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Conceptualising the Self with the aid of Social Psychology

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

■ THE CONCEPT OF 'SELF'

Self can be described in terms of three main features (Baumeister & Bushman, 2009). The first is to do with how aware is an individual about his/her own self. Second feature is related to how self is understood in the context of social situation when we relate with others. Third is the behaviour and decisions that are largely determined by self.

Willian James, 1890, was one of the first proponents of 'self' (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2006). He stated that anything and everything with which an individual associates himself/herself becomes part of his/her self. He proposed three elements of self experience: the material me, which deals with self related to one's body as well as physical objects present in his/her environment; the social me, which has to do with the awareness of an individual about how others view him/her; and the spiritual me, which deals with personal thoughts and feelings of an individual.

Freud also considered the concept of self as significant, as insight in one's self is an important aspect of psychoanalysis. Jung was yet another proponent who focused on the relevance of acceptance and integration of conscious and unconscious aspects of an individual in order to promote complete development of self.

Individual differences can be explained to a greater extent by 'self'. Self influences the behaviour of an individual, especially in a social set-up. It also has a strong influence on cognitive processes such as perception, thinking and learning, and it also plays a role in decision-making, setting of goal and performance. Self can be seen as responsible for regulating various psychological processes including motives.

Studies also indicate that not only human beings but other species as well have a sense of self, though rudimentary (Gallup, 1997). A study was carried out by Suddendorf and Collier-Baker (2009) on the evolution of primate visual self-recognition. In this study, a mirror was kept in the animal's cage until it became a familiar object. The animal was then anaesthetised and its brows or ears were marked with a red dye that was odourless. The chimpanzees and orangutans touched the spots marked with the dye as they saw themselves in the mirror; however, the same was not displayed by monkeys. Studies have also indicated that mirror self-recognition has been displayed by dolphins (Reiss & Marino, 2001). With regard to human beings, self-recognition develops by around two years of age and the rudimentary self-concept becomes more and more complex as they grow older (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2014).

There are two main views of self, especially when cultural difference with regard to self are discussed. These are independent view of self and interdependent view of self. In self, as independent view, individual's identity is seen as not dependent on the interaction with others. In fact, self is determined by attributes that are internal to an individual. These attributes are relatively consistent across situations and periods of time. Individual differences exist with regard to these attributes. This view was referred to as the self-contained model by Markus and Kitayama (1991).

The other view indicates self as interdependent. This view proposes that an individual's identity is to a greater extent influenced by their relationship with others. The self also depends on the roles played by the individual with reference to others.

Gender differences have also been observed with regard to self. Women display more of relational interdependence where the focus is on close relationships and men display more of collective interdependence where the focus is on a larger group membership (Aranson et al., 2014).

■ SELF-CONCEPT

During a workshop on self, the trainer carried out a simple exercise with the participants. She asked participants to provide their answer to the question ‘Who are you?’ Each participant thus had to write down who they felt they were or, in simple terms, how they perceived themselves. Most of the participants described themselves in terms of their physical appearance (in terms of their height, weight and so on) or in terms of their traits (being extrovert or introvert, calm, honest and so on). Many participants also informed about their goals in life (such as they want to pursue medicine, want to become a singer and so on). Such descriptions can help understand the concept that the individuals have about themselves. Self-concept is thus ‘a complex collection of diverse information that somehow is held together as you’ (Baron & Byrne, 1995, p. 175).

Self-concept, in simple terms, can be described as a mental picture that an individual has about his/her own self. It can also be described as the perception that an individual has about his/her own self, for example, ‘I am a good employee’, ‘I am honest’, ‘I am smart and have potentiality to do well’, ‘I am lazy’ and so on.

Self-concept can be described as a multifaceted entity and is nothing but how you see yourself. It can be described as the collection of beliefs that an individual has about his/her own self. These beliefs are organised and are also referred to as self-schemas. These self-schemas are separately characterised by unique thoughts and feelings. Thus, various self-schemas constitute a self-concept of a person. Schemas are described as mental representations (will be covered in detail in the next chapter). Self-concept is also one such schema that an individual will have about his/her own self. Self-schemas, or schema about one’s self, can be described as the beliefs, feelings and knowledge we have about ourselves. These beliefs, feelings and knowledge are organised and they determine the way in which the information about ourselves is processed by us. Like other schemas, self-schemas are also influenced by past experiences and expectations and social situations and people in the social set-up, especially the significant people in our lives.

