Chapter 4: The self

What's it about?

(Social Psychology pp. 95–140)

People construct the **self-concept** in much the same way as they form impressions of others. According to **self-perception theory**, they also look at their own behavior to infer their own characteristics. They also use thoughts and feelings and other people's reactions. However, there are differences in how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others, producing **actor–observer differences in attribution**. Self-knowledge is organized around multiple self-aspects, which are not always a coherent structure, but by means of selectivity we manage to make a coherent structure of the self.

There are two major self-evaluation motives: the self-accuracy motive and the self-enhancement motive. We strive for an accurate image of how well we function, but we also want to keep our **self-esteem** high. Self-esteem can serve as a buffer against threats.

We strive for a coherent self-concept, and process information in a way that serves this need for consistency. Self-relevant events and their causes are appraised and lead to different reactions. **Self-discrepancy theory** describes how people compare the self with internal standards, and this comparison motivates us to take action. **Self-awareness** can emphasize the discrepancy. The level of **self-monitoring** determines whether we engage in **self-expression** or **self-presentation**.

Confronted with threat, there are different **coping strategies**. Which coping strategy is the best depends on the kind of threat we are dealing with, and on personal characteristics, such as level of self-esteem.

Chapter topics

- Constructing the self-concept: Learning who we are *(SP pp. 96–107)*
- Constructing self-esteem: How we feel about ourselves *(SP pp. 107–114)*
- Effects of the self: Self-regulation *(SP pp. 114–125)*
- Defending the self: Coping with stresses, inconsistencies, and failures *(SP pp. 125–136)*

CONSTRUCTING THE SELF-CONCEPT: LEARNING WHO WE ARE

Ask yourself

- How do we form impressions of ourselves?
- Is the knowledge about ourselves the same as our knowledge about others?
- Do we have one single self?
- Are there cultural differences in self-views?

What you need to know

SOURCES OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

(SP pp. 96–100)

Learning who we are from our own behavior

The **self-concept** is constructed in much the same way that impressions from others are formed. The self-concept is the set of all an individual's beliefs about his or her personal qualities. These beliefs are based on different kinds of information.

Daryl Bem's (1967) [DOI:10.1037/h0024835] [HKT] **self-perception theory** says that we learn things about ourselves from our own behaviors, but only if we lack strong inner thoughts or feelings about this part of ourselves.

Behavior driven by intrinsic motivation leads to inferences about the self; behavior driven by extrinsic motivation reveals less about inner qualities.

External rewards lead to less intrinsic motivation (see Lepper et al., 1973 [DOI:10.1037/h0035519]; SP p. 97), because self-perceptional processes lead to the conclusion that the behavior was engaged in because of the reward.

Thinking about actual or imagined behavior increases the accessibility of related personal characteristics, which leads to self-inferences.

Learning who we are from thoughts and feelings

From the thoughts and feelings of a person, more accurate inferences about the self are drawn. This is true for the person as well as for others who have to form an impression of a person.

Learning who we are from other people's reactions

Charles H. Cooley's "Looking-glass self" means that people use other people's reactions as a source of self-knowledge (Cooley, 1902; SP p. 98). These reactions serve as a kind of a mirror, reflecting our image so that we can see it. In a study by Miller et al. (1975 [DOI:10.1037/h0076539]; SP p. 98), it was shown that children came to behave in a way that others described them. However, this should especially be the case for people who are insecure about their self-concept, such as children.

Learning who we are from social comparison

According to **social comparison theory** (Festinger, 1954 [DOI:10.1177/001872675400700202]), the self-concept is often shaped by comparisons between ourselves and others. People want to evaluate themselves accurately and therefore seek similar others to compare themselves to. In fact there are also other motives for social comparison. For example, social comparison also

plays a role in distinguishing oneself from others, by focusing on the unique features of the self, compared to others.

LEARNING ABOUT SELF AND OTHERS: THE SAME OR DIFFERENT?

