

# The Looking Glass Self Exercise

Part of the Community Innovation Network Toolkit



Negative interactions based on racial, gender, gender-identity, ethnicity, and culture are increasing in the U.S. and abroad. Achieving collegial, and authentic civil group dynamics is tantamount at the outset of training intended to improve the cohesion and relationships in the group. This exercise connects group members to one another very quickly as assumptions come to the fore and fade to black, before similarities and like-mindedness take center stage, creating new realities.

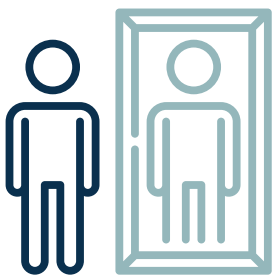
*Adrienne M. Crawford Fletcher developed The Looking Glass Self Exercise from Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) Theory of Self. Cooley theorized that individuals develop their identity in response to how they understand others' perceptions of themselves (Cooley (1909). Specifically, interactions between individuals and groups hence have a tremendous influence on one's socialization (Marshall, 1998).*

## Goals

- To create a group dynamic in which participants are willing to honestly and thoughtfully engage with one another;
- To create a group dynamic in which participants socially affirm one another, and are more empathetic toward one another;
- To create a group dynamic in which participants engage with one another in a relationally-responsible manner.

with group participants. It is also a way to break down barriers that may exist between group participants as a result of differing cultures, ethnicities, and gender identities, etc.. Cooley's (1902;1909) concepts of 'the looking glass self', 'primary groups, and 'secondary groups' all speak to the influence others have upon the individual. Marshall (1998) specifically noted that interactions between individuals and social groups have a tremendous influence on socialization.

## The Looking Glass Self Exercise & Theory of Self



*Each to each a looking glass,  
reflects the other that doth pass  
I am not what I think I am  
I am not what you think I am  
Rather, I am what I think  
you think I am*

(Cooley, 1902)

Lastly, this exercise is effective because it is couched in storytelling. Participants become less anxious as they tell their own stories, and listen to the stories of others. This exercise is an indirect way of discussing the 'third-rail' topics of race, gender, ethnicity, etc.. Gyasi (2016), author of Homegoing, noted that storytelling creates new histories, and as mentioned above, new realities. Storytelling is also a political act that helps us to realize our past (Gyasi, 2016). It also helps us to co-create our future! The narrative or story, the primary concept in this exercise, becomes a tool of empowerment, which builds relationship from the ground up, enhancing group dynamics.

## Rationale

The Looking Glass Self Exercise is a practical tool for thinking and talking about the influence of stereotypes

## Enhancement of Group Dynamics

The Looking Glass Self Exercise is an excellent exercise for enhancing group dynamics at the beginning of a training for participants who are different from one another. This exercise allows for the discussion and management of perceived differences, whether they be cultural, gender identity, ethnicity, class, etc.

## Setting-up the Looking Glass Self Exercise

Provide the following instructions to the group. This exercise will take approximately 30 minutes. The exercise is set up in three 8-10 minute segments. Give each participant about 5 minutes to 'tell their story' within segment 1 and 2. Provide 'time warnings' to ensure that each participant has time to share. The final segment is a large group segment managed by the facilitator/trainer. (Note: participants may need a 10-minute break after this exercise because of its intensity).

### 1. Segment 1 Activities: (8-10 minutes)

- Find a partner, preferably someone you don't know;
- Stand in front of your partner face-to-face, eye-to-eye;
- Repeat the poem together;
- Decide together who will begin;
- The 1st partner shares who they believe their partner thinks they are. Their partner listens in silence;
- The second partner, in turn, does the same. They share who they believe their partner thinks they are. Their partner listens in silence.

### 2. Segment 2 Activities: (8-10 minutes)

- Remain standing in your dyad;
- Ask your partner the following questions:
  - When was the first time you thought someone like me thought "you weren't smart" or "she's probably poor" or "he's just a rich white man" about you?
  - Do you believe this thought about yourself?
  - What do you want people to think about you?
  - What do you want people to know about you?
- Your partner responds to all three questions (4-5 minutes);
- After your partner finishes, they ask you the same questions (another 4-5 minutes)

### 3. Segment 3 Activities: (8-10 minutes)

- Return to the large group setting;
- The facilitator encourages participants to debrief, saying: "I'm wondering who might be willing to share reflections from this exercise?"
  - What was your most difficult discovery?
  - Do you believe what you heard to be true about you?
  - The last two questions should be asked to the same person:
  - What is it that you want people to think about you?

- Tell us who you are?
- Encourage several people to answer these questions.

## Exercise Conclusions

Provide a summary of the exercise goals and the learning that was intended. We base our behavior on what we think others think of us, thus social interaction becomes a looking glass, a mirror that informs how we see ourselves. The looking-glass self comprises three main components that are unique to humans (Shaffer 2005).

1. We imagine how we must appear to others in a social situation.
2. We imagine and react to what we feel their judgment of that appearance must be.
3. We develop our sense of self and respond through these perceived judgments of others.

You might acknowledge that this exercise creates a shift in groups through:

1. The creation of a safe environment.
2. An increase in positive group dynamics including honest and thoughtful engagement, increased empathy, social affirmation, and relational responsibility.
3. An openness and willingness to discuss difficult topics

Positive group dynamics begin to emerge when one recognizes the strong influence of individual and social interactions. Favorable group dynamics further emerge in the face of transformative dialogue, which include "... relational responsibility, self-expression, affirmation, coordination, reflexivity, and the co-creation of new realities" (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p. 704). In this brief exercise participants can discuss opposing views, stereotypes and barriers based upon how they think others see them.

## References

- Cooley, C. (1902). Human nature and the social order. New York: Scribner's Sons
- Cooley, C. (1909). Social organization. New York: Scribner's Sons.
- Gergen, K. J., McNamee, S. & Barrett, f. (2001). Toward a vocabulary of transformative dialogue, *International Journal of Public Administration* 24 (7), 679-707.
- Gyasi, Y. (2016). Homegoing. New York: Knopf Marshall, G. (1998). Charles Horton Cooley. In *Oxford dictionary of sociology* (pp. 120) (2nd ed.). (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved February 11, 2009, from <http://www.soci.canterbury.ac.nz/resources/biograph/cooley.shtml>
- Shaffer, Leigh S. (January 2005). "From mirror self-recognition to the looking-glass self: exploring the Justification Hypothesis". *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 61 (1): 47-65.