Further, the information that is significant with reference to ourselves is also rapidly processed as compared to other information. Such information is easily detected, remembered and recalled as well. This can be termed as self-reference effect, which occurs as a result of elaborative and categorical processing. In elaborative processing, meanings of words and situations are thought about, whereas in categorical processing, various stimuli are specifically categorised. Both these processes are enhanced and facilitated by the self-referencing effect and, thus, the information related to one’s self is better remembered and recalled (Klein & Loftus, 1988; Klein, Loftus, & Burton, 1989).

Self-concept are largely determined by one’s past experiences, goals in life, roles played in social settings, traits and abilities and even physical characteristics. A boy who is obese and, thus, has to face taunts from his classmates may possibly have lower self-concept. A girl who wins gold medal in a swimming championship will have higher self-concept.

Relationships (both past and present) and significant others in our lives greatly influence our self-concept. Parents, friends, siblings, spouse and other significant people in one’s life will determine one’s self-concept.

R. F. Baumeister (1995) defined self-concept as ‘the total organised body of information that any given person has about himself/herself’.

As suggested by William James (1980), there are following two main aspects of self-concept:

1. Self as a subject of experience is also denoted as 'I'. This develops early in our life and is followed by the development of self as an object of experience.
2. Self as object of experience is also denoted as 'me'. Thus, self-concept develops as we become more aware about self as an object of experience.

Self-concept can be categorised into working self-concept, a term introduced by Hazel Markus to describe the self-concept that can be retrieved at any moment or at any given time, and looking glass self-concept, a term introduced by Cooley (1902) that explains how our self-concept is determined by the evaluation of others or how others view us.

Development of Self-concept

The development of self-concept can be understood with the help of terms such as self-recognition, self-description and autobiographical memory (Eysenck, 2013).

- **Self-recognition:** Self-concept is developed very early in life, and is apparent in the self-recognition expressed by the infants. The development of sense of self amongst infants can be apparent when they start recognising themselves in a mirror. Self-recognition also indicates the presence of self-awareness among infants. Various research studies in this regard have been carried out that confirm the development of visual self-recognition that indicates the existence of self-awareness (Courage, Edison, & Howe, 2004; Lewis & Brooks, 1978).
- **Self-description:** As the name suggests, self-description denotes how an individual depicts or describes himself/herself. Research in this regard was carried out on older children, and it was found that they often distorted information in order to create a positive impression on the researcher, but at the same time they had a tendency to ignore relevant facets of self-concept (Eysenck, 2013).

Based on the descriptions given by these children, there are four main categories of self-description as stated by Damon and Hart in 1998 (Eysenck, 2013).

1. The first category has to do with the physical characteristics, for example, height and weight.
 2. The second category is related to various activities that are carried out by the child, for example, studying, playing and watching cartoon.
 3. The third category is that of the social aspect of the person, for example, how he/she describes self in relation to others.
 4. The last category is that of psychological features or the characteristics that are internal to an individual. For example, being honest, friendly and so on. The psychological features can also be categorised into two: one is a relatively permanent aspect that can be termed as disposition and the other is internal states that are temporary (Wellman & Gelman, 1988).
- **Autobiographical memory:** This deals with memories with regard to events in our lives. For example, we easily remember events such as weddings and get-togethers. Addis and Tipotte in 2004 found that individuals with impaired autobiographical memory about childhood and early adulthood had weaker self-concept (Eyesenck, 2013). Autobiographical memory promotes social

relationships, influences ones behaviour and actions in future, and also leads to the development of a sense of self continuity over a period of time. Thus, it is of relevance when we speak about self-concept. Self-concept and autobiographical memories are also interrelated as to a greater extent, self-concept will influence which autobiographical memory is relevant for us.

Theories of Self-concept Management and Maintenance

Various theories of self-concept management and maintenance are described here.

1. **Control theory of self-regulation:** This theory states that self-regulation involves four main phases, these are as follows:

- i. *Test phase.* During this phase, the individuals compare themselves with either of the two standards, private or public. The individuals who are privately self-aware will compare themselves with the private standard and the individuals who are publicly self-aware will compare themselves with the public standard. For example, an individual with private self-awareness will compare his/her own self with the values that he/she believes in and, on the other hand, the individual with public self-awareness will compare his/her own self with the values of say his/her family members (Crisp & Turner, 2010).
- ii. *Operate phase.* Individuals reach this stage when they feel that they do not meet the required standards, that is, individuals with private self-awareness not meeting the private standards and the individuals with public self-awareness not meeting the public standards. This results in the individuals changing their behaviour so as to meet the standards.
- iii. *Test phase.* During this phase, the individuals get involved in retest, that is, they again compare themselves with the standards to see where they fall. If they fall short when compared to the standard, then they further change their behaviour to match the standard and this will go on till they feel that their behaviour matches the standard.
- iv. *Exit phase.* Once the individual feels that he/she has met the standard, they exit from the vicious circle of operate and test.

