

The Self

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The Self

One characteristic that distinguishes humans from other animals is our capacity for reflexive thought, the ability to reflect on the way in which we think. Reflexive thought allows us to think about who we are and how we are perceived by others, and we are constantly defining ourselves. Ask any person *who* they are, and they will provide an extensive list of characteristics and identities that represent how they perceive themselves. For instance, one of us writing this book could describe himself as a male, a psychologist, young(ish), British, and liberal (amongst other things). The self is a fundamental part of every human, a symbolic construct which reflects an awareness of our own identity.

In this chapter, we first consider how self-awareness develops and how it affects how we feel and behave. Second, we outline social-psychological theories of the self which explain how our perception of the self is formed. These theories can be subdivided into four broad types: those that explain our sense of self based on observations of our *own* behaviour, and those that explain our sense of self in terms of comparisons with personally held standards, other individuals and other groups. Third, we discuss individual differences in self-esteem and how these differences affect the way we deal with life events. Fourth, we consider our motivations where self-perception is concerned, the most powerful of which is the motive for self-enhancement. Finally, although the self is perceived by many to reflect our uniqueness as a human being, there is considerable evidence that it is influenced by culture. We therefore discuss cross-cultural differences in perceptions of the self, and consider how bicultural individuals cope with holding two types of identity simultaneously.

SELF-AWARENESS

Although the self is an essential aspect of every person, we do not think about it all of the time. Instead, our level of self-awareness varies depending on both the situation and our personality. Self-awareness is a psychological state in which people are aware of their traits, feelings and behaviour. Alternatively, it can be defined as the realization of oneself as an individual entity. In this section, we explain how self-awareness develops in humans and discuss the areas of the brain which are responsible for this ability. We then distinguish between two types of self-awareness, private and public,

which have diverging consequences for the self. Each form of self-awareness can either be temporary, as a consequence of a particular situation, or chronic, reflecting a personality trait that varies from person to person.

Development of Self-Awareness

Infants are not born with self-awareness. Instead, they develop the ability over time. Lewis and Brooks (1978) put a spot of rouge on the nose of babies and then put them in front of a mirror. Babies aged between 9 and 12 months treated the mirror image as if it was another child and showed no interest in the spot on their nose. Because they lacked self-awareness, they were unable to identify the baby in the mirror as themselves. By around 18 months, however, children would curiously look at themselves in the mirror and touch the spot on their nose; they now recognized that the person they could see was them and that they were looking different from normal.

Neurological Basis of Self-Awareness

Why do children develop self-awareness at around the age of 18 months? Research has shown that at around this time, children show a rapid growth of spindle cells, specialized neurones in the anterior cingulate, an area of the frontal lobe in the cerebral cortex of the brain thought to be responsible for monitoring and controlling intentional behaviour (Allman & Hasenstaub, 1999). There is also evidence among adults that this area of the brain is activated when people are self-aware (Kjaer et al., 2002). In sum, although it is not likely to be the only area of the brain that contributes towards self-awareness, the anterior cingulate appears to play an important role. To read about a study that investigates the role of the anterior cingulate and the prefrontal cortex in how we make inferences about others based on self-reflection, see Text Box 1.1.

Text Box 1.1

Biological Correlates of Self-Perception and Perspective Taking

The prefrontal cortex area of the brain is thought to have a role in a wide range of complex social-cognitive behaviours, including making inferences about what other people are thinking and processing information about the self. At first glance, understanding other people and understanding the self seem to be quite different mental processes, so how can the same area of the brain produce both types of behaviour? One explanation is that we might make

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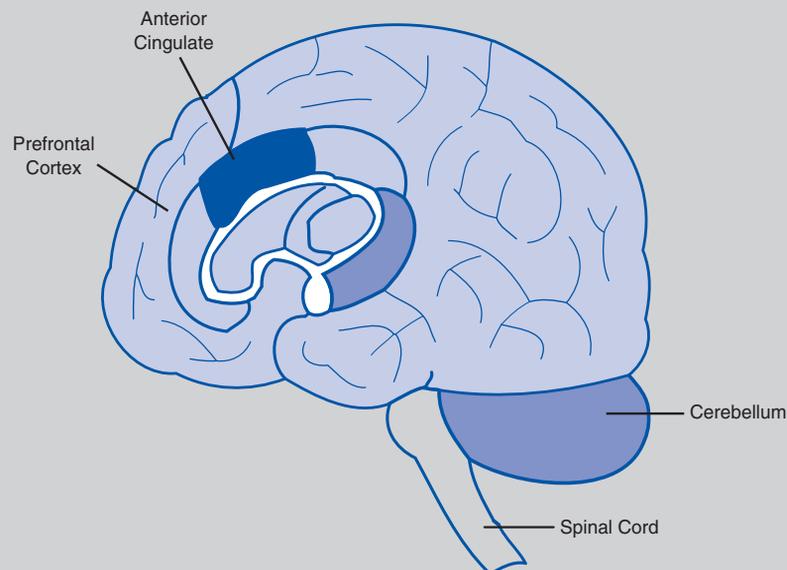
inferences about the thoughts and feelings of other people by imagining what our *own* thoughts and feelings would be if we were in the same situation. Recent research by Mitchell, Banaji, and Macrae (2005) investigated this possibility.

