

## Social Psych- Lesson 3: The Social Self

1. Describe the processes that underlie how people come to have a self-concept and how those processes are affected by internal factors as well as external factors.
2. Explain current theory on why individuals have a sense of self-esteem and describe findings regarding gender and cultural differences in self-esteem.
3. Compare and contrast how both situational factors and personal factors influence self-awareness.
4. Identify the ways in which individuals engage in self-enhancement and discuss whether the positive illusions that follow from self-enhancement are adaptive.
5. Name the three motives that may drive self-presentation and differentiate them from one another.

### The ABCs of the Self:

**Affect:** How do we evaluate ourselves, enhance our self-images, and defend against threats to our self-esteem?

**Behaviour:** How do we regulate our actions and present ourselves according to interpersonal demands?

**Cognition:** How do we come to know ourselves, develop a self-concept, and maintain a stable sense of identity?

### The Self-Concept

- Self Concept: The sum total of beliefs that people have about themselves

***Self-concept is made up of self-schemas.***

- **Self-schema:** Beliefs about oneself that guide processing of self-relevant information.
- “Cognitive molecules”- that are beliefs about ourselves that help us process relevant information.
- Self-recognition is the first step in the development of a self-concept

The Self has both *private and public aspects*. The private, “**inner**” aspect relies on the capacity for self-reflection in order to understand one’s motives, emotions, and behaviour. **The public, “outer”** aspect is heavily influenced by social factors.

The Self is an important object of our attention. We have a natural tendency to pick up on personally relevant stimuli from the surrounding “noise” going on around us. This “**cocktail party effect**” is evidence *that the self is an important object of our own attention*.

**Self-recognition** (e.g., seeing your reflection in a mirror and recognising it as yourself) is an important **first step in the development of a self-concept**. It appears that only humans and great apes are capable of self-recognition (though there is some evidence that elephants and dolphins can also recognise themselves in a mirror).

**Social factors** also play a key role in the *development of a self concept*. Other people serve as mirrors in which we see our self (“the looking glass self”) defined this as the “**relational self**” – we draw our sense of who we are from past and current relationships with significant others. Apes raised in isolation do not develop the capacity for self-recognition, indicating the importance of social factors in the development of a self-concept. Social factors also play a role in the development of the self-concept.

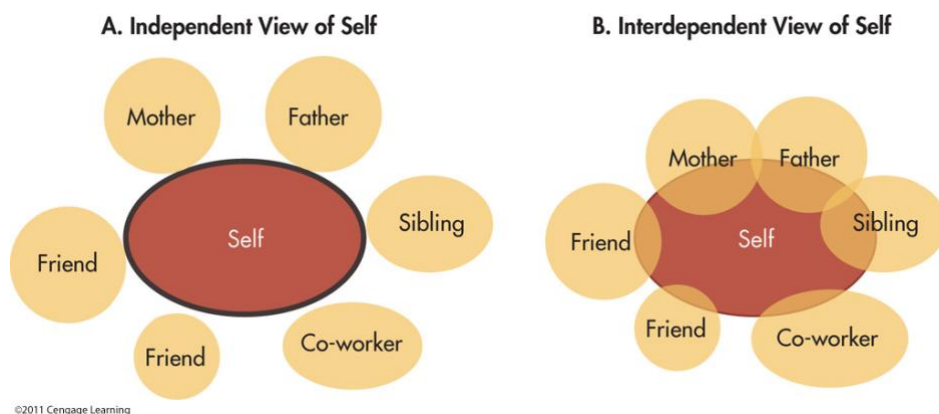
### Where does our Self-Concept come from?

1. **Introspection:** *is the self-knowledge gained through looking inward at one’s own thoughts and feelings*. Mixed evidence regarding the role of introspection in the development of the self-concept. First of all, **introspection does not always lead to accurate self-knowledge**. Wilson (2002) theorised that we are too mentally busy to fully understand our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It has also been shown that we have difficulty in predicting our responses to future emotional events (“affecting forecasting”), a skill that should be easy if we use introspection to understand our self-concept. We also tend to overestimate the strength and duration of our emotional reactions (see Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2005).
2. **Perceptions from our own behaviour:** People can learn about themselves simply by watching their own behaviour (Bem, 1972). Bem’s Self-Perception Theory states that when internal cues are difficult to interpret, people gain insight by observing their own actions and the situation in which the actions took place. In this way they can infer their internal state and thus develop a picture of their self-concept.

