

**The Core of Us:  
Properties of the Socialization Process and the Influence of Social Class Therein**

“The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can't ever really know what's going on. So it shouldn't bother you, not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be responsible for this on the mid-term.”

*-A Serious Man*

Authors Collins & Makowsky brush against an interesting idea when summarizing George Herbert Mead's theories on the social self: “The ‘I’ as construed by Mead is the sociological analogue to Werner Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle in physics” (Collins & Makowsky 2010:156). In 1927, Heisenberg, a German theoretical physicist and Nobel Laureate, was researching quantum mechanics in Copenhagen when he discovered that the more accurately he measured one physical property of a particle, the less accurate would his measurements or control be of another. In brief, one cannot observe a particle without changing its properties, making concrete predictions impossible (Cassidy 1998).

Early sociologists like Mead and Charles Horton Cooley grappled with a similarly indeterminate study: the social self. What factors in society make us behave in the manner we do as individuals? Drawing on each of these sources, the self does not exist within the individual, but rather within that individual's social interactions. It is a result of the process of socialization, which takes place during childhood and involves an individual learning to adapt her behavior to the norms and values of the society at large. The self is non-static and subject to wide changes. Quite like a quantum particle, the self cannot be accurately measured, and observation itself is the variable that causes these changes. I will argue drawing from Mead and Cooley that the act of observation is the

driving force of the socialization process as well as the social self. Additionally, using the films, *Jesus Camp* and *Boys of Baraka*, as well as the findings of ethnographers Annette Lareau and Elijah Anderson, I will argue that the disparity of resources between social classes creates differing observational points of view that in turn impact the socialization process of a particular class.

In Chapter 8 of *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory*, the authors make a point of outlining Pragmatism, a philosophy whose influence reaches through Cooley and Mead. It asserts that an object has no intrinsic meaning, purpose, or essence. These things come from how the object serves human adaptation and problem solving. Appelrauth and Edles point out that after Pragmatism, “there is no reality separable from the perceiving subject. Instead, the external world of objects and events exist only through the conscious apprehension of them” (2008:312). Thusly, reality and the discernable characteristics of objects is created by an individual’s observation. To those influenced by Pragmatism like Cooley and Mead, the world is not a static form, but something created and shaped by human observation.

This focus on observation and *a posteriori* reasoning surfaces in Cooley’s body of work. His concepts of the “I,” and the “looking glass self” are axiomatic to observations of socialization (Appelrauth & Edles 2008:313). According to Cooley, the concept of the “I” represents the empirical and observable self. It is comprised of an individual’s reaction to what Cooley calls “the looking glass self,” the process by which an individual determines her behavior by imagining her appearance in the eyes of another, imagining that person’s judgment, and reacting emotionally to that perceived judgment. Cooley asserts that the “imagination which people have of one another are the *solid* facts of society” (Appelrauth & Edles 2008:313). Thusly, the “I,” after Cooley, becomes a

changing state of emotion contingent on the empirical experiences of the individual. An example of this arises in the documentary *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady 2006), which examines the children of a North Dakota based evangelical summer program. At one point, the film shows a group of young boys exchanging ghost stories in their bunks before bed. An adult enters and admonishes them for partaking in supernatural stories that potentially dishonor God. As he leaves, the boys fall silent and look mortified. The boys were able to objectify themselves through the eyes of the adult and imagine his impression of them. This imagined impression causes an emotional reaction (in this case, a negative one), which then alters their behavior. Thus, they felt the way they thought they were being perceived.

Highly influenced by Cooley's work, Mead's position among theories of the self and socialization is that of a lynchpin. Collins and Makowsky relate his reputation as a "rare, high, and disinterested spirit," who "reasoned in a spiral by returning to what he had already said and then integrating it at a higher level of understanding" (2010:154). Fitting then, that he represents a synthesis of sociological ideas. His idea of language leads into his evolved concept of the "I," the "me," and finally the "generalized other."

Mead's notion of language is essential to understanding class differences in socialization. Expanding on the work of John Dewey, Mead focused on the gestures and symbols that comprise the symbolic interaction of human communication. Mead's use of "gesture" relates to "a social act that operates as a stimulus for the response of another form [individual] engaged in the same act" (Collins and Makowsky 2010:155). Humans, when communicating via gestures, respond to the gesture's symbolic meaning. "When the gesture evokes the same attitude in the receiving as well as the sending form... it has become what we call 'language'" (Collins and Makowsky 2010:155). In the documentary,

*Boys of Baraka* (Ewing and Grady 2005), 13-year-old Devon, an aspiring preacher, demonstrates this principal when he delivers a guest sermon to his church. His arms whip about in pace with his speech, oscillating from smooth to electrified. His gestures, both vocal and physical, convey a reverent and pious attitude, becoming visibly charged when mentioning God or Jesus. The congregation responds likewise, nodding their heads and engaging in a call-and-response dynamic. The common meaning of Devon's gestures conveyed a symbolic interpretation to the churchgoers.

Key to the usage of language is an individual's ability to take the role of others when weighing potential actions. From this springs Mead's development of the "I" and "me." As summarized by Collins and Makowsky, "the 'me' determines our self-consciousness insofar as we are able to take the role of others within the larger community of selves" (2010:156). For example, in *Jesus Camp*, a young girl opines how she feels she is being trained for a religious army. The girl is aware of herself and her role in the larger community (Ewing and Grady 2006). Mead's "I" represents the momentary response of the individual towards the attitudes of the group. It is separate from the "me" in that it occurs in the present, while the "me" is the passive sum of experiences. The "I" accounts for spontaneity and the development of the creative self (Collins and Makowsky 2010:156). Again, the "I" surfaces in *Jesus Camp* during a scene in which Lou Engle, a pro-life leader, encourages the children to pray for the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. By the end of his speech, many of the children voluntarily chant, "righteous judges" repeatedly (Ewing and Grady 2006). The children were able to observe themselves as part of a group and, in the moment, act on what they perceived the norms of that group to be.

