

Mead's Theory of Self and Cooley's Looking Glass Self

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover George Herbert Mead's theory of the self, through the definition and discussion of:

1. George Herbert Mead's Theory of Self
2. C.H. Cooley's Looking Glass Self
3. Imitation and the Generalized Other
4. The Two Parts of the Self: I and Me

1. GEORGE HERBERT MEAD'S THEORY OF SELF

George Herbert Mead was an important sociologist who spent his career at the University of Chicago in the early 1900s. He is credited with helping to develop the symbolic interaction perspective. This tutorial will focus on Mead's **theory of the self**.

Mead theorized that the self has two parts: a self-awareness and a self-image. It is interesting to note that Mead's theory of the self is completely social. He doesn't allow room for any kind of biological development of the self or personality.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Recall the case of Genie, the girl who was left alone in a room until she was 13. When she was found at 13, she couldn't really speak or walk. She had no development of the self. Even though her body had aged biologically, her 'self' had not developed, because this is something that emerges through social interaction.

In this way, Mead's genius was to see the self as social, not as biological. Your self and your notion of who you are, what you like, what your personality is, etc., becomes constructed through being in the world, through interaction, and through reflection on those interactions, and so on. The self is developed as you age and grow—it's not something innately biological.



THINK ABOUT IT

What kind of personality do you have? You develop your own personality by living in the world and having innumerable interactions with others, which makes you who you are. Your self develops through interacting

with others, reflecting on that interaction, and thinking about how others are perceiving you, which helps you generate an image of yourself.



TERM TO KNOW

George Herbert Mead's Theory of the Self

According to Mead, the self, the part of one's personality composed of self-awareness and self-image, emerges through social interaction. Mead made several assumptions in proposing this idea: 1) that the self develops only through social interaction; 2) that social interaction involves the exchange of symbols; 3) that understanding symbols involves being able to take the role of another.

2. C.H. COOLEY'S LOOKING GLASS SELF

How might social interaction give rise to the self? Social experience--being in the world--allows you to have interactions and exert your forming personality to see how the self that you put out there on display for others is being reacted to. How are others reacting to you right now?

In this manner, your self is mirrored in the reactions of the other, which is called the **looking glass self**, an idea developed by Charles Horton Cooley.

IN CONTEXT

If you're talking to a group of people and you state something and everyone laughs at you, even calling you stupid, you might begin to see yourself as stupid. You adopt the looking glass, the mirror image of yourself that is being reflected back to you by others. Vice versa, if you say something intelligent, and this is the image reflected back to you, you might begin to see yourself as intelligent.

One by one, in isolation, these interactions won't make you think you're stupid or intelligent, but if these patterns get repeated again and again throughout your lifetime, you develop an image of yourself that is given to you from without, from interaction with others.



TERM TO KNOW

C.H. Cooley's Looking Glass Self

Cooley argued that the self is a product of our social interactions with other people that involves three steps: 1) The imagination of our appearance to other people and associated feelings; 2) Imagining that others are evaluating our behavior; 3) We develop feelings and react to the imaginary evaluations of ourselves as objects.

3. IMITATION AND THE GENERALIZED OTHER

Given that a self image is developed in recognizing how others are perceiving you, you're constantly trying to put yourself in the shoes of another, thinking about how they are seeing this particular event, situation or action. Mead called this imitation. With imitation, you're constantly trying to see the world from another's point of view.

IN CONTEXT

Children do this first by imagining the position of mom and dad. Gradually, they learn to take the point of view of many others at the same time, until finally when they're fully socialized, they take the viewpoint of society generally.

This happens when they've internalized the widespread cultural norms, mores, and expectations of behavior appropriate in that society. At this point, when you're thinking about your behavior, you're thinking about the generalized 'other,' and how this generalized 'other' sees yourself and your behavior. When you take this final role, then Mead called it the generalized other.

4. THE TWO PARTS OF THE SELF: I AND ME

By taking the role of the other, people become self-aware. In doing so, they develop two parts of the self: self-image and self-awareness. In addition, there is what Mead called the "I" part of the self and the "me" part of the self. The "I" part is the part of you that's existing out in the world, acting, being spontaneous, etc. The "I" part is the subject of action. It's what you would commonly think of as yourself.

The "me" part is an object. It's the aggregated combined image of yourself that has been given to you from interacting with society. When society reflects a self-image back on you, this external, conceptual object, is the "me."



BRAINSTORM

When you're interacting with people, what might they be thinking of you? Monitor the impressions you're giving off in social interaction. How do you know who you are? How do you know what your personality is like? Think about times you've had interactions with somebody, and they've said something to you like, "That was smart" or "That was witty" or conversely, "That was stupid." How did that make you feel about yourself?



BIG IDEA

This is the core of Mead's theory. It's a fascinating theory of the self because it is completely social. The biological child, like Genie, who doesn't have any interaction with society is the true biological self. Everything that makes us human is given to us in social interaction.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist **George Herbert Mead and his theory of self**, including **imitation**, the **generalized other**, and the **two parts of the self**. You also learned about **C.H. Cooley's looking glass self**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



C.H. Cooley's Looking Glass Self

Cooley argued that the self is a product of our social interactions with other people that involves three steps:

1) The imagination of our appearance to other people and associated feelings; 2) Imagining that others are evaluating our behavior; 3) We develop feelings and react to the imaginary evaluations of ourselves as objects.

George Herbert Mead's Theory of the Self

According to Mead, the self, the part of one's personality composed of self-awareness and self-image, emerges through social interaction. Mead made several assumptions in proposing this idea: 1) that the self develops only through social interaction; 2) that social interaction involves the exchange of symbols; 3) that understanding symbols involves being able to take the role of another.