2.1 Sociological Perspectives

The modern sociology of the self assumes an emerging sociological approach reflecting new emphases on power, reflexivity, and social constructionism (Callero, 2003). However, the traditional sociological approach to the self is associated with Mead’s symbolic interactionism and the principle of reflexivity being at the core. The sociological theories attempt to explain how social processes influence the development of the self.

**A. Symbolic Interactionism**.

This approach was pioneered by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist. Symbolic interactionism is the study of the patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals. Mead conceptualizes the mind as the individual importation of the social process. For Mead, the self and the mind are like social processes where gestures are taken in by the individual organism and so with the collective attitudes of others and react accordingly with other organized attitudes. Hence, the***mind***and the***self***are the products of the communication process.

**Self as reflexive process**. This is the capacity to become an object to one's self, to be both subject and object. This process is characterized by Mead as the “I” and the “me.” The “me” is the social self and the “I” is the response to the “me.” In other words, the “I” is the response of an individual to the attitudes of others, while the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others which an individual assumes.   The “me” is the accumulated understanding of the “generalized other,” i.e. how one thinks one’s group perceives oneself. The “I” is the individual’s impulses. The “I” is self as subject; the “me” is self as object. The “I” is the knower; the “me” is the known. The mind, or stream of thought, is the self-reflective movement of the interaction between the “I” and the “me.” For Mead, the thinking process is the internalized dialogue between the “I” and the “me.”( Boundless.com)

**Self as a social construction**.  Some reviews of the sociological self argue that the self is both a social product and a social force (Rosenberg 1981 as cited in Callero, 2003). In the first instance, the self is examined as a bounded, structured object referring to Mead's "me" whereas in the second instance, the self is examined as a fluid, agentic, and creative response referring to Mead's "I." This distinction captures the core principle of a socially constructed self that the self is a joint accomplishment, neither completely determined by the social world nor pregiven at birth (Callero, 2003). Understood as a combination of the “I” and the “me,” Mead’s self proves to be noticeably entwined within a sociological existence. For Mead, existence in a community comes before individual consciousness. First one must participate in the different social positions within society and only subsequently can one use that experience to take the perspective of others and become self-conscious*. "It is by means of reflexiveness--the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself-that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it"(Mead, 1934 cited in Callero,2003).*

**B. Looking Glass self**

This approach was conceptualized by Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), an American sociologist. The looking-glass self is a social psychological concept stating that a person’s self grows out of society’s interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others. The term refers to people shaping their identity based on the perception of others, which leads the people to reinforce other people’s perspectives on themselves. People shape themselves based on what other people perceive and confirm other people’s opinions of themselves.

There are three main components of the looking-glass self:

* First, we imagine how we must appear to others.
* Second, we imagine the judgment of that appearance.
* Finally, we develop ourselves through the judgments of others.

This means that our self-image is shaped by others, but only through the mediation of our own minds. There is no way to truly know what others think of us. According to Cooley, “the mind is mental” because “the human mind is social.” In other words, the mind’s mental ability is a direct result of human social interaction. Humans begin to define themselves within the context of their socialization starting from their childhood.

**C. Dramaturgical model of self**

  Dramaturgy is a concept developed by Canadian sociologist Irving Goffman**,**the idea that life is like a never-ending play in which people are actors. Goffman believed that when we are born, we are thrust onto a stage called everyday life and that our socialization consists of learning how to play our assigned roles from other people. We enact our roles in the company of others, who are in turn enacting their roles in interaction with us. He believed that whatever we do, we are playing out some role on the stage of life.

During our everyday life, we spend most of our lives on the ***front stage***, where we get to deliver our lines and perform. Sometimes we are allowed to retreat to the ***backstages*** of life. In these private areas, we don’t have to act. We can be our real selves. We can also practice and prepare for our return to the front stage.

**IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT**

Goffman coined the term**Impression Management** to refer to our desire to manipulate others’ impressions of us on the front stage (the idealized self). According to Goffman, we use various mechanisms, called **Sign Vehicles**, to present ourselves to others. The most commonly employed sign vehicles are the following: ***social setting, appearance, and manner of interacting.***