

Marginalized through the “Looking Glass Self”

The development of Stereotypes and Labeling

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Abstract

The “looking glass-self,” a concept created by Charles Cooley supported the theory that individuals learn to see themselves based on how society views them. The “looking glass-self” presented the idea that all of us take on characteristics that are predominately influenced by what we believe society perceives of us to be. This article will explore terminology and concepts essential for understanding the notion of the “looking glass self” with comparison to that of how social stereotypes and labelling can influence behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of marginalised groups of people as described by Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007).

Keywords

The Looking-Self, labelling, Change Management, diversity, ghetto, stereotypes, community

1. Introduction

World renowned social psychologist, educator and author Charles Cooley was most known and respected for his writings and research on the subject of the “looking glass-self,” (Yeung & Martin, 2003) which supported the theory that individuals learn to see themselves based on how society views them. The “looking glass-self” (Cooley, 1902) presented the idea “that the self is a social product” and that we as individuals or groups take on characteristics such as behaviours, attitudes and beliefs based on how society perceives of us (Yeung & Martin, 2003). This literature review will explore terminology and concepts essential for understanding the notion of the “looking glass self” and compare this to a social stigma that is plaguing marginalised groups of people living in inner city communities, also known as the ghetto.

The “looking glass-self” supported the theory that individuals learn to see themselves based on how society views them (Cooley, 1902). The “looking glass-self” is an idea that all individuals take on characteristics that are predominately influenced by what we believe society perceives of us to be. Under this theory, stereotyped individuals come to integrate society’s label of them as their identity, and will reproduce the behaviours associated with that identity. The labelling of being “ghetto” will be examined in this paper with reference to the formation of identity of the self.

2. The Looking Glass-Self

Cooley’s (1902) “looking glass-self” theory and the behaviours and attitudes of marginalised people living in the ghetto share many aspects. People who live in the ghetto are frequently stereotyped and labelled as being “ghetto” by society, a negative stereotype that often leads people to think poorly of themselves and their opportunities. Such negative stereotypes can

be internalised and consequently affect interpersonal relations and how individuals see themselves, their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Cooley argued that a person's perception of the self actually is an outcome of his or her acceptance by others; "The social origin of his life comes by the pathway of intercourse with other persons" ([1902] 1998). Cooley believed that the self arises dialectically through communication with society, which influences how we desire our self to be portrayed in front of others ([1902] 1998). Cooley (1998) explains this theory of "social influences" on the self as follows:

When we speak of society, or use any other collective term, we fix our minds upon some general view of the people concerned, while when we speak of individuals we disregard the general aspect and think of them as if they were separate. (Cooley, 1998)

According to Cooley, the self is not foremost an individual and then a social being, but rather we unconsciously develop or mould our self on the basis of our communication with society: "there can be no isolated selves. There is no sense of 'I' without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they... a reflection of the ideas about himself that he attributes to other minds" ([1902] 1998). The individual accepts/ embraces or unconsciously develops an image of the self based on society's viewpoint or acceptance (Yeung & Martin, 2003). Cooley points out that this social process causes us to develop a sort of "selective reinforcement" that shapes our "developing selves" (Cooley, 1902). Cooley elaborates on the influence of the social process on the "developing selves" as follows:

In imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, characters, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it seeing ourselves as we imagine others see us. ([1902] 1998).

There is a strong comparison between the "looking glass-self" and that of the influences of social stereotypes on the development of the "self." Stereotypes are seen as negative labelling, while the "looking glass-self" is viewed more as a normal experience by which we all go through in discovering who we really are. The "looking glass-self" seems to question whether individualism is truly gained by social influences on the "self." I would argue that the same phenomenon occurs with regard to how stereotypes and labelling can influence how marginalised people see themselves, and how they think they should appear in front of others.

Individualism seems to be the challenge in the development of the "self." There are many forces that shape our character, beliefs, and behaviours. I would then argue that stereotypes are the by-product of the "looking glass-self." If stereotypes are developed by society, which then influences how people perceive another group to be, thus effecting how the group being stereotyped see themselves, would this not support the concept of "looking glass-self"? The difference between the two topics is that the "looking glass-self" can be influenced by positive social interactions and experiences, while stereotypes will only lead to disparity within the self.

