Hello. Welcome to Sociological Studies. Thank you for joining me today. We’re going to talk about a pretty interesting theory of the self given to us by George Herbert Mead.

Mead was an important sociologist who spent his career at the University of Chicago in the early 1900s. He’s credited with helping to develop the Symbolic Interactions Perspective, which we’ve talked about at length in this course and other tutorials. Today we’re going to focus on Mead’s theory of the self.

Mead theorized that the self has two parts, a self-awareness and a self-image. We’re going to elaborate these two parts now. What’s interesting about Mead’s theory of the self is that it’s completely social. He doesn’t allow any room for any kind of biological development of the self or biological development of the personality. And what I mean by this is think of that image of the child who-- Genie, who got left alone in a room til she was 13. When they found her at 13, she couldn’t really speak, couldn’t really walk. So she really had no development of the self. Our bodies age biologically, but the self is something that emerges through social interaction. And so in this way, Mead’s genius was to see the self as social not as biological. Our self and our notion of who we are, what we like, what our personality is, et cetera, becomes constructed through being in the world, through interaction, through reflection in thinking about the interaction and then more interaction with others. And so the self is developed as we age, as we grow. It’s not something innately biological.

So I have the personality of a teacher, because I have lived in the world and have had innumerable interactions with others and that’s made me who I am. And that’s the same as you and everybody else. Your self develops through interacting with others, through reflecting on that interaction, to thinking about how others are perceiving you, and that helps you generate an image of yourself. We’ll talk about that process now.

How might social interaction then give rise to the self? Well, social experience, being in the world allows us to have interactions and exert our forming personalities and see how the self that we put out there on display for others is being reacted to. How are they reacting to me right now? And so in this way, our self is mirrored in the reactions of the other. And we call that the looking glass self. So if you’re talking to a group of people and you state something and then everyone laughs, and someone might even call you stupid. You might begin to see yourself as stupid. You adopt the looking glass, the mirror image of yourself that is being put back to you by others. Or vice versa, if someone says something intelligent. And so one by one, just in isolation and interaction like that, won’t make you think you’re stupid or won’t make you think you’re intelligent, but if these patterns get repeated again and again and again through your lifetime, you develop an image of yourself that is given to you from without, from interaction with others. And this is, we call the looking glass self. And this idea of the looking glass
self was given to us by Charles Horton Cooley. He was the one that gave us that term.

Given that a self image is developed in recognizing how others are perceiving us, we're constantly trying to put ourselves in the shoes of another and think about how they are seeing this event or this situation or this action transpiring. So Mead called this imitation. We're constantly, with imitation, trying to see the world from another's point of view. Children do this first by imagining the position of mom and dad. And then gradually learn to take the point of view of several others, many others at the same time. Until finally when they're fully socialized, you could take the viewpoint of society generally, and this happens when you've internalize the widespread cultural norms, mores, and expectations of behavior appropriate in that society. And so then you're thinking about your behavior, you're thinking about the generalized other, how this generalized other then sees myself and my behavior. And when we take this final role, then Mead called it the generalized other.

By taking the role of the other, we can become self-aware. So aware of ourselves and develop two parts of the self, self-image and self-awareness. In addition, we have 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 out there, acting, being spontaneous, doing things in the world. It's the subject of action. It's what you would probably commonly think of as yourself. The "me" 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 object, this conceptual object, this image of yourself is the "me."

So think about when you're interacting with people what they might be thinking of you and monitor your impressions of what you think your impressions you're giving off. Monitor that in social interaction. Think about it. Think about how you know how you 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, oh that was really smart or that was really witty or that was really stupid. How did that make you feel about yourself? So that's what Mead is getting at, and we study this. It's a fascinating theory of the self because it is completely social. Remember then, that biological child who doesn't have any interaction with society. That is the true biological self. Everything that makes us human is given to us in social interaction. That's why Mead had a genius theory of the self.

Have a great rest of your day.