(SP pp. 100–103)

Differences in cues and knowledge

Our self-knowledge is more extensive than our other-knowledge, probably leading to the difference in the way we perceive ourselves and others: We view ourselves as more variable and flexible than other people, because we know ourselves in all kinds of situations.

Differences in inferences

Because we have greater access to our own thoughts and feelings, we are more aware of the impact people, places, and events have on us than of the impact they have on others. This leads to **actor–observer differences in attribution**: in describing our own behavior, we take *external factors* into account. In describing others' behavior, we make correspondent inferences: assumptions that behavior reflects *personality* characteristics.

Reasons for actor–observer differences:

- Whatever grabs our attention stands out. In others' behavior we see the behavior, in our own behavior we see the cause of our behavior.
- Different sets of causal alternatives are considered for the self and for others.
- Actors usually explain their behaviors in terms of their own beliefs and goals, while observers often cite more remote causes of those beliefs or goals.

Weblink: How to read minds like a wizard
www.psychologicalscience.org/onlyhuman/2010/04/how-to-read-minds-like-wizard.cfm

Similar shortcomings: More is not always better

Although we have more information about ourselves than about others, this does not mean that our judgments about ourselves are more accurate than our judgments about other people. This is probably due to our use of more general knowledge about human behavior that we apply to interpret both ourselves and others.

MULTIPLE SELVES

(SP pp. 103–104)

Because people engage in different roles and situations, self-knowledge is organized around multiple roles, activities, and relationships. Therefore our self-concept consists of multiple **self-aspects**, which are active in different social situations and make us actually think, feel, and behave differently when we are in different social roles, groups, and relationships.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: CONSTRUCTING A COHERENT SELF-CONCEPT

(SP pp. 104–106)

People select a few core characteristics that uniquely describe them and form their self-schema. All information that is consistent with the self-schema is processed very quickly, and inconsistent information is rejected very quickly.

By making different (incoherent) parts of the self inaccessible, a coherent self is easily acquired by just focusing on specific coherent parts of the self.

People have selective memory, so that they forget inconsistent information about the self and easily retrieve consistent information. If some information needs to be reconstructed to be consistent, people will do this very easily.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE SELF-CONCEPT

(SP pp. 106–107)

Although members in all cultures seek a coherent sense of self, the visions of what the self is differ across cultures. In independent cultures, the individual characteristics are emphasized; in interdependent cultures the social roles are more important.

In interdependent cultures, members of those cultures rely on self-aspects to define the self, not on self-schemata. Descriptions of self in independent cultures are more in terms of general traits, while descriptions in interdependent cultures are more in terms of the social situation.

Across all cultures the self serves as a guide in adaptation. Our self-knowledge tells us which situations to engage in and which things we should avoid. Therefore, accurate self-knowledge is needed, but accuracy is not the only goal.

So what does this mean?

People construct their **self-concept** in much the same way as they form impressions of other people. According to **self-perception theor**y, people infer internal characteristics from their behavior. They also use thoughts and feelings and other people's reactions to form opinions about themselves. **Social comparison theory** describes how people compare themselves to others to learn what characteristics make them unique.

However, there are also differences in how we perceive other people's behavior. People tend to take the influence of the situation on their behavior into account, but attribute other people's behavior to internal characteristics, leading to **actor–observer differences in attribution**.

Because of the multiplicity of selfhood, people have to be selective in the availability of self-relevant information in order to keep the self a coherent structure.

CONSTRUCTING SELF-ESTEEM: HOW WE FEEL ABOUT OURSELVES

Ask yourself

- Do we want to feel good about ourselves, or do we want to have an accurate self-view?
- How do we protect our self-views against threats?
- Are there cultural differences in self-esteem?

