

Socialization into the Self and Mind

3.2 Use the ideas and research of Cooley (looking-glass self), Mead (role taking), and Piaget (reasoning) to explain socialization into the self and mind.

When you were born, you had no ideas. You didn't know that you were a son or daughter. You didn't even know that you were a he or she. How did you develop a **self**, your image of who you are? And how did you develop your ability to reason? Let's find out.

self

the unique human capacity of being able to see ourselves "from the outside"; the views we internalize of how we think others see us

looking-glass self

a term coined by Charles Horton Cooley to refer to the process by which our self develops through internalizing others' reactions to us

Cooley and the Looking-Glass Self

About a hundred years ago, Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), a symbolic interactionist who taught at the University of Michigan, concluded that producing a self is an essential part of how *society* makes us human. He said that *our sense of self develops from interaction with others*. To describe the process by which this unique aspect of "humanness" develops, Cooley (1902) coined the term **looking-glass self**.

He summarized this idea in the following couplet:

*Each to each a looking-glass
Reflects the other that doth pass.*

The looking-glass self contains three elements:

1. *We imagine how we appear to those around us.* For example, we may think that others perceive us as witty or dull.
2. *We interpret others' reactions.* We come to conclusions about how others evaluate us. Do they like us for being witty? Do they dislike us for being dull?
3. *We develop a self-concept.* How we interpret others' reactions to us frames our feelings and ideas about ourselves. A favorable reflection in this *social mirror* leads to a positive self-concept; a negative reflection leads to a negative self-concept.

IN SUM *Although the self-concept begins in childhood, it is never a finished product.* All of our lives, we monitor how others react to us. Whether we are accurate in how we think others evaluate us does not change the process. Even if we grossly misinterpret how others think about us, those misjudgments become part of our self-concept. Because we are always monitoring others' reactions to us, we are continually modifying the self, even in our old age.

Mead and Role Taking

Another symbolic interactionist, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who taught at the University of Chicago, pointed out how important play is in developing a self. As we play with others, we learn to **take the role of the other**. That is, we learn to put ourselves in someone else's shoes—to understand how someone else feels and thinks and to anticipate how that person will act.

This doesn't happen overnight. We develop this ability over a period of years (Mead 1934; Denzin 2007). Psychologist John Flavel (1968) asked 8- and 14-year-olds to explain a board game to children who were blindfolded and also to others who were not. The 14-year-olds gave more detailed instructions to those who were blindfolded, but the 8-year-olds gave the same instructions to everyone. The younger children could not yet take the role of the other, while the older children could.

As we develop this ability, at first we can take only the roles of **significant others**, individuals who significantly influence our lives, such as parents or siblings.

taking the role of the other

putting yourself in someone else's shoes; understanding how someone else feels and thinks, so you anticipate how that person will act

significant other

an individual who significantly influences someone else

By assuming their roles during play, such as dressing up in our parents' clothing, we cultivate the ability to put ourselves in the place of significant others.

As our self gradually develops, we internalize the expectations of more and more people. Our ability to take the role of others eventually extends to being able to take the role of "the group as a whole." Mead used the term **generalized other** to refer to our perception of how people in general think of us.

Taking the role of others is essential if we are to become cooperative members of human groups—whether they are family, friends, or co-workers. This ability allows us to modify our behavior by anticipating how others will react—something Genie never learned.

As Figure 3.1 illustrates, we go through three stages as we learn to take the role of the other:

1. *Imitation.* Under the age of 3, we can only mimic others. We do not yet have a sense of self separate from others, and we can only imitate people's gestures and words. (This stage is actually not role taking, but it prepares us for it.)
2. *Play.* During the second stage, from the ages of about 3 to 6, we pretend to take the roles of specific people. We might pretend that we are a firefighter, a wrestler, a nurse, Supergirl, Spider-Man, a princess, and so on. We like costumes at this stage and enjoy dressing up in our parents' clothing or tying a towel around our neck to "become" Superman or Wonder Woman.
3. *Team Games.* This third stage, organized play, or team games, begins roughly when we enter school. The significance for the self is that to play these games, we must be able to take multiple roles. Baseball was one of Mead's favorite examples. To play baseball, each player must be able to take the role of any other player. It isn't enough that players know their own role; they also must be able to anticipate what everyone else on the field will do when the ball is hit or thrown.

Mead also said that the self has two parts, the "I" and the "me." The "I" is *the self as subject*, the active, spontaneous, creative part of the self. In contrast, the "me" is *the self as object*. It is made up of attitudes we internalize from our interactions with others. Mead chose these pronouns because in English, "I" is the active agent, as in "I shoved him," while "me" is the object of action, as in "He shoved me." Mead stressed that we are not passive in the socialization process. We are not like robots, with programmed software shoved into us. Rather, our "I" actively evaluates the reactions of others and organizes them into a unified whole. Mead added that the "I" even monitors the "me," fine-tuning our ideas and attitudes to help us better meet what others expect of us.

IN SUM In studying these details, be careful not to miss the main point, which some find startling: *Both our self and our mind are social products.* Mead stressed that we cannot think without symbols. But where do these symbols come from? Only from society, which gives us our symbols by giving us language. If society did not provide the symbols, we would not be able to think and so would not possess a self-concept or that entity we call the mind. The self and mind, then, like language, are products of society.

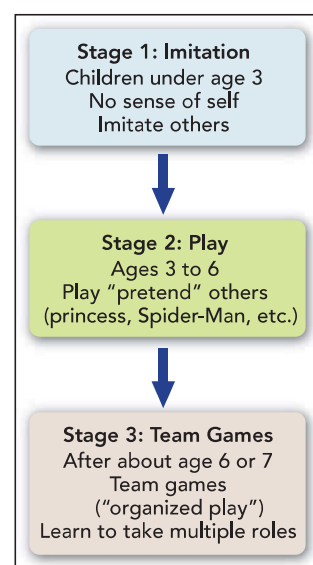


Mead analyzed taking the role of the other as an essential part of learning to be a full-fledged member of society. At first, we are able to take the role only of significant others, as this child is doing. Later we develop the capacity to take the role of the generalized other, which is essential not only for cooperation but also for the control of antisocial desires.

generalized other

the norms, values, attitudes, and expectations of people "in general"; the child's ability to take the role of the generalized other is a significant step in the development of a self

Figure 3.1 How We Learn to Take the Role of the Other: Mead's Three Stages



SOURCE: By the author.