

THEORIES OF SELF IN SOUTH PARK'S FISHSTICKS

While the "[Fishsticks](http://tinyurl.com/3538eos)" episode (<http://tinyurl.com/3538eos>) from Season 13 is problematic because it contains controversial language and does not soften the depiction of the homophobia and anti-Semitism with which our society is fraught, instructors teaching classes of mature students can use this episode to illustrate theories of the self. At the start of the episode, Eric lies on the couch and eats potato chips while his friend Jimmy writes a joke. Jimmy's mother kills a spider and then cautions the boys against eating potato chips because they are unhealthy. The joke Jimmy writes becomes a national sensation, but Eric increasingly takes more and more of the credit for writing the gag. Eric does this through a misremembering of events that is depicted through a series of flashbacks that also portray Eric's increasingly favorable self-perception. During the first flashback, Cartman helps Jimmy write the joke and then kills a black widow spider, and by the end of the episode Cartman perceives himself as "totally not fat," and as having superpowers that enable him to not only write the joke, but save the entire town from dragons and killer robots. Meanwhile, rapper Kanye West becomes increasingly upset because he does not understand the play on words the joke uses and instead thinks the entire world is accusing him of being a gay fish.

Before showing this episode to students, I pass out the attached worksheet that asks students to describe Eric Cartman's *looking glass self* and Kanye West's *I* and *Me*. On the worksheet, students outline the three components of Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) looking glass self as they relate to Cartman: (1) We imagine how our self appears to others, (2) we perceive others judging the self they perceive and (3) we then develop our own sense of self based on those judgments of others. How Cartman imagines himself as appearing in favorable ways to others is explained within the episode when Kyle tells Cartman:

Yes, I believe that you believe you helped write that joke. That's how people like you work! Your ego is so out of whack that it will do whatever it can to protect itself. And people with a messed up ego can do these mental gymnastics to convince themselves they're awesome.

While Kyle speaks to the inner processes of self-conception, the episode further captures the social aspects of identity by illustrating the second and third parts of the looking glass self. For instance, Cartman imagines or remembers (quite inaccurately) how others treat him and uses these as cues of how others judge him. For instance, instead of being told potato chips are unhealthy, he misremembers people telling him things such as how funny he is, and how he "is totally not fat." Cartman then uses those judgments of others (as he perceives them) to develop his self-concept, convincing himself he is "awesome."

Throughout this same episode, the impersonation of Kanye West illustrates George Herbert Mead's ([1934] 1962) *I* and *Me*. The joke Cartman and Jimmy write engage a play on words to comically accuse individuals of being gay fish, though West takes this statement literally. Throughout much of the episode, West repeatedly expresses his *I*'s view of his *me*: "a genius voice of a generation." West suffers constant aggravation because his *I*'s view of his *me* is not in accordance with who others were telling him he is. However, by the end of the episode, West's *I* accepts his *me* as he assumes others' perceptions of him. He says, "I couldn't take it when people were making fun of me; but they were just trying to help," and ultimately decides to jump into the ocean and spend his life as a fish.

The After Discussion

To ensure students understand how the episode illustrates different theories of the self, I cover the worksheet after collecting it for grading. I begin by asking students to describe all three aspects of Cartman's *looking glass self*. In most classes I discover that because he has such a flawed self-concept, the processes become readily apparent since Cartman takes great interpretative liberty in how he assesses others' behaviors in making judgments of his self. Next, I stray from the worksheet and ask students to describe West's *looking glass self* at the beginning of the episode (a genius voice of a generation) and then his self-concept of the self at the end of the episode (a gay fish). Then, I ask students: How did his self-concept changed so radically? Students usually figure out that West reassesses and reinterprets his self-concept because of the social pressures he was under to conform to others' expectations. In further specifying this process through lecture, describing how the subjective *I* has power of the objective *me*, students come to understand how Mead's theory is better equipped to explain how the self is not only actively constructed, but always in flux and always dependent upon the social context that surrounds individuals.

While this episode is amazingly effective at putting awkward concepts of the self into an easily digestible format, the episode also makes no effort to conceal how society is fraught with homophobia and anti-Semitism. However, if effectively framed in the after-discussion, this too can be translated into a learning opportunity. I explain to students how homophobia and racism, along with other prejudices directed at any social group, are central to the ways many people see and even treat others; and therefore according to theories of the self, these negative prejudices must be somehow negotiated by these individuals who are stigmatized. Framed in this way, students usually come to understand that even seemingly innocent jokes about others being gay, playful accusations of homosexuality that often occur amongst male friends, or even carelessly using a word like "Jew" as a verb for economic exchanges, can have consequences for both how individuals and these groups are constructed (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Works Cited

- Cooley, Charles Horton. 1902. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
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- Mead, George Herbert. 1962 [1934]. *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Scientist*. Edited by Charles Morris. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwalbe, Michael, Godwin, Sandra, Holden, Daphne, Shrock, Douglas, Thompson, Shealy, and Michele Wolkomir. 2000. "Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis." *Social Forces* 79(2): 419-52.

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Illustrate how Eric Cartman develops a **looking glass self** by explaining how the three components of Cooley's concept unfold in this episode of South Park.

1.) How does Cartman imagine he appears to others?

2.) How does Cartman imagine the judgment of that appearance?

3.) How does Cartman develop his [perhaps flawed] sense of self through those judgments of others?

Explain the different stages of Kayne West's *I*'s view of his **me** throughout the episode.

1.) At the beginning of the episode, how does West's *I* view his **me**?

2.) In the middle of the episode, how does West experience a conflict between his *I*'s view of his **me**, and what he perceived to be other's view of his **me**?

3.) At the end of the episode, how did West's *I* change his **me** to better match others' social judgments of his self?