What you need to know

BALANCING ACCURACY AND ENHANCEMENT *(SP pp. 108–109)*
EVALUATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: SOME PAIN BUT MAINLY GAIN *(SP pp. 109–110)*
SOCIAL COMPARISONS: BETTER OR WORSE THAN OTHERS? *(SP pp. 110–111)*
WHY SELF-ENHANCE? *(SP pp. 111–112)*
SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-ENHANCEMENT IN CULTURAL CONTEXT *(SP pp. 113–114)*

BALANCING ACCURACY AND ENHANCEMENT

(SP pp. 108–109)

Self-esteem tells us how well we are doing in successfully adapting to our own social world. To serve its proper role, it should be an accurate reflection of how we are doing. However, people generally tend to inflate their own abilities and accomplishments, seeking to elevate their self-esteem. Our level of self-esteem therefore reflects a compromise between the two motives: accuracy and enhancing self-esteem.

CASE STUDY: Implicit egoism and major life decisions [see ch04-CS-01.doc]

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Name your choice [see ch04-RA-01.doc]

Self-enhancement

Events that affect us positively or negatively influence our self-esteem. However, **self-enhancing biases** can color the impact of our experiences on self-esteem, so that negative events have less effect and positive events have a large effect on our self-esteem.

EVALUATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: SOME PAIN BUT MAINLY GAIN

(SP pp. 109–110)

One self-enhancing bias is that we engage in situations that give us positive feelings, and avoid situations that can lead to negative feelings. Another bias is our selective memory: we have a better memory for success than for failure.

Self-complexity

Our self-knowledge is organized around multiple self-aspects. The more self-aspects there are, the higher the level of self-complexity. The lower this level of self-complexity, the greater the impact of failure is on one domain of the self.

SOCIAL COMPARISONS: BETTER OR WORSE THAN OTHERS?

(SP pp. 110–111)

People evaluate themselves by comparing with others. The result of the comparison can be positive or negative. According to the self-evaluation maintenance model, this

outcome depends on two factors: closeness to the person with whom we compare, and importance of the attribute in question.

We avoid comparisons that make us look bad. One tactic is establishing distance between ourselves and those who are successful. Another form of protection involves downward comparison: the comparison with others who are less fortunate or successful.

Weblink: Bronze medals are the worst!
http://mindhacks.com/2012/08/14/bbc-future-column-what-a-silver-medal-teaches-us-about-regret/

WHY SELF-ENHANCE?
(SP pp. 111–113)
If an accurate level of self-esteem is needed as an indicator of how we are doing, why are we so prone to biases that create and maintain positively biased views of ourselves?

- Self-improvement: Doing the best you can actually improves your performance. Improvement often requires **self-regulation** which involves controlling one's behavior so that it falls in line with internal or external standards.
- High self-esteem feels good and has positive effects on lives, acting as a kind of resource that can buffer us from some of the blows of fortune.

Weblink: Test your self-esteem
http://psychologytoday.tests.psychtests.com/take_test.php?idRegTest=3207

SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-ENHANCEMENT IN CULTURAL CONTEXT
(SP pp. 113–114)
Self-enhancing biases operate somewhat differently in different cultures. In interdependent cultures, people are less prone to this bias, or even show a reverse bias. This difference is explained by the focus on self-worth: in independent cultures,

the focus is on autonomous and separate aspects of the self. In interdependent cultures, however, the focus is on the ability to fit in harmoniously with others, and negative information about the self is used as a way to improve this ability. In this respect, self-criticism is a way to improve the self, in both independent and interdependent cultures, and thus both cultures engage in self-enhancement, albeit in different ways. In both cultures, high levels of self-esteem are important, because they are a gauge that gives us information about our success and acceptance.

CASE STUDY: Culture influences young people's self-esteem [see ch04-CS-03.doc]

So what does this mean?

Accurate self-knowledge regarding our capacities is important for guiding us through our lives and for having control over our lives. But accuracy is not the only motive for evaluating the self: **Self-esteem** is also greatly influenced by motivational pressures to think well of the self. These motivations color many of our thoughts and feelings about the self through **self-enhancing biases**. We have a whole range of self-enhancing strategies to cope with positive and negative self-relevant information. There are cultural differences in self-enhancement, but self-esteem in all cultures is a sign of how well we are connected with and master our environment.