George Herbert Mead (1934, 1938), a follower of Cooley (1902), contended that it was unfeasible for anyone to conceive a self in the absence of social interaction. Mead postulated an understanding of the self as intersubjective, believing that the self was constructed in interaction with others through such mechanisms as social control, roles, and the generalised other. In this interpretation of the self, Mead argued that interaction, as opposed to action or

consciousness, as the starting point for sociological theorising. Therefore, this further supports and develops the idea forwarded under Cooley's (1902) theory that individuals tend to represent in themselves their identities as perceived by others. However, going beyond perception, Mead's theory specifies that it is in interaction that the understanding of the self, and the accompanying behaviours of that self, takes place.

Mead (1934, 1938) had a devoutly pragmatic attitude towards identity formation, and believed that an individual existed as a part of a community before existing with individual consciousness (Joas, 1985). An individual's meaning is deeply rooted in the interactions they have in the society around them. The extent of that individual consciousness can determine an individual's level of identification with the community. Mead postulated that only through experience with different communities can individuals become self-aware. This construct is important in explaining the persistent negative stigmatisation of community agencies as "ghetto."

Mead (1982) also forwarded the concept of "the generalised other," which is essentially a summation of the social norms in a given community or environment. As a child matures, they learn to understand appropriate modes of behaviour and interaction for the particular communities around them, which represent "the generalised other." For Mead (1982), the thinking processes of individuals are no more than their experiences of internalised communications, noting "the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings" (1982, p. 5). Mead's (1934, 1982) important contribution to this research is in framing the elements of the agency that carry the negative stigmatisation of being "ghetto," which reflects on the organisation. The employees and clients who are stereotyped as being "ghetto" can be understood as a clashing of perceptions of "the generalised other." The key element here is the experience of those involved, which can be intrinsically tied to education and opportunity, both of which are lacking in disenfranchised areas served by the community agencies.

Erving Goffman (1959, 1963) affirmed Mead's (1934, 1938) argument that the identity of an individual is constructed through an understanding of the projection of the self to others. Goffman (1959, 1963) posited the idea that individuals will go to great lengths to combat a stigma they feel is attached to them, and in doing so, may work to reinforce that stigma. Goffman's (1959) research focused on the acting of individuals in their daily interactions. Interactions are perceived as "performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 17), and these performances are inflected with impressions to attain the desired goal of the participants of the interaction. This is a formative part of individual development.

The performances that individuals engage in often require a specific set of criteria for the appropriate identity in order to most effectively engage in interactions (Goffman, 1959). This confirms the earlier work of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), in that social surroundings are the determinative factor of self-development and identity formation. Goffman considered this specific set of criteria for the appropriate identities that individuals adopt for their societies as a "front" (p. 22). Consistency of the front is paramount in order to maintain its viability as a believable identity. This suggests that the behaviours implicated the labelling of organisations and individuals as "ghetto" are deeply engrained, and will be difficult to alter.

According to Goffman (1959, 1963), individuals will attempt to perform an idealised version of the front, more consistent with the societal perception of the identity when around an audience than when not performing. The idealised version of the front is largely determined by the hegemony of prevailing dominant norms, which also provides the pressure for

individuals to conform to that front in their performative identities. Goffman's theories of self-management and development reinforce the results of this study, in that the "ghetto" stigma associated with those who use or work at the community agencies may reinforce the stereotype in their attempts to avoid or counteract its negative connotations.

3. Concept and Connotations of the "Ghetto": The Ghetto Identify

According to Vergara (1995) presently the word ghetto, for most Americans, now has a different meaning and image from that used to describe the Warsaw ghetto. The word ghetto in America is used to describe poverty-stricken communities; a section of a city where a sub-group of low-income people resides in (Vergara). These sub-groups living in inner-city ghettos are often minority families that are forced to live in these poor conditions because of economic or legal challenges, or social pressures (Hilfiker, 2002). Some of these sub-groups may also be receiving government and public aid to supplement their income, such as welfare, food stamps, Medicaid and public housing (Hilfiker, 2002). Minority groups living in the ghetto are also considered to be marginalised and oppressed because of the poor quality of life in these areas:

The quality of life in these areas was already lower because of neighbouring industry, and what housing stock existed tended to deteriorate [...] Congress set strict income limits on who could live in these new housing "projects." Functionally, this meant that the poorest members of the black ghetto were moved somewhere else in the city and segregated by class as well as by race, only intensifying their isolation from larger society. (Hilfiker, 2002, p.56)