With the “me” serving as the conditioned phase of the social self and the “I” as the spontaneous, it is the idea of the “generalized other” that represents the landmark in socialization when an individual is “able to relate to himself or herself according to the attitude of the whole community” (Collins and Makowsky 2010:157). The “generalized other” is an evolution of role taking behavior into a flexible tool, applicable to many other groups. Examples include the attitude of the students at the conclusion of *Boys of Baraka*; their closing interviews see the once apathetic kids newly energized by a potential future, indicating a heightened awareness of their role outside their community and how they are observed by wider society. Ultimately, these theories share the act of observation as commonly fundamental. While the theories of Cooley and Mead seem to encapsulate the construction of the social self, the issue of social class never comes into discussion, and it is a variable with profound effects on socialization.

Both Annette Lareau and Elijah Anderson performed exhaustive sociological studies that dealt with urban areas and social class. Anderson’s *Code of the Streets* examines the norms and behavior of ghetto counterculture, and Lareau’s *Invisible Inequality* examines the intersection of social class and child rearing practices. When considered in terms of Cooley’s “looking glass self” and Mead’s notion of language and the “generalized other,” it becomes clear that the imbalance of resources between the middle class and the working poor class impacts the observations of each. As observations form the core of the socialization process, a significant difference in observations results in a significant difference in socialization. Of particular importance is the lifestyle of the working poor that so drastically differs from that of the middle class.

Urban areas like the ones studied by Anderson and Lareau are unique environments. “The main fact of life in the black inner city, Anderson argues, is that

formal law and order is far away” (Collins & Makowsky 2010:268). Society promises basic safety. With little to no defensive police presence, the families of the street are left highly vulnerable. Society promises fair access to resources. Racism and the lack of paying jobs makes earning money difficult for the working poor, thus access to basic necessities is made difficult. Society promises us the chance to pursue happiness, but with several large systems of stratification –such as race and financial standing- operating simultaneously, a successful escape from the streets is near impossible. Since the standards of what Anderson refers to as “wider society” (McIntyre 2006:100) do not apply to these urban areas, the norms and values of lower class groups change. Anderson states that the norms of the street “are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society” (McIntyre 2006:94). Thusly, the streets become a counterculture. Instead of values of fairness and equality, the streets value “might makes right, and toughness is a virtue” (McIntyre 2006:98). Anderson describes a system of rules (the “code of the streets”) that better equip individuals to survive in the ghetto. The code’s primary tenant is violence. Individuals must not be afraid to exercise violence if they perceive the slightest transgression against their respect. Of the constant and brutal fights that spring from this, Anderson says, “in almost every case the victor is the person who physically won the altercation, and this person often enjoys the esteem and respect of onlookers” (McIntyre 2006:98). This ties into Cooley’s “looking glass self,” as the victor imagines himself in the eyes of the audience, and presumably experiences pride as a result of his imagined perception. Indeed, Anderson contends that for someone of the “street,” maintaining respect “involves in part his self-image, which is shaped by what he thinks others are thinking of him in relation to his peers” (McIntyre 2006:99). At all times one

must evaluate their self-image to make sure it is intimidating and violent, and this passive observation of the self becomes an example of Mead's "me."

Among "wider society," the relationship between the looking glass self and violent force changes. "They are much more likely than street oriented people to feel that they can walk away from a possible altercation with their self-esteem intact" (McIntyre 2006:100). This is because "wider society" has been socialized in an environment where presence of resources and amenities made "might makes right" obsolete, thusly their function of the looking glass self was not to determine whether or not they appeared self-sufficient and capable of violence at all times. The observations of individuals in "wider society" differ from the observations of those in the street, and as a result, their socialization process differs as well.

Lareau indicates that working class families, being under more general stress, tend to provide their children with basic needs and let their development unfold spontaneously. This is opposite of middle class families, who possess the money, education, and time to practice "concerted cultivation," which translates to a high level of parental involvement. Language use varies greatly from concerted cultivation households to households that favor accomplishment of natural growth. Lareau lists "child contestation of adult statements" and "extended negotiations between parent and child" as symptomatic of concerted cultivation, and "general acceptance by child of directives" as a characteristic of the alternative (2002:753). Considering Mead's idea of language as indispensable to socialization, a lack of linguistic engagement can be seen as a disadvantage that partially contributes to the use of violence as a form of communication. When Cooley and Mead are mixed with theories of stratification, a clear axis of resource access emerges.

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Heisenberg's uncertainty principle does not speak to a limitation of observational technology, but rather an innate principle of quantum mechanics. We will never be able to simultaneously measure two quantum properties accurately, much like we will never be able to concretely assess the self, for it is our own observation that reshapes it. The ideas of Cooley and Mead clearly approximate several aspects of the social self, but both theorists fail to consider questions of power, dominance, and social stratification, aspects that drastically impact socialization. Fusing these ideas may not necessarily lead to a more realized understanding of the self, but joining socialization theory with stratification theory could provide valuable insights into improving the quality of life for working class citizens narrowing the class gap.

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