EFFECTS OF THE SELF: SELF-REGULATION

Ask yourself

- How do our self-views influence our thoughts, behavior, and perception of others?
- How do views of other people influence our behavior?

What you need to know

THE SELF AND THOUGHTS ABOUT OURSELVES AND OTHERS *(SP p. 114)*
THE SELF AND EMOTIONS *(SP pp. 114–119)*
- How do emotions arise?   - Appraisals, emotions, and bodily responses: All together now
THE SELF IN ACTION: REGULATING BEHAVIOR *(SP pp. 119–123)*
- Self-expression and self-presentation   - Personality differences in preference for self expression and self presentation: Self-monitoring   - Regulating behavior to achieve a desired self (Higgins, 1987 [DOI:10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319])   - From self to behavior, and back again
TEMPTATIONS THAT MAY DERAIL SELF-REGULATION *(SP pp. 123–124)*

THE SELF AND THOUGHTS ABOUT OURSELVES AND OTHERS *(SP p. 114)*

Once the self-concept is established it is hard to change, and information about the self is processed in a self-affirmative way. However, people who have an unstable self tend to have low self-esteem and high emotional reactivity to daily events.

The self-concept also influences the way we perceive others: We compare others with our own central traits. The self-concept serves as an organizing framework for perceiving and remembering information about people in general.

THE SELF AND EMOTIONS

(SP pp. 114–119)

How do emotions arise?

The prevailing view today is that emotions are caused by appraisal of a self-relevant object or event. An **appraisal** is an interpretation of an event, including both the causes of the event and how the event affects the self. Two appraisals are important in influencing emotions:

- Our appraisal of the event's positive or negative implications of the self.
- Our appraisal of what caused or controlled the event.

These appraisals are flexible and can change over situations. Sometimes our appraisals of the cause of the event are wrong, because we are misled by other salient cues.

The way we appraise events and experience emotions also depends on our culture.

Appraisals, emotions, and bodily responses: All together now

Our appraisals not only lead to emotions, but also to behavioral responses like smiling, frowning, and escaping. Furthermore, emotions affect thinking. All these reactions are frequently activated together, so that they become associated. As a result, one aspect can engage all the rest. For example, imitating a smile actually makes you feel happier (see Strack et al., 1988 [DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.768]).

CASE STUDY: Bodily signs of emotion often intensify emotional feelings [see ch04-CS-04.doc]

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: I've got the funnies [see ch04-RA-02.doc]

THE SELF IN ACTION: REGULATING BEHAVIOR

(SP pp. 119–123)

Self-expression and self-presentation

Once we have an established self, we use this self to control and direct our behavior. Sometimes we behave in a particular way with the aim of affecting people:

- **Self-expression**: I am what I am. We are motivated to express ourselves.
- **Self-presentation**: I am what you want me to be. We try to shape other people's impressions of us in order to gain power, influence, or approval. Most people want others to have a good impression of them. Therefore, ingratiation and self-promotion are the two most common goals of social interaction.

CASE STUDY: Self-esteem and Facebook use [see ch04-CS-05.doc]

Personality differences in preference for self expression and self presentation: Self-monitoring

Everyone engages in both self-expression and self-presentation. However, people show a stable preference for one or the other, called **self-monitoring**: High self-monitors want to satisfy the demands of the situations and engage in self-presentation, while low self-monitors try to show who they are and what they stand for, and engage in self-expression.

(SP pp. 120–121)

Regulating behavior to achieve a desired self (Higgins, 1987 [DOI:10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319]**)**

Self-guides are personal standards toward which we strive. There are two forms: the *ideal* self (the person we would like to be) and the *ought* self (the person we feel we should be).

