

# The looking-glass self by charles h. cooley essay sample

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I will be talking about the looking glass self, made famous by famed American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. This concept stems from our interpersonal perception of what another individual's impression is on us and how we form ourselves towards that initial perception. Out of all the theories that are at our disposal in sociology, this is the theory that interested me the most and here is why. To me the looking glass self is not just a concept or a theory but is a vital step in socialization because it's an interaction we all experience. To me it has aspects of issues we go through today, the big one being conformity, because the looking-glass self is simply a form of conformity. This is evident when we look at Cooleys quote " Each to each a looking glass, Reflects the other that doth pass"[i]. This is one of the very few concepts that is unique to us as humans and the simplicity of the concept of the looking-glass self makes for an interesting analysis.

The looking glass self got its start in 1902 in *The Human Nature and the Social Order*, which was published work by Cooley. The work was what got the looking glass self into the minds of sociologists. This work made the looking glass self the main topic in sociology on self concept. When you look at socialization as a whole, it is a never ending process while we are alive. So each step in the process has its own level of importance and some that are vital. To me this is one of the most vital processes in life. A major contribution to socialization and our own self image comes from the interactions between everyone around us, but mainly our peers. It is a theory I think that does not taper off through life, we analyze everything and are always trying to fit into different groups and self image is what drives us into those groups.

There are three main components when dealing with the looking glass self. Component number one is “ We imagine how we want to appear to others”[ii]. What I think he meant was that we as humans have a personal awareness of our self image. We take the time to make sure that we are presented in a way that is satisfactory. The second component is “ We imagine that judgment of our appearance”[iii]. Cooley means by this that we read what others think of us. We as humans are the only species on earth that truly worry about what others think of us on a personal level, as well as a physical level. The final component of the looking glass self is that “ We develop ourselves through the judgments of other individuals”[iv]. He meant this as we develop our “ self” through what we think people think of us. This could be negative, it could be positive, either way this is how we develop our self image. These three components work together like well oiled gears, developing one step and then progressing into the next step.

The looking glass self was not a theory that was presented, became a vital step in socialization, and then went away. The looking glass self has stayed the same, but not without the help of other sociologists. There has been many experiments done over the years to help see the looking glass self in action. The big one that I researched was done in 1976, and it was performed by Arthur L Beaman, Edward Diener and Soren Svenum. Their experiment was conducted on children to look into the relationship between self awareness and transgressive behavior. They started by taking 363 kids during trick or treat and told them they could only take one piece of candy. They placed a mirror behind the candy bowl and it made kids only take one piece of candy. This is a great example of the looking glass self. The kids saw

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themselves taking the candy and their self image from the reflection kept them from taking more than one. The second round of subjects were not told a set amount of candy to take, and they took more than the first group.

This experiment was a great way to prove a point. Its a simple experiment that could be done in a night but ended up giving good material to use towards the looking glass self. It included self image, conformity, deviant. So this experiment could go towards other issue such as deviance if the children took more candy in round one. This all shows just how well the looking glass self ties into other sociological events.

Deviance is a concept we are all very much aware of. We are all deviant in some way every day. For some people they choose to take deviance to a high level, while some commit small acts of deviance without even realizing it. So we can ask ourselves, what makes us deviant? To me it has to do with how we are socialized. That includes the time from birth to where we are today. Deviance is not always bad but usually its never good. Included in that time period, is we can learn it from our parents, we learn it from our peers and our siblings, we learn it from the mass media. The media is where I think most of our deviance is rooted. I feel that we as a society are formed to what the media wants us to be. They portray people that are successful as a certain way and vice versa. The media is the place where we learn that crime pays off at times and how crime is somehow the norm. This to me leads to a desensitized view on crime and leads to a desensitized view on deviance making it more normal.

When we look at the looking-glass “ self” we can ask ourselves a few things. Does it favor a specific age or gender? Does it or has it changed over time? Well we can take the first question. I think that it does favor specific ages, even though it lasts from the time we are born to the time we die. I feel it favors the mature. At a young age we are being socialized and using the looking glass self, but we are not really conscious about it at the time. We develop that consciousness of socialization as we get more mature. I think about the age of six we develop it the most. We are starting school and being exposed to kids our age and it puts a little pressure on us to be who we need to be. So I feel that it favors kids older than five or six years of age. To me it does not favor gender in any way. We may think that girls think about it more than guys but really it probably equals itself out. Guys think about how others think just as much as girls.

We can then go into how the theory changes or how it has changed over time. I think that it really has not changed much over time. We as humans have not really changed all that much as time has progressed, but the world around us has. The one constant has been us humans and our human processes. Now the future is a different story. I think that we as humans are at a point in history that technology is what is driving the world. I feel that over the last 1000 years we haven't changed much in a sociological way. But over the next 1000 years I feel sociologically we are going to be changing quite a bit. The world is evolving at a rate that will exceed how we humans evolve. What others think of us might not change much, but how we view ourselves is bound to have some changes.

The looking-glass self theory is a very hard theory to go into detail on. It really has to do with who the people are. Its a theory that I am included in every day as well as us humans on the macro level. I got to go over the history of the looking glass self as well as my own views on its past, present and history. Seeing how the three main components tie into every day life and how it works as a well oiled machine helped me understand our everyday sociology a little bit more. Whether we are male or female doesn't really matter too much to me but the age of the individual is what matters the most. Putting a few weeks of research and writing was well worth the time now that I have learned so much on Cooley and Meade and other sociologists who have helped this theory evolve into what it is today. Makes sociology a little more relatable.

### Bibliography

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[i]<http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/courses/LKGLSSLF.HTML>

[ii]Jeanne Ballentine and Keith Roberts, 2010. Our Social World. Canada, Pine Forge Press. Page 86

[iii]Jeanne Ballentine and Keith Roberts, 2010. Our Social World. Canada, Pine Forge Press. Page 86

[iv]Jeanne Ballentine and Keith Roberts, 2010. Our Social World. Canada, Pine Forge Press. Page 86