3. **Influences of other people:** When asked the question “Who are you?”, people tend to describe themselves in ways that set them apart from others in their immediate vicinity (e.g., family, friends, colleagues). It is suggested therefore that the self is “relative”, to who is most immediate to the person at that time. We define ourselves in part by using others as a benchmark. This means of course that the concept of self can change from situation to situation. When people are uncertain of their abilities or opinions, we rely on “social comparison” with others to evaluate the self.
4. **Autobiographical memories:** Autobiographical memories are essential for a coherent self-concept (see “The man who mistook his wife for a hat” by Oliver Sacks). When asked to recall events from their past people typically report more events from the recent than the distant past. However, there are two exceptions to this recency rule: we tend to retrieve autobiographical memories from our adolescent and young adult years (a “reminiscence bump” due to the importance of these years in development) and we have a tendency to remember transitional “firsts” in our development. Flashbulb memories (enduring, highly detailed recollections of dramatic events in our history) also serve as prominent landmarks in our autobiographies. It is important to note that autobiographical memory is not infallible and can, rather perversely, be influenced by our self-concept. In particular, memories can be distorted by the tendency for self-inflation (“the older I get the better I was”).

### Self-concept is also influenced by cultural factors.

- **Individualistic cultures** value the virtues of **independence**, autonomy, and self-reliance. North Americans and Europeans for example, view the self as an entity that is distinct, autonomous, self-contained, and endowed with unique dispositions. People in such cultures strive for personal achievement.
- **Collectivist cultures** value the virtues of **interdependence**, cooperation, and social harmony. Asians and South Americans for example, view the self as part of a larger network of family, co-workers, and others to which they are socially connected. People in such cultures derive more satisfaction from the status of the valued group.



**Self-esteem:** *the affective component of self, consisting of a person's positive and negative self-evaluations*

### Why do we have a need for self-esteem?

- Self-esteem is necessary for a healthy and functional existence, in the same way that food, air, sleep, and water are necessary for survival. We are motivated to see ourselves in a positive light – we have a *need* for self-esteem. Satisfying this need is critical to our entire outlook on life. Those with a positive self-image tend to be happy, healthy, productive, and successful. Those with a negative self-image tend to be more depressed, pessimistic about the future, and prone to failure.
- We are inherently social animals, so our need for self-esteem is driven by a primitive need to connect with others and gain their approval
- There are conflicting views on whether high self-esteem necessarily results in more desirable life outcomes. While there is undoubtedly a correlation between higher self-esteem and feeling good, there is little data to suggest that the relationship is causal. On the other hand, others note that while global indicators of self-esteem are poor predictors of success on a task, high self-esteem specific to the task leads to better performance. High self-esteem regarding academic performance, for example, will lead to better grades but won't necessarily mean better performance in the workplace.

## Gender and Race Differences in Self-esteem?

- **Gender** – a meta-analysis of 216 studies by Kling et al. (1999) found consistent differences in self-esteem between men and women. Men tended to have higher self-esteem than women as adolescents and adults, but the difference was small, particularly amongst older adults.
- **Race** – as Figure 3.6 from Kassin et al. (2011) shows, African-Americans have higher self-esteem compared to the majority white population. Other minority groups tend to have lower self-esteem compared to the white population. It is suggested that the surprising finding of higher self-esteem amongst the minority African-American population could be due to a sense of group pride, propagated by the attribution of negative outcomes to the forces of discrimination.

## Self-Discrepancy Theory

- Proposes that self-esteem is defined by the match between how we see ourselves and how we want to see ourselves. That is, our self-esteem and emotional well-being can be predicted by examining the discrepancy between our “actual self” and our “self-guides.”
- Self-guides are things that you feel you ought to be, as well as things you feel you would like to be. A mismatch between actual self and moral/ideal self leads to disappointment, frustration, sadness, and sometimes even depression.

**According to the Self-discrepancy theory, self-esteem levels depend on 3 factors:**

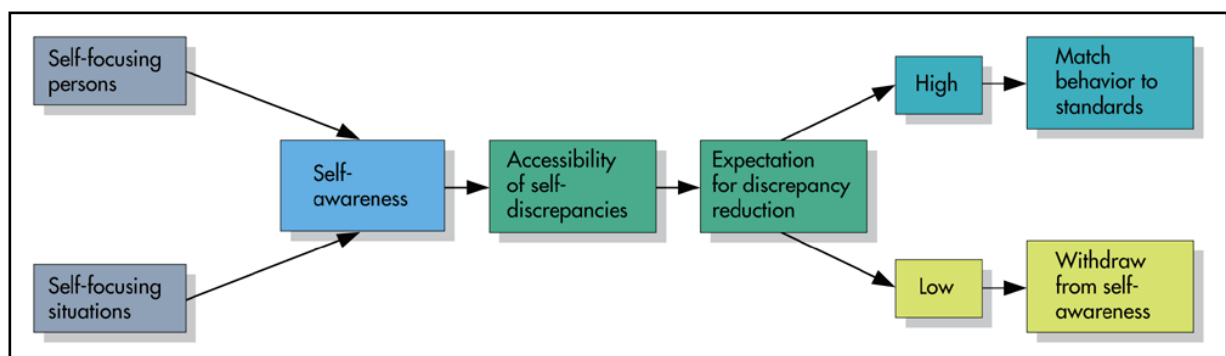
1. *The bigger the discrepancy between actual self and self-guide, the worse we feel*
2. *The more important the domain of discrepancy is to our self-concept, the worse we feel*
3. *The more we focus on the discrepancy, the worse we feel.*

