Overview:

In 1902, sociologist Charles Horton Cooley coined the concept the “Looking Glass Self,” which he describes as an interactive process where our perceptions of ourselves are determined by how we believe others see us. We first imagine how we appear to others. Then, others react to us and we interpret those reactions and adjust our self-image accordingly.

This activity uses the Looking Glass Self to enable participants to reflect on how they view themselves in relation to how they believe others perceive them. They will first draw two self-portraits—one that represents how they see themselves and the other that represents how they believe others see them—and write labels surrounding those portraits to further capture their perceptions. Then, they will debrief and reflect in small groups and as an entire group.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast how they see themselves and how they perceive others see them.
2. Discuss nuances of their hidden and visible identities and the stereotypes that other people seem to apply to them.
3. Identify examples of the Looking Glass Self process of self-image development in their own lives.

Time:

1 hour

Group Size:

Small group

Materials:

The Seeing You Seeing Me PowerPoint (in Downloads), writing utensils, and at least 2 sheets of paper for each participant.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness:

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).
Activity Instructions:

1. Ensure that each participant has a writing utensil and at least 2 sheets of paper.

2. Ask participants to take 2 minutes to sketch a self-portrait. Then, around the edges of their self-portrait, they should write labels that describe social groups that they identify with. These labels should be nouns, such as “college student,” “scientist,” etc.

3. On another sheet of paper, they should draw another portrait. This time, the portrait should represent how they believe others see them. They will once again write labels around the portrait, but this time they will use adjectives that they believe others would use to describe them. These adjectives can be positive, negative, or whatever comes to mind.

   Note: The directions for steps 2-3 are available on slide 2 in the PowerPoint.

4. After participants have completed their portraits, introduce Charles Cooley's concept of the Looking Glass Self (on slide 3 in the PowerPoint). To explain the concept, use toddler hide and seek as an example: At that age, children are not yet aware of the self as an object and believe that they can't be seen if they can't see the person playing with them. However, eventually, we all learn that not only is the self an object for others but that we can see ourselves through other's eyes.

   Note: The facilitator may want to tell a personal story of gaining this self-awareness of how others see them.

5. Next, debrief with the entire group using the following questions:
   • How are you feeling about this activity so far?
   • What is your comfort level with talking about identity and self-perception?

6. Then, divide participants into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions (on slide 4):
   • How are the nouns in the one picture related to the adjectives in the other? Which identities are most related to the characteristics others attribute to you? Which group memberships are they seeing?
   • Are your two self-portraits different in any way? If so, what do those differences say about the tension between how you see yourself and how you see others seeing you? Which portrait do you prefer?
   • What do the two pictures have in common? What do these similarities say about the insights of the Looking Glass Self? How do we unconsciously let others define us in our own minds? Who has been most influential in shaping your self image in this way? How happy are you about that influence? What can you do about it?

   Note: If facilitating this activity in person, go back and forth between a question in small groups and a large group debriefing for maximum interactivity. If facilitating online, post all prompts in the chat and then send participants to breakout rooms, debriefing upon return to the whole group.
7. If time, additional debriefing/discussion questions for the entire group could include the following sets of questions:

- **Set 1:**
  - Are there any noun labels that other people assume should be on your self-portrait but are not?
  - Are there any that are especially hidden from other people – no one knows unless you identity them to others?
  - Are there adjectives you wish were on the 2nd portrait? Anything you wish were NOT there?

- **Set 2:**
  - Are there people in your life that, if I had asked you to think of them in particular, your 2nd picture would have been drastically different? In what ways?

- **Set 3:**
  - Does anyone have a specific example they are willing to share – a story that illustrates the process of the looking glass self in action? I'll start... (the facilitator should share their own story here)
  - Do you see yourself differently now than before the events of the past few months? Do you think others see you differently now?

**Related Tools:**

*Similar tools:*
- [Circles of My Multicultural Self](#)
- [Paseo, The (Circles of Identity)](#)
- [Who Am I? Echoes of Culture](#)
- [Who Am I? Identity Dialogue](#)