Thus, if a person with private self-awareness values relationships, he/she will first compare his/her own self with this value, and if it does not match, he/she will put in more efforts in his/her relationship with others to attain the private standard. Taking another example, if a person with public self-awareness feels that respecting the elders is valued by his/her family, he/she will compare his/her self with this standard and then put in more effort towards gaining this public standard.

The theory, thus, helps in understanding how self-awareness as well as self-regulation play an important role in improvement of the self. However, as stated by Baumeister et al. (1998), when one aspect of self is self-regulated, it becomes difficult to self-regulate some other aspect, mainly because the resources for self-regulation have decreased (Crisp & Turner, 2010).

2. **Self-discrepancy theory:** This theory focuses mainly on how aware the individual is about the discrepancies that exist between his/her actual identity and ideal identity. The theory also focuses on how the individuals respond (emotional) to such discrepancies. Higgins has proposed that there are three types of self-schemas, the actual self, the ideal self and the ought self (Crisp & Turner, 2010). The actual self is mainly about how an individual is in present. The ideal self, on

the other hand, is like a reference point with regard to how an individual would like to be. The ought self, lastly, is related to what the individual feels he/she should be like.

The theory also states that individuals strive to have their actual self match the ideal self and the ought self and if these don't match, then there will be discrepancies. For example, if an individual is a student of law but wants to be an actor, but his/her parents want him to become a businessperson. In this case, the actual self (student of law) is discrepant from the ideal self (actor) and the ought self (businessperson).

In this context, the emotional responses of the individuals having these self discrepancies also need to be discussed. If the discrepancy is actual–ideal discrepancy, then the individuals will be disappointed and sad as he/she in reality is not what he/she wants to be. On the other hand, actual–ought discrepancy may lead to experiencing emotions related to anger, agitation, fear and so on as the individual is reminded of what he/she actually is and what others expect from him/her.

Although the theory states that the individuals get motivated to change as a result of self discrepancies, the experience of such emotions as anger, nervousness, fear and so on can, in fact, have a negative impact on self-regulation that may push individuals to be impulsive. Although this may give individuals immediate but temporary satisfaction, it will take them away from their goals.

3. **Social comparison theory:** The theory states that an individual will carry out the assessment of his/her abilities and opinions by comparing them with the abilities and opinions of others. Thus, one's success, for example, is determined by comparing how successful other people are. Social comparison theory not only helps us in assessing our opinions and abilities but also helps to enhance our skills and maintain self-image. Many times, such a comparison is with a group of people with peculiar characteristics, referred to as reference groups. The reference group can be your classmates, colleagues and so on, and will depend on what ability or opinion you want to compare.

Social comparisons can be upward or downward. Upward social comparison occurs when we compare ourselves with people who are better than us. This will help us do better in life. We may compare our communication skills with that of a colleague and would make attempts to be as good as him/her. In addition, downward social comparison takes place when we compare ourselves with people weaker than us.

In certain cases an individual may also compare with his/her own self. He/she may compare his/her current position, skills, opinions with his/her position, skills, opinions in the past. This will help an individual realise how far he/she has come along in life or what mistakes he/she has committed. This serves as feedback and helps the individual improve further.

4. **Self-evaluation maintenance model:** This model was put forth by Tesser in 1988 (Crisp & Turner, 2010). The model explains the effect of someone else's success on an individual's self-esteem. In this context, we can discuss about social reflection that has to do with the derivation of one's own self-esteem based on the achievement of others whom one is close to rather than that based on one's own accomplishments. For example, a person will feel proud when his/her younger sibling stands first in the state swimming championship, or the parents are going to be very happy when their child tops the high school examination. In these cases, the person and the parents, will experience an increase in their self-esteem. Social reflection—rather than social comparison—will take place because the skills that the other person has achieved or the field wherein he/she is successful is not important for that individual. Thus, that person's achievement is not a threat or a challenge to his/her self-concept and in a way adds to it. Furthermore, if that individual is also successful and confident about his/her abilities, the other

person's achievement is not a threat or a challenge to his/her self-concept and thus the outcome again is social reflection and not social comparison.