Hilfiker (2002) argues that the extreme deprivation and poverty of these ghetto communities, its restriction, or isolation fuel the growing problem of crime, violence and drug abuse within these communities. Some of the largest inner cities (Ghetto) of the United States are located in Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Washington D.C and New York City (Brooklyn, Queens and Bronx) all of these majority cities have experienced some of the worst gang related crimes, which includes murders, assault and battery, robberies, weapons trafficking, and drug trafficking and abuse (Hilfiker, 2002). Poorer communities also face serious problems with hunger, education, and lack of opportunities (Hilfiker, 2002). These conditions create a feeling of uncertainty, disparity and apathy for the future, which causes many residents of ghettos to engage in dangerous, harmful or often illegal activities in their community:

Poverty leads to despair. Chronic poverty impairs one's motivation to aspire to something greater than what one sees in the environment...Joblessness, poverty, low levels of education and consequent hopelessness, and segregation and consequent alienation from middle-class norms all combine to create a fertile field for nurturing workers in the drug trade. (Hilfiker, 2002, p.62)

According to Hilfiker (2002) and Vergara (1995), people living in the ghetto are more likely to face serious economic hardship, unsafe living conditions, community violence, drug and alcohol abuse, suffer from illness and malnutrition, oppression and racism, and even forces that may appear positive for other communities – "the law, the media, government, police" – can in fact be harmful for residents living in the ghetto; Rodney King and Amadou Diallo. With all of these adversities that ghetto residents face, the media coverage focuses upon reporting bad news, which serves to perpetuate the negative stereotype towards African Americans living in the ghetto more than any other minority groups (Hilfiker, 2002).

Even though the data reported by the 2000 Census showed that African Americans only made up 12% of the poor in America, and less than half of that 12% live in ghettos. In fact,

more White Americans receive welfare support than African Americans, but our society thinks otherwise (Hilfiker, 2002). According to Hilfiker these stereotypes of ghetto residents invoke images of dangerous looking black men hanging out on every street corner, uneducated and uncultured families and children, streets infested with gang activity, drug dealers, addicts, and pregnant teens:

When most Americans think about poverty, or see the poor on television, or read about them in the newspapers, the images are poor black men hanging around the street corner, poor black teenagers selling drugs, poor black single mothers living on welfare, black inner-city schools failing their children. (Hilfiker, 2002, p.66)

From my research and professional experience, these stereotypes that have been plaguing African Americans for decades have now attached its harmful stigma onto these urban community centres that services residents living in the ghetto. The labelling of these community centres as being “ghetto” has invoked a lot of mixed feelings by residents, clients, and the employees and administrators of these agencies.

4. The “Self” Through Stereotypes

Sowell’s (2005) work on stereotypes is similar to Cooley’s “developing selves” theory (1983). Sowell explains that under-represented groups given negative labels will start to mimic these stereotypes since this has become a common belief of the community. Subsequently, these labelled groups might start to use the negative stereotypes as excuses as to why they are unable to achieve their goals or become successful contributors to the community. These groups might come to regard their future as hopeless because the stereotypes with which they are labelled often result in negative outcomes.

Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007) argue that these stereotypes are supported by the media, since news sources might relay that all black males have a higher likelihood of being murdered, committing crimes or dropping out of school; or Hispanic women have high teen pregnancy rates and are very sexually active or Hispanic men participate in gang activity and illegally enter the country; or Asians and Caucasian people are racist towards blacks and other minority groups and have fewer worries in life to deal with because they are wealthy and happy people. Griffin argue that the majority of stereotyped groups have “bought into” these labels by absorbing the self-defeating stereotypes conferred upon them by historical events like slavery and segregation and due to media exploitation and negative attitudes within their own community:

Oppression not only resides in external social institutions and norms but lodges in the human psyche as well (Fanon, 1968; Miller, 1976). Oppressive beliefs are internalised by victims as well as perpetrators. The ideas that poor people somehow deserve and are responsible for poverty, rather than the economic system that structures and requires it, is learned by poor and affluent alike. Homophobia, the deep fear and hatred of homosexuality, is internalised by both straight and gay people. Jews as well as Gentiles absorb antisemitic stereotypes. (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007, p. 4)