Method

Participants underwent an fMRI (function magnetic resonance imaging) scan, an imaging technique which shows activity in different areas of the brain by recording changes in the blood flow, while making judgements about photographs of a series of faces. Participants either made judgements about the mental state of the target person (how pleased they were to have their photo taken) or a non-mental state task (how symmetrical their face was). After the fMRI scan, participants were shown each photograph again and reported how similar they perceived themselves to be to the person in the photo.

Results

Participants showed mental activity in the prefrontal cortex when they were making inferences about mental state, but not when they were making judgements about the appearance of the individuals in the photographs.



Source: <http://bama.ua.edu/~sprentic/672%20aggression-brain.jpg>

There was also a correlation between the amount of activity in the prefrontal cortex and perceived similarity of the participant to the individuals in the photographs. However, this relationship emerged only when making inferences about mental state, not for the non-mental state task.

Interpreting the Findings

The fact that the prefrontal cortex was activated when making mental inferences about people but not when making judgments about appearance suggests that the prefrontal cortex is specifically used when trying to understand the attributes that other people possess, but not for making more general judgments about others.

In sum, when participants believed they were similar to the individual about whom they were making inferences – and therefore were better able to predict the behaviour of that individual on the basis of how they themselves would feel in the same situation – their prefrontal cortex showed greater activation.

Temporary Differences in Self-Awareness

Social psychologists have distinguished between private and public self-awareness.

Private self-awareness refers to when an individual temporarily becomes aware of private, personal aspects of the self. People become privately self-aware when they see their face in a mirror, or experience physiological arousal which may lead them to reflect on their emotional state, for example whether they are happy, excited, or angry. Private self-awareness has three important consequences for how people act. First, it results in an intensified emotional response. If an individual already feels positive, reflecting on those feelings of happiness will lead them to feel even happier. In contrast, a sad individual who is privately self-aware may come to feel worse because they dwell on their negative state of mind. Scheier and Carver (1977) had participants read aloud a series of positive statements (e.g. 'I feel light-hearted') or a series of negative statements (e.g. 'Everything seems empty and futile'), tasks previously shown to elicit elation and depression. They found that participants who looked at themselves in a mirror during the task – and were thus made privately self-aware – become more extreme in their emotional responses than participants who had not been looking in a mirror during the task (see Figure 1.1).

Second, privately self-aware people are likely to experience clarification of knowledge; by focusing on internal events individuals are able to report them with greater accuracy. Gibbons, Carver, Scheier, and Hormuth (1979) gave participants a placebo which they were told was a drug that would induce arousal and a number of other side-effects. Participants with mirror-induced self-awareness reported less

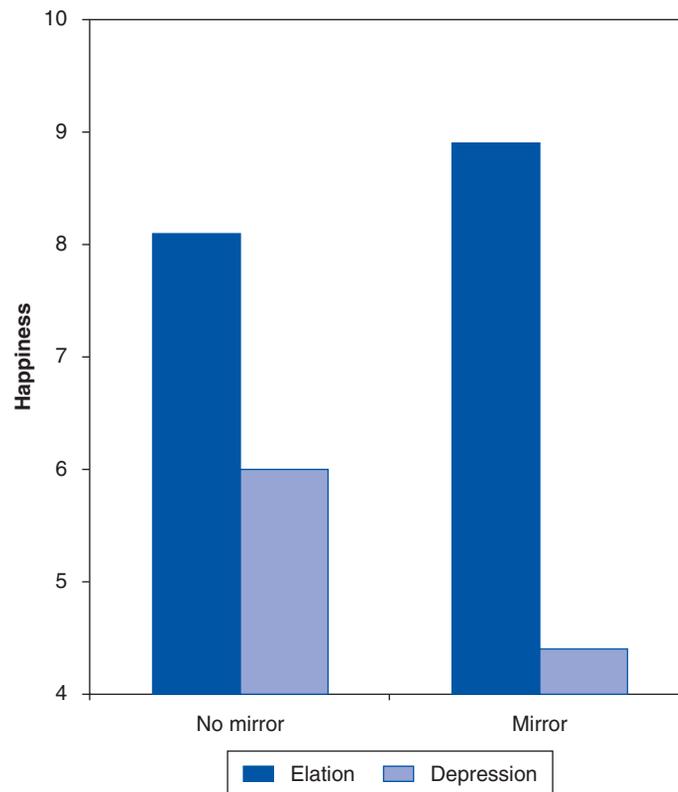


Figure 1.1 The effect of self-awareness on emotional response following a mood manipulation task. Data from Scheier and Carver (1977)

