

## Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929)



Cooley was an American sociologist and the son of Thomas M. Cooley. He studied and went on to teach economics and sociology at the University of Michigan, and he was a founding member and the eighth president of the American Sociological Association. He is perhaps most well known for his concept of the looking glass self, which is the concept that a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others.

Cooley's methodological approach: he is noted for his displeasure at the divisions within Sociology over methodology. He preferred an empirical, observational approach. While he appreciated the use of statistics, he preferred case studies: often using his own children as the subjects on his observation. So has done Jean Piaget studying cognitive development in childhood.

### The Looking Glass Self

Building upon the work of William James, Cooley opposed the Cartesian tradition that posited a sharp disjunction between the knowing, thinking subject and the

external world. The objects of the social world, Cooley taught, are constitutive parts of the subject's mind and the self. Cooley wished to remove the conceptual barrier that Cartesian thought had erected between the individual and his society and to stress, instead, their interpenetration. He wrote,

“A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals. . . .” Society” and ”individuals” do not denote separable phenomena but are simply collective and distributive aspects of the same thing. . . . When we speak of society, or use any other collective term, we fix our minds upon some general view of the people concerned, while when we speak of individuals we disregard the general aspect and think of them as if they were separate”

Cooley argued that a person's self grows out of a person's commerce with others. "The social origin of his life comes by the pathway of intercourse with other persons." The self, to Cooley, is not first individual and then social; it arises dialectically through communication. One's consciousness of himself is a reflection of the ideas about himself that he attributes to other minds; thus, there can be no isolated selves. "There is no sense of 'I' without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they.”

In his attempt to illustrate the reflected character of the self, Cooley compared it to a looking glass:

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

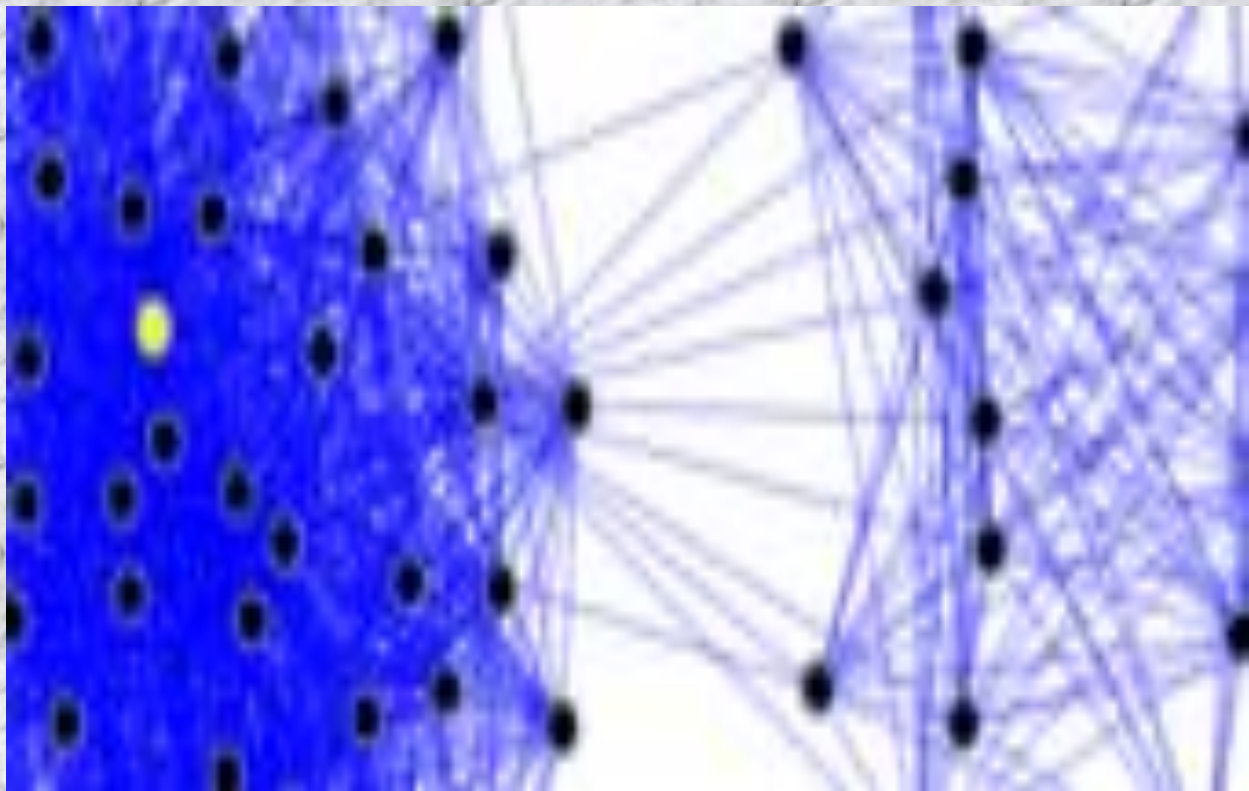
"As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be, so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it."