Elizabeth and Ewen (2006) describe stereotyping as a “fixed, commonly held notion or image of a person or group, based on an oversimplification of some observed or imagined trait of behaviour or appearance” (p.27). Similar to labelling, stereotyping reflects the ideas that one group of people hold about a different group of people, but is more synonymous with prejudice and racism because it creates a one-dimensional and often degrading viewpoint of the group, which then robs those in the group of their humanity. Stereotypes evoke images and ideas that fuel ignorance and hatred. Jacobs (1999) illustrates the power of stereotyping

with examples of the fear felt by many “white women” in relation to young black males; women clutch their purses and walk on the opposite side of the street. Marketing campaigns for products, music, food and services help fuel stereotypes and generalisations about groups of people:

Whether you know it or not, you are surrounded by such hyped-up messages, largely from mass media, and if you are not careful you will be prone to accept their impact as instinct when in fact it is the opposite: amplified fear. (Jacobs, 1999; 2006, p.51).

Sociologist David Schoem (1991) defines stereotyping as a set of generalisations held by one group of people regarding the characteristics and behaviours of a different group, based on an image or assumption rather than sound evidence. Stereotypes are developed when people are unable or unwilling to obtain all of the information that they would need to make a fair judgment about people or situations. Family, friends, the community or even the media often unknowingly perpetuate stereotypes, which can lead to discrimination and persecution in cases of unfavourable stereotypes. Schoem (1991) argues that stereotypes substitute for substantive human understanding and are indicative of the deep social chasms and separation across racial and ethnic lines:

The effort it takes for us to know so little about one another across racial and ethnic groups is truly remarkable. That we can live so closely together, that our lives can be so intertwined socially, economically, and politically and that we can spend so many years of study in grade school and even in higher education and yet still manage to be ignorant of one another is clear testimony to the deep-seated roots of this human and national tragedy. What we do learn along the way is to place heavy reliance on stereotypes, gossip, rumour, and fear to shape our lack of knowledge. (p. 98)

In the field of sociology, the act of “labelling” something or someone is considered by many researchers as a metaphor to distinguish/ identify things and groups of people (Becker, 1963). In a social context, the act of labelling is often used to differentiate one group of people from another, thereby discriminating and stereotyping the people being labelled (Becker, 1963). The characterisation of a group of people based on assumptions, personal or social opinions, religious perspectives, isolated behaviours or any other unfounded evidence can be very damaging. Becker argues that labelling theory researchers should avoid examining individual behaviours as the cause of labelling behaviours:

He criticises other theories for accepting the existence of deviance and by doing so, accept the values of the majority within the social group...studying the act of the individual is unimportant because deviance is simply rule breaking behaviour that is labelled deviant by persons in positions of power. (p. 122).

Social norms are the common practice of beliefs, values and laws supported by the majority group of a community and society (Becker, 1963). The behaviours that are often seen as unacceptable by one group might become acceptable by another group. According to the “looking glass-self” theory, many if not all of these negative behaviours are influenced by society (Cooley, 1902; 1983). Negative stereotypes used to label marginalised groups influence how these groups see themselves. The stereotypes become accepted by these groups, which shapes their personal and professional development and influences their behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, whether it is destructive or not.

A common method of “labelling” people often develops out of a generalised perspective of beliefs towards members of a certain nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual

preference (Becker, 1963). When the majority of a group of people holds certain beliefs towards another group, that belief develops into a “stereotype.” That stereotype can shape the way other people perceive that group, even without formal contact or research. The beliefs that are developed by the label, positive or negative, help create social stereotypes about the group (Becker, 1963).

Similar to Cooley, Becker (1963) believes that the source of many labelling problems is social beliefs, which are used to compare differences between groups. Comparison between a larger group (the majority) and a smaller group (minority) as to what are acceptable behaviours and beliefs leads to the labelling of the minority group (Becker, 1963; Wright, 1984). Becker (1963) further explains that these social norms are then forced upon differently than the labelling mentioned in the previous sentence where the minority group or individual, which in turn leads to the development of unwanted behaviours among the minority group. It can be argued that these unwanted behaviours within the minority group were forced on it by society.