However, if the area in which the other person is successful is important, then the individual will engage in upward comparison and if he/she is uncertain about his/her own capabilities, then again there would be upward comparison, as in these cases his/her self-concept is under threat.

There are four main strategies to maintain self-esteem that need to be focused on while we discuss this model.

- **Exaggeration of the abilities of the person who is successful:** We might end up saying that no one can achieve as much as a certain person because he/she is a genius and there can be no comparison between him/her and normal people.
 - **Changing the comparison target:** We often hear people say 'compare yourself with less fortunate than those who are more fortunate than us'. In this case, we can go for a downward comparison and compare with a person who is comparatively less successful.
 - **Distancing from the successful target:** This involves emotionally distancing one's self from the target and implying how one is not similar to that target.
 - **Reducing the value of the dimension of comparison:** An individual might say that the target person is successful as he/she is earning more but is not as secured in his/her relationship as this individual. Thus, the dimension of comparison has changed from earnings to relationship. And the value of the original dimension of comparison, that is, earning, is reduced.
5. **Social identity approach:** According to this approach, the self can be categorised into aspects related to personal identities (e.g., personality traits) and those related to social identities (e.g., identity related to nationality, religion and caste). Thus, a single individual holds many identities, and the identity (personal or social) that an individual is most aware of will determine the sense of self at a given time and this awareness will in turn depend on the context or the situation the individual is in. For example, when you are talking to your best friend, you will be aware of your personal identity but when you are abroad representing your nation at an international event, you will become aware of your social identity (being Indian). Furthermore, when an individual becomes aware of his/her social identity, he/she will become depersonalised and see his/her own self as having features of a particular group. As a result, he/she will start thinking and behaving as per the norms of that group. This is also known as self-categorisation theory, which can be termed as an extension of social identity theory (Crisp & Turner, 2010).

Factors that Influence Self-concept

There are various factors that determine our self-concept; they are discussed as follows:

1. **An individual's observation of his/her own self:** The main factor that affects our self-concept is how we perceive our own self. The theory of social comparison explains how we go about observing our own self and making inferences. Although our observation about ourselves is one of the relevant factors in determining our self-concept, it is not necessarily objective and subjectivity often creeps in. The self-perception (discussed later in this chapter) that we have can be biased, misleading and distorted.
2. **How others perceive the individual:** Besides how we observe ourselves, how others see us is equally important in determining our self-concept. This has mainly to do with the feedback given

by others. If we believe that we have a great sense of dressing, it will elevate our self-concept. However, when one of our classmates/colleagues ridicules us for the way we have dressed, our self-concept will, to some extent, take a dive. Thus, what others think about us does have an influence on our self-concept. In this regard, how parents perceive us is of extreme importance and can greatly affect our self-concept, especially during early childhood. However, later in life, our friends, teachers, spouse and colleagues also play an important role in determining our self-concept. The Michelangelo phenomenon can be discussed here, which occurs when a spouse/life partner or a close friend plays a relevant role in bringing together the ideal self and actual self-concept of a person. This is referred to as the Michelangelo phenomenon as it is similar to sculpting carried out by the spouse/life partner/close friend to bring about the ideal self in an individual (Weiten, Hammer, & Dunn, 2012).

3. **Social set-up:** The social setting will also have an impact on self-concept. Whether the social set-up is formal or informal will determine how the individual perceives himself/herself. For example, how an individual sees him/herself will differ when he/she is with friends, when with boss and when with teachers.
4. **Cultural aspects:** One's cultural aspects also influence self-concept. Cultural values, beliefs and practices can have an impact on our self-concept. The patriarchal system prevalent in our country may induce a lower self-concept amongst girls when compared to boys. This, in turn, affects their priorities and life goals. The feeling of not being good enough because of being a girl can be detrimental to one's functioning and self-confidence. This can also be observed in the caste system prevalent in the country. When the position in society is determined by what caste or sub-caste an individual belongs to, it may become difficult to break these barriers and achieve full potentiality in life. The information about how cultural difference exists in self-concept can help in understanding other psychological aspects that can also possibly differ across cultures.

Further, the factors that can help change self-concept include the social interactions, influences and one's identity in a social set-up.

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