

Class Activity

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Who am I? : The Looking Glass Self

Synopsis: In this activity, students will familiarize themselves with the concept of the Looking Glass Self (1902) by participating in a low-stakes classroom sales pitch. Volunteer participants will complete pre- and post-questionnaires asking them to rate their performance and ability as public speakers. Unknowingly, they are subjected to pre-determined reactions from their classmates, eliciting either enthusiasm or boredom. After the pitches, pre- and post-questionnaires will be used for class discussion. At the end, students will be able to understand how sense of self is developed through social processes and interpersonal interactions. Students will then be assigned a brief, 1-2 page take-home response essay defining and detailing how the concept of the Looking Glass Self applies to their own lives. In the following class session, students will also be given a short period to anonymously write any comments, concerns or recommendations regarding the activity.

Courses: Intro to Sociology, Social Psychology

Class size: 20-50 students

Materials needed:

- “Who am I” pre- and post- questionnaire
- Red and blue placards
- Pens/pencils

Class Activity Goals:

- Introduce the concept of the Looking Glass Self.
- Provide a warm, welcoming, and low-stakes classroom environment for class participation.
- Provides an opportunity for the instructor and students to increase rapport. (better suited for mid-semester)

Anticipated Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to define and understand the concept of Cooley’s Looking Glass Self, which posits that individuals develop self-concept by imagining how they are perceived through the point of view of others, and gain a sense for the larger sociological concept of symbolic interaction approaches.
- Students will actively and critically engage with the concept by applying it to their own lives.
- Students will learn to think sociologically about taken-for-granted behaviors (i.e. individuals reacting to how they imagine others to perceive them.).

Procedure:

In the class session before the activity, introduce the students to the activity and inform them of the rules and format. Rationalize it as a strategy to playfully overcome the anxiety and burn-out associated with mid-terms. There will be four rounds of sales pitches composed of two students each, eight students in total, arguing a point for one uninterrupted minute. In total, each round will last two minutes. The amount of rounds can be changed depending on class size.

Participants will have to fill out a simple questionnaire before and after the pitches asking them to rate their performance and ability as public speakers on a scale of 1-5, with one being the lowest and five being the highest. The pre-debate questionnaire will ask:

- Rate your ability as a public speaker.
- How well do you think you will do on this sales pitch?
- How persuasive are you?
- Do you believe that you'll have the best sales pitch?

The post-debate questionnaire will ask:

- Rate your ability as a public speaker?
- How well do you think you did on your sales pitch?
- How persuasive were you?
- Do you believe that you had the best sales pitch?

These questions will be used for class discussion after the activity; so, make sure potential volunteers are comfortable with sharing their answers. List the topics on the board. Emphasize the playful nature of the activity by picking innocuous topics such as Southwest vs Orchard Hills (residential halls), Hampshire vs Berkshire (dining halls), The Walking Dead vs. Game of Thrones, and the Boston Red Sox vs. The New York Yankees. Ask for eight volunteers and assign them to each round according to their preference. Email each student the pre-questionnaire and have them confirm receipt of the email. They will complete the form in advance and hand it in on the day of the activity.

On the day of the activity, list the topics with the assigned volunteers on the board. Go over the rules and format of the activity once more, answer any questions, allow volunteers to withdraw if they're no longer willing to participate, and, once again, emphasize the low-stakes, playful atmosphere and tone of the activity. Collect the pre-questionnaires from the participants and direct them to go outside of the classroom to wait for the start of the activity. They will be allowed back into the classroom after the instructor finishes briefing the remaining students of the rest of the activity. On an overhead (-PPT, etc.), so as to prevent the volunteers from overhearing, instructors will inform the remaining students of the following instructions:

- The winners of each round will be chosen at random.
- Instructor will distribute either a red or blue placard to the participants in each round. Participants with red placards are chosen to win. During their one minute speech, the

audience will smile, laugh, clap loudly, or perform any other gestures that indicate good performance.

- Participants with blue placards are chosen to lose. During their one minute speech, the audience will look bored and disinterested, play with their phones, refuse to clap, or perform any other gestures that indicate bad performance.
- If placards are unavailable, outcomes will be determined by order. For example, the first student to speak in each round would be chosen as the winner.

As to prevent them from feeling hesitant, guilty, or uncertain about down-voting their fellow classmates, assure the remaining students that all participants will be thoroughly debriefed after the activity. This activity could also function as a social breaching experiment, in which students are challenged to break social politeness norms. After this is completed, allow the first round of volunteers to enter the classroom. Let the first volunteer step forward and distribute either a red or blue placard. Give the remaining placard to the second volunteer. Once the round is finished, escort the students back out of the classroom and allow the next round of students to enter. Repeat this process for four rounds, or however many rounds are included. At the completion of all of the rounds, distribute the post- questionnaire to the volunteers for them to finish outside of the class and allow them to come back inside once all of them are done. Collect the questionnaires. Whenever performing an activity, in which students are somewhat manipulated, a long, thorough, and detailed debriefing session is necessary. Inform the participants that the sales pitch winners and audience reactions were pre-determined and, not at all, reflective of their actual performance. Then, ask the volunteers to discuss their experience and refer back to their pre- and post-questionnaires.

To help in navigating discussion, I've included some sample discussion questions, typical student responses, and connections that can be made between the different stages of the activity and the overall concept.