An example of how stereotyping works can be seen in the term “ghetto,” as alluded to earlier in the paper. Communities can become labelled as “ghetto,” based on society’s assessment of the group. In the twentieth century the word “ghetto” became associated with the Holocaust (Edelman, 2004). The word “ghetto” is linguistically derived from the Italian word ghetto, a distinct district where Jews lived: “The Jews of Venice were confined to the ghetto, in what is now the Arsenale district in Italy.” The Germans established the Warsaw ghetto in Poland and forced Jewish families to live there within the confines of barbed wire fences that prevented them from leaving the area and cut them off from the outside world

According to Vergara (1995) the word ghetto now has a different meaning and image for most Americans. “Ghetto” describes poverty-stricken communities, or a section of a city in which a sub-group of low-income people resides. These sub-groups in inner-city ghettos are often minority families forced to live in these poor conditions because of economic or legal challenges or social pressures (Hilfiker, 2002). Some of these sub-groups might also be receiving government and public aid to supplement their income, such as welfare, food stamps, Medicaid and public housing (Hilfiker, 2002). According to Hilfiker (2002) minority groups living in the ghetto are considered to be marginalised and oppressed because of their poor quality of life:

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Hilfiker argues that the extreme deprivation, poverty, restriction and isolation of these ghetto communities fuel their growing problems of crime, violence and drug abuse. Such ghetto communities are located in Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Washington D.C and New York City (Brooklyn, Queens and Bronx), all which have experienced some of the worse gang related crimes, including murders, assault and battery, robberies, weapons trafficking, drug trafficking and abuse. Poorer communities also face serious problems with hunger, education and lack of opportunities. These conditions create a feeling of uncertainty, disparity and apathy about the future, which causes many residents of ghettos to engage in dangerous, harmful or often illegal activities in their community:

Poverty leads to despair. Chronic poverty impairs one's motivation to aspire to something greater than what one sees in the environment...Joblessness and consequent poverty, low levels of education and consequent hopelessness, and segregation and consequent alienation from middle-class norms all combine to create a fertile field for nurturing workers in the drug trade. Young men can earn more in hours than their peers in low-paying jobs do in weeks. (Hilfiker, 2002, p. 62)

According to Hilfiker (2002) and Vergara (1995) people living in the ghetto are more likely to face serious economic hardship, unsafe living conditions, community violence, drug and alcohol abuse and suffer from illness, malnutrition, oppression and racism. Even elements that might appear positive for other communities – “the law, the media, government, police” – can in fact be harmful for residents living in the ghetto, such as in the examples of Rodney King and Amadou Diallo.

Despite the adversity that ghetto residents face, media coverage seems to focus attention on bad news, which attaches a disproportionate negative stereotype towards African Americans living in the ghetto as opposed to other minority groups (Hilfiker, 2002). Even though the 2000 Census showed that African Americans only comprise 12% of those living in poverty in the United States, and that less than half of that 12% are actually living in ghettos, and that more White Americans receive welfare support than African Americans, the majority of American society still thinks the opposite (Hilfiker, 2002).

5. Conclusion

One of the most interesting patterns I noticed between the “looking glass-self” and that of stereotypes is the role that our society plays. There is a strong comparison between the “looking glass-self” and that of the influences of social stereotypes on the development of the “self.” Stereotypes are seen as negative labelling, while the “looking glass-self” is viewed more as a normal experience by which we all go through in discovering who we really are. The “looking glass-self” does seem to question whether individualism is truly gained by social influences on the “self.” I would argue the same thing in regards to how stereotypes and labelling can influence how margined people see themselves, and how they think they should appear in front of others.

The work of Cooley (1902), Mead (1934, 1938), and Hoffman indicated that individuals' identities were products of interaction and communication with the society around them. The “front” suggested by Hoffman can be understood as the labelled stereotype of “ghetto,” and it is important to recognise that it is a monumental task to restructure the behaviour routines of individuals. It will take significant change to the environment in order to restructure of the mindsets of the self after being labelled.

Individualism seems to be the challenge in the development of the “self.” There are many forces that shape our character, beliefs and behaviours. I would then argue that stereotypes is the by product of the “looking glass-self.” If stereotypes are developed by society, which then influences how people perceive another group to be, thus effecting how the group being stereotyped see themselves, would this not support the concept of “looking glass-self”? The difference between the two topics is that the “looking glass-self” can be influenced by positive social interactions and experiences, while stereotypes will only lead to disparity within the “self” and conflicts for personal acceptance.

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