arousal and fewer side-effects than participants in a control condition who could not see themselves in a mirror. While people who were not self-aware based their self-knowledge on their perceptions of the drug they believed they had taken, self-aware individuals ignored the placebo and focused on how they were really feeling, resulting in more accurate self-perceptions.

Third, people who are privately self-aware are more likely to adhere to personal standards of behaviour. As they are more aware of their true beliefs, they will act in line with those beliefs rather than being influenced by normative pressures (see Chapter 6). Scheier and Carver (1980) had participants write a counter-attitudinal essay. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (see Chapter 4), people feel negative arousal if their attitudes and behaviour are inconsistent, and often deal with this by changing their attitudes in line with their behaviour. However, participants who wrote the essay in front of a mirror showed less attitude change than participants who wrote the essay without the presence of a mirror.

Public self-awareness arises when a person is aware of public aspects of themselves that can be seen and evaluated by others. People are publicly self-aware when they are being watched by others, for example giving a presentation, talking in a seminar, being photographed or being filmed. Public self-awareness is associated with evaluation apprehension. When people are the focus of others' attention, they realize they are being appraised by those observers (see also Chapter 5). The fear of a negative evaluation can lead to nervousness and a loss of self-esteem, particularly if a person's perceived actual public image does not match their desired public image. Finally, in contrast to the effects of private self-awareness, public self-awareness leads to adherence to social standards of behaviour; people who are aware of the perceptions of others, for example their social group, are more likely to conform to group norms, even if this does not match their private point of view (see Chapter 6).

Chronic Differences in Self-Awareness

In addition to temporary heightening of self-awareness that people experience from time to time as a result of the situation, some people are chronically more likely to experience self-awareness. Such individuals can be described as possessing the personality trait of self-consciousness. Mirroring temporary differences in self-awareness, people can be either publicly or privately self-conscious. A simple way to think about self-consciousness is that it is the same as public or private self-awareness, but refers to chronic (i.e. general tendencies) to be one or the other. Public and private self-consciousness are not mutually exclusive; an individual can be high in one of these traits, both of these traits, or neither.

People who are high in **private self-consciousness** experience chronically heightened private self-awareness; they therefore experience more intense emotions, are more likely to remain true to their personal beliefs and have more accurate self-perceptions. Being privately self-conscious has both positive and negative implications for the individual. On the plus side, such individuals are less likely to suffer from ill health as a result of stress because they pay more attention to their physiological state and so notice earlier if there is a problem (Mullen & Suls, 1982). However, the down side of being high in private self-consciousness is a greater tendency to suffer from depression and neuroticism; such individuals are more likely to pay attention to and ruminate about any feelings of unhappiness or discomfort they are experiencing.

People who are high in **public self-consciousness** are particularly concerned with how they are perceived by those around them. As a result they are more likely to adhere to group norms, more likely to avoid embarrassing situations (Froming et al., 1990), more concerned with their own physical appearance and more likely to judge others based on their physical appearance.

Summary

Self-awareness is a psychological state in which people are aware of their traits, feelings and behaviour. The ability to be self-aware develops during early childhood, as the *anterior cingulate*, an area of the frontal lobe in the cerebral cortex of the brain develops. In adulthood, this area of the brain is only activated when people are self-aware. We have both temporary and chronic differences in self-awareness. Individuals who are temporarily *privately self-aware* experience intensified emotional response and clarification of knowledge, and are more likely to adhere to personal standards of behaviour. When an individual is temporarily *publicly self-aware*, on the other hand, they may experience evaluation apprehension and a loss of self-esteem, and they are more likely to adhere to social standards of behaviour. The effects of private and public self-consciousness, or chronic self-awareness, parallel the impact of being temporarily privately or publicly self-aware.

ORGANIZATION OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

When we are self-aware, we access the information we have about ourselves. But how is this information organized in our minds? The knowledge that we have about the world is stored as schemas, cognitive structures that represent the knowledge we have about a particular concept or type of stimulus (see also Chapter 3). Each schema is developed through our experiences with a stimulus, and holds all the information we have about it. A **self-schema** reflects how we expect ourselves to think, feel and behave in a particular situation. Each self-schema consists of our perception of our self (for example, 'shy') and incorporates our experience on this dimension (for example, we know that we are likely to be shy when at a party, or when asked to talk about our opinions during a seminar).