- For students who were comfortable in their abilities as public speakers to deliver a persuasive sales pitch, how did they attain that level of confidence? Essentially, how did they come to know that they were good public speakers?
- For students who were not as confident in their abilities as public speakers, how did they come to that self-assessment?

For the first set of questions, student responses may include: I have a lot of experience, people have reacted in a positive manner when I have spoken publicly in the past, or people have told me or implied. For the second question, student responses may include: I have minimal experience, people have reacted in a negative or a disinterested manner when I have spoken publicly in the past, people have told me or implied. Whether students express high or low confidence in their abilities as public speakers, both sets of questions emphasize that perceptions of competency were cultivated through experiences and interactions with others.

- For students with blue placards, did they notice the overall class reaction to their sales pitch? To their opponent's sales pitch? How did that make them feel in terms of their abilities as a public speaker?

These questions represent the first principle element of the Looking Glass Self, in which individuals imagine how they appear to others. If the activity was executed correctly, students most likely noticed the marked differences in how the class reacted to their sales pitches. Students, most likely, made assumptions as to how they felt they appeared to their classmates.

- According to the participants, who won their respective rounds? Were class reactions used to come to that conclusion?

These questions represent the second principle element of the Looking Glass Self, in which individuals imagine how others are judging them. Students will most likely use the overall class reactions to determine who won each round. As a result, those with blue placards will feel as though they lost their round, and those with red placards will feel as though they won their round. Students will have now evaluated themselves based on how they perceived their classmates to be judging them.

- Did the participants alter their performance based on class reactions? Ask the class if they noticed any behavioral changes in the speakers during the sales pitch.
- Did they feel any different coming out of the sales pitch as opposed to going in? Did their assessment of themselves as a public speaker/being persuasive change after their sales pitch?

These sets of questions focus on the third principle element of the Looking Glass Self, in which individuals react to the perceived judgments of others. The first question focuses on how students responded to their classmates' judgments by changing their behavior. Students with blue placards may have attempted to alter their performance in an effort to sway the seemingly negative class reactions they experienced. The second set of questions focus on how students responded to their classmates' judgments by reassessing the ways in which they defined themselves as public speakers. For example, students with high confidence in their public speaking may have momentarily started to question their abilities when faced with what they perceived was a negative class reaction to their sales pitch.

Emphasize that participants' reactions and final assessments of themselves may have been a result of how they imagined their fellow students perceived their performance, regardless of whether those judgments were true or false. This activity provides a good basis to formally introduce the concept of the Looking Glass Self. As a suggestion, on an overhead, display the following "I am not what I think I am. I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am." (Cooley). Ask the class to interpret the quote. Then, outline Cooley's three principle elements.

- We imagine how we appear to others.
- We imagine how they judge us.
- We react to these imaginations.

After, assign a brief, 1-2 page take-home response paper to either of the posed prompts.

- Describe one situation or experience in your personal life that illustrates the Looking Glass Self. Provide detail on setting, actors, context, etc.
- Assign Jones article (listed below) as supplemental reading. Think of your social media accounts. Has your presence and resulting interactions (i.e. likes, shares, follows, comments, etc.) on social media influenced the ways in which you conceive and define yourself. Describe specific instances, in which this has occurred.

Responses will be collected in the next class session. Students will be assessed according to how well they define the concept in their own words and how accurately their selected accounts demonstrate the concept.

To reinforce the activity/lecture, readings have been provided, which can be used to supplement the take-home essay.

In the next class session, students will also be given a short period to anonymously write any comments, concerns or recommendations regarding the activity. From both the discussion period following the activity and the anonymous written responses, instructors will be able to gauge how well the activity fostered a warm and welcoming environment for class participation. To guide their responses in a constructive way, pose questions such as:

- Has this activity allowed you to feel more comfortable participating in class?
- Was this activity helpful in learning this new concept?
- Which aspects would you change/not change?
- Did you find this activity enjoyable?

Suggested Supplemental Readings:

Morf, Carolyn C. and Sander L. Koole. 2012. "The Self." Pp. 124-129 in *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, edited by M. Hewstone, W. Stroebe, and K. Jonas. United Kingdom: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.

Jones, Julie M. 2015. "The Looking Glass Lens: Self-concept Changes Due to Social Media Practices." *The Journal of Social Media and Society* 4(1):100-125.

Tice, D. M. (1992). Self-concept change and self-presentation: The looking glass self is also a magnifying glass. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63(3), 435-451.

Yeung, King-To and John Levi Martin. 2003. "The Looking Glass Self: An Empirical Test and Elaboration." *Social Forces* 81(3): 843-879.

Estimated time outline:

- (5) 5-10 minutes to go over activity rules, format, etc.
- (5) 5 minutes to collect pre-questionnaires/brief remaining students of activity
- (8) 10-12 minutes for sales pitches.
- (3-4) 5 minutes for participants to complete post questionnaires
- (15) 25 minutes to debrief and discuss participants' pre-and post-sales pitch feelings regarding their performance.

- 10 minutes to formally introduce the Looking Glass Self and answer any remaining questions
- This activity will most likely span an entire 75-minute classroom session. Parenthesized numbers represent time variations for a 50- minute classroom session.

References:

Cooley, Charles Horton. 1902. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.