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) says that people may have a *promotion* focus in which self-regulation is guided primarily by the ideal self, or a *prevention* focus in which self-regulation is guided primarily by the ought self or fulfilling one's duties or obligations. Those with a *promotion* focus seek opportunities to obtain positive outcomes relevant to their goals. When they succeed in achieving these outcomes they are happy, and when they fail they are sad. Those with a *prevention*

focus seek to avoid negative outcomes relevant to their goals. When they succeed in avoiding these unfortunate outcomes, the feel relief, and when they fail they feel anxiety.

The very same goal can represent a promotion goal for one person and a prevention goal for another person.

There are individual differences within cultures in the impact of goals, and there are differences between cultures: members of collectivistic cultures generally focus on prevention goals, whereas members of individualist cultures tend to emphasize promotion goals.

Weblink: Prevention focus and dieting
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87931325

Weblink: Could you stick with it?

www.stickk.com/

From self to behavior, and back again
Self-presentation not only affects impressions that others hold of us, but also affects our impressions of ourselves, provided that there is an audience for our self-presentation.

TEMPTATIONS AND OTHER THREATS TO SELF-REGULATION

(SP pp. 123–124)
Short-term benefits may challenge our long-term goals. To resist these short-term benefits, we can reward ourselves for sticking to our long-term goal. Another strategy is to change the things we *ought* to do into things we *want* to do.

Self-regulation leads to depletion, which leads to loss of self-regulation.

Self-affirmation can restore self-control when one is low on inner-resources. Self affirmation can be as simple as thinking of your most important values.

Negative effects of not reaching goals

Self-discrepancies motivate us to meet our personal goals and standards, but at a price: awareness of our failures to meet our goals is painful and in extreme cases triggers negative emotions, lowered self-esteem, and even depression.

Factors that can exaggerate our awareness of discrepancies:

- Self-focusing situations lead to **self-awareness**, directing our attention to our internal standards, and heightening our awareness of discrepancies.
- Self-focusing individuals are more aware of, and try to cope with, discrepancies.

So what does this mean?

The **self-concept** is a relatively stable construct. To keep this construct stable, people have several strategies. The other way around, our self-knowledge influences our perception of others. Perceptions of situations lead to **appraisals** of the situation that in turn lead to emotions. These emotions involve the whole self, body, and mind. According to **self-discrepancy theory**, people compare themselves with (ideal and ought) self-views, which lead to a motivation to behave in particular ways. This is especially the case when people are self-aware. The self also directs behavior in two ways: **self-expression** or **self-presentation**, depending on the level of **self-monitoring**.

DEFENDING THE SELF: COPING WITH STRESSES, INCONSISTENCIES, AND FAILURES

Ask yourself

- How do we react to negative experiences, like negative feedback?
- What is a healthy way of coping with negative events?
- Does feeling good about yourself influence the way you cope with threats?

What you need to know

THREATS TO THE WELL-BEING OF THE SELF *(SP pp. 126–128)*
• Emotional and physical effects of threat • Threats and appraisals of control • Control and depression
DEFENDING AGAINST THREAT: EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING *(SP pp. 129–130)*
• Escaping from threat • Downplaying threat by focusing on the more positive aspects of the self • Working through threat by writing about it • Tend and befriend
ATTACKING THREAT HEAD-ON: PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING *(SP pp. 132–135)*
• Making excuses: It's not my fault • Taking control of the problem • Control and life goals
HOW TO COPE? *(SP pp. 135–137)*
• Self-esteem as a resource for coping • Controllability and coping

THREATS TO THE WELL-BEING OF THE SELF

(SP pp. 126–128)

Anything that contradicts our sense of self can mean a threat to us. These threats can be failures, inconsistencies, awareness of our mortality, or small frustrations or hassles of everyday life.

Emotional and physical effects of threat

The level of self-esteem influences the reaction to self-threats. People with high self-esteem are protected against threats, but only if their level of self-esteem is stable. Research by Baumeister et al. (1996 [DOI:10.1037/0033-295X.103.1.5]; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998 [DOI:10.1037/0022-3514.75.1.219]) showed that especially people with high self-esteem react aggressively after threats to the self. Threats to the self lead to all kinds of physical reactions that in turn lead to illness.