The notion of the looking-glass self is composed of three principal elements: "The imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification." The self arises in a social process of communicative interchange as it is reflected in a person's consciousness. As George H. Mead put it when discussing Cooley's contribution, "By placing both phases of this social process in the same consciousness, by regarding the self as the ideas entertained by others of the self, and the other as the ideas entertained of him by the self, the action of the others upon the self and of the self upon the others becomes simply the interaction of ideas upon each other within mind."

This somewhat abstract notion can be illustrated by a delightful example which Cooley gave himself when he imagined an encounter between Alice, who has a new hat, and Angela, who just bought a new dress. He argues that we then have,

1) The real Alice, known only to her maker. 2) Her idea of herself; e.g. "I [Alice] look well in this hat." 3) Her idea of Angela's idea of her; e.g. "Angela thinks I look well in this hat." 4) Her idea of what Angela thinks she thinks of herself: e.g. "Angela thinks I am proud of my looks in this hat." 5) Angela's idea of what Alice thinks of herself; e.g. "Alice thinks she is stunning in that hat." And of course six analogous phases of Angela and her dress.

"Society," Cooley adds, "is an interweaving and interworking of mental selves. I imagine your mind, and especially what your mind thinks about my mind, and what your mind thinks about what my mind thinks about your mind. I dress my mind before yours and expect that you will dress yours before mine. Whoever cannot or will not perform these feats is not properly in the game." Multiple perspectives are brought into congruence through continued multi-lateral exchanges of impressions and evaluations between our minds and those of others. Society is internalized in the individual psyche; it becomes part of the individual self through the interaction of many; individuals, which links and fuses them into an organic whole.



## Social Organization

The first 60 pages of *Social Organization* were a sociological antidote to Sigmund Freud. In that much-quoted segment Cooley formulated the crucial role of primary groups (family, play groups, and so on) as the source of one's morals, sentiments, and ideals. But the impact of the primary group is so great that individuals cling to primary ideals in more complex associations and even create new primary groupings within formal organizations. Cooley viewed society as a constant experiment in enlarging social experience and in coordinating variety. He therefore analyzed the operation of such complex social forms as formal institutions and social class systems and the subtle controls of public opinion. He concluded that class differences reflect different contributions to society, as well as the phenomena of aggrandizement and exploitation.

## Social Process

Cooley's last major work, *Social Process* (1918), emphasized the non-rational, tentative nature of social organization and the significance of social competition. He interpreted modern difficulties as the clash of primary group values (love, ambition, loyalty) and institutional values (impersonal ideologies such as progress or Protestantism). As societies try to cope with their difficulties, they adjust these two kinds of values to one another as best they can.

## Cooley and Social Subjectivity

Cooley's theories were manifested in response to a three-fold necessity that had developed within the realm of society. The first of which was the necessity to create an understanding of societal phenomena that highlighted the subjective mental processes of individuals yet realized that these subjective processes were effects and causes of society's processes. The second necessity examined the development of a social dynamic conception that portrayed states of chaos as natural occurrences which could provide opportunities for "adaptive innovation." Finally, a need to manifest publics that were capable of exerting some form of "informed moral control" over current problems and future directions.

In regards to these, aforementioned, dilemmas Cooley responded by stating "society and individual denote not separable phenomena but different aspects of the same thing, for a separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so

likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals." From this, he resolved to create a "Mental-Social" Complex of which he would term the "Looking-glass self."

The Looking-glass self is created through the imagination of how one's self might be understood by another individual. This would later be termed "Empathic Introspection." This theory applied not only to the individual but to the macro-level economic issues of society and to those macro-sociological conditions which are created over time.

To the economy, Cooley presented a divergent view from the norm, stating that "...even economic institutions could [not] be understood solely as a result of impersonal market forces." With regard to the sociological perspective and its relevancy toward traditions he states that the dissolution of traditions may be positive, thus creating "the sort of virtues, as well as of vices, that we find on the frontier: plain dealing, love of character and force, kindness, hope, hospitality and courage." He believed that Sociology continues to contribute to the "growing efficiency of the intellectual processes that would enlighten the larger public will."

Professor C. H. COOLEY, later Adulthood Time



*Charles Horton Cooley*