## Self-Awareness Theory:

- We are not usually self-focused; however, certain situations may cause us to become objects of our own attention.
- When we become more self-aware, we naturally begin to compare behaviour with some standard. This comparison often results in a negative discrepancy and a temporary reduction in self-esteem.
- Heightened self-awareness also tends to result in bad moods, as well as health problems such as anxiety, alcoholism, and other clinical disorders.
- In the main, we are poor monitors of our “inner self”.

## Coping with Discomfort

- *Self-awareness theory proposes two ways in which the discomfort attached to heightened self-awareness can be diminished.*
1. **“Shape up” by behaving in ways that reduce self-discrepancies.**
    - Start behaving in ways that reduce the self-discrepancies. The success of such a strategy depends on whether the person believes they are capable of reducing the self-discrepancy and whether they are please with their early progress.
  2. **“Ship out” by withdrawing from self-awareness.**
    - If people believe they don’t have the skills or resources to reduce the self-discrepancy, or they meet with early failure when trying, they will attempt to escape from self-awareness – usually by extreme behavioural means (e.g., drug abuse, sexual masochism, binge eating, and suicide).



**Self-Focusing Persons:** Certain individuals are characteristically more self-focused than others. They are divided into 2 distinct traits:

**Private vs. public self-consciousness**

**Private self-consciousness:** Tendency to introspect about inner thoughts and feelings

- People high in **private self-consciousness** are introspective – they tend to focus on their own inner states. Such people fill in incomplete sentences with first-person pronouns (e.g., “I”, “me”, “we”) and make self-descriptive statements. They also recognise self-relevant words more quickly than other words.

**Public self-consciousness:** Tendency to focus on outer public image

- People high in **public self-consciousness** see themselves as social objects – they tend to focus on themselves as they are seen by others. Such people tend to be sensitive to the extent to which other people share their opinions. They are also sensitive to the way they are viewed from an outsider’s perspective

*A person’s level of public or private self-consciousness has implications for how they deal with self-discrepancies. Someone high in private self-consciousness will try to reduce the discrepancies by changing their behaviour to meet their own inner morals or standards. Someone high in public self-consciousness will try to match their behaviour to socially accepted norms.*

**Self-Regulation:** is the process by which we seek to **control or alter our thoughts, feelings, behaviours,** and urges.

- Self-focused attention can motivate us to control our behaviour and strive for personal or social ideals
- Suggest that self-control is a limited resource that can temporarily be depleted by usage. That is, we have a limited reservoir of self-control that can temporarily run out or become fatigued. Thus, after self-control has been exercised in one domain, capacity to exercise self-control in another domain is weakened
- Research suggests that self-control fatigue is physically taxing, as measured by a reduction in glucose levels after a self-control exercise (Gailliot et al., 2007), supporting the theory that increased self-control in one domain can reduce the capacity for self-control in another domain.

**Irony Process:**

- Wegner (1994): Sometimes the harder we try to inhibit a thought, feeling, or behaviour, the less likely we are to succeed.
- Observed in a wide range of behaviours
- Example: For the next 30 seconds, think about ANYTHING, but DO NOT think about a white bear.
- E.g. Insomnia is an example of an ironic process- the more you try not to worry about falling asleep, the less likely you are to fall asleep!

**Mechanisms of Self-Enhancement**

- We tend to see positive traits as more descriptive of ourselves than negative traits. Such natural tendencies allow us to overcome the potential pitfalls of self-awareness and self-regulation.
- We have a natural tendency to be positive. We overestimate our abilities across many domains. Interestingly, those who are the least competent are also the most likely to overrate their own performance (see Kruger & Dunning, 1999). As people become more competent, they become more realistic about their abilities. True knowledge is recognising your limitations.
- Most people **exhibit implicit egotism**, a tendency to hold ourselves in high regard- Implicit egotism is an **unconscious form of self-enhancement**. We unconsciously seek out subtle reflections of the self in our surroundings.