Type A personalities in particular run the risk of suffering physically from threats. These people are ambitious, competitive, speak rapidly, are hostile, and show much anger.

Positive emotion is strongly associated with better health.

Weblink: Stressed out? Here's how to deal with it (tip 1)
www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm

Weblink: Stressed out? Here's how to deal with it (tip 2)
www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_TCS.htm

Threat and appraisals of control

People have the motive to control their environment. Losing this sense of control is very threatening.

Control and depression

A repeated experience of lack of control can lead to *learned helplessness*; the feeling that no effort can change the (bad) situation one is in. These feelings can lead to clinical depression, a psychological disorder characterized by negative moods, low self-esteem, pessimism, and a disruption of thinking, sleeping, eating, and activity patterns.

If this feeling of lack of control goes together with the feeling that it is all "my fault," then depression is likely. This depressive attributional style leads to physical as well as mental illness.

DEFENDING AGAINST THREAT: EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING

(SP pp. 129–130)

Coping strategies are efforts undertaken to reduce the negative consequences produced by threatening events.

Escaping from threat

People try to deal with the negative emotions associated with the event, perhaps by escaping or avoiding the threatening situation.

Downplaying threat by focusing on the more positive aspects of the self

One way to deal with threat is to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative by affirming our positive strengths and trivializing our negative aspects.

Self-affirmation may also be used as a way to cope when individuals are faced with reminders of their own mortality. According to *terror management theory*, such reminders lead us to cope by reaffirming our most basic cultural worldviews.

Working through the threat by writing about it

Research by Pennebaker has shown that writing about threatening events leaders to temporary feelings of physiological arousal, but long-term positive health benefits.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Let it go [see ch04-RA-03.doc]

Tend and befriend

During times of stress, women nurture themselves and others, and create and maintain a social network of close others. This behavior helps women to cope. Men, in contrast, are more likely to engage in "fight or flight" responses when under stress.

ATTACKING THREAT HEAD-ON: PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING

(SP pp. 132–135)

In problem-focused coping, people try to deal with the threatening situation by reinterpreting the event as non-threatening, or by physically removing the event.

Making excuses: It's not my fault

One way to deal with threats to the self is to attribute the negative outcomes to external factors. In addition, people may engage in self-handicapping by making up excuses before and expected poor performance.

Weblink: Protecting the ego by making excuses
www.nytimes.com/2009/01/06/health/06mind.html?_r=3&partner=rss&emc=rss&

Taking control of the problem

Self-efficacy is people's confidence that they can achieve their goals. Self-efficacy leads people to believe they have more control over their outcomes.

People may also engage in *counterfactual thinking* to imagine how they could behave differently (and perhaps achieve better outcomes) in the future.

Weblink: The illusion of control
www.spring.org.uk/2013/02/the-illusion-of-control-are-there-benefits-to-being-self-deluded.php

Control and life goals

Intrinsic goals lead to greater well-being.

Weblink: Self-determination theory: about intrinsic motivation and well-being
www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/theory.html

HOW TO COPE?

Self-esteem as a resource for coping
High self-esteem people have a whole arsenal of strategies for coping with threats. Self-esteem serves as a buffer against threats. Threats are harder to cope with for depressed and low self-esteem people.

Controllability and coping
Controllability of a threat leads to a challenge. Uncontrollable events lead to escape, distraction, and other forms of emotion-focused coping behavior. The perceived controllability of an event differs between people.

So what does this mean?

When threatened by external events or negative feedback, like major failures and disasters, inconsistent information, daily hassles and stresses, people must defend their **self-esteem**. For this reason we respond to these threats with **coping strategies**. There are two major strategies: leaving or avoiding the stressful situation, or removing the threat. The strategy used depends on the situation and the individual's resources.