For each of us, some self-schemas are particularly important whilst others are less important or even irrelevant. Markus (1977) argued that if a particular aspect of the self is perceived as particularly important, if the person thinks they are *extreme* on that dimension (high or low on it), and if they are certain that the *opposite* is not true for them, then an individual can be described as **self-schematic** on that dimension. If, for example, you are a student, you are likely to be self-schematic on that dimension if being a student is very important to you, you think you are a highly typical example of a student, and you think you are very different from someone who is not a student. In contrast, you would be *self-aschematic* on a particular dimension if it is not important to you and does not reflect who you are.

Each of us holds a complex self-concept made up of a number of discrete self-schemas. Our self-schemas are likely to be more complex and varied than

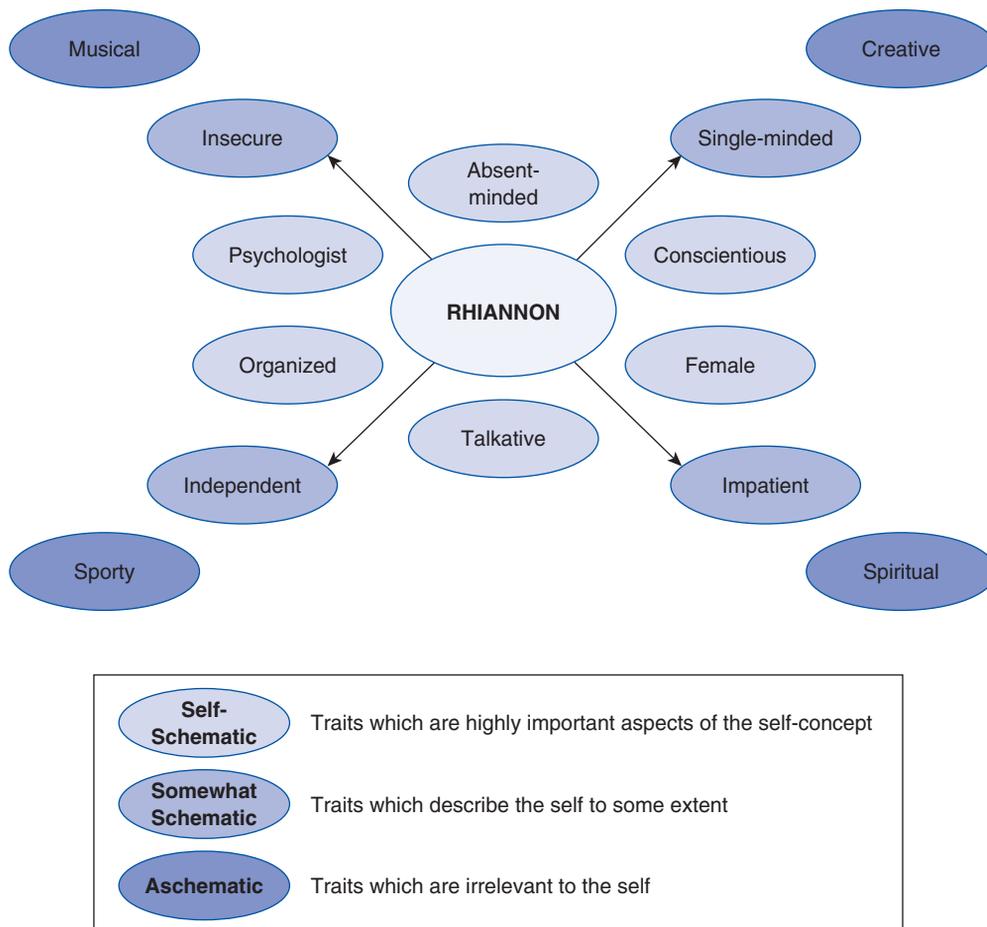


Figure 1.2 An example of self-schemas

other schemas represented in memory, given that we acquire more information about the self than about anything else. Markus and Sentis (1982) proposed that as well as current self-schema, we also hold possible future self-schema, for example self-schemas that reflect how we would like to be in the future, and self-schemas that reflect how we think (or fear) we will actually turn out (we will look at this distinction between how we perceive ourselves to be, and how we would ideally like to be, later on in this chapter). Having complex and varied self-schemas is beneficial for us, buffering us from negative events or failures in our life. This is because if one self-schema is having a negative impact on us, there will be other self-schemas from which we derive satisfaction, or that allow us to see ourselves in a positive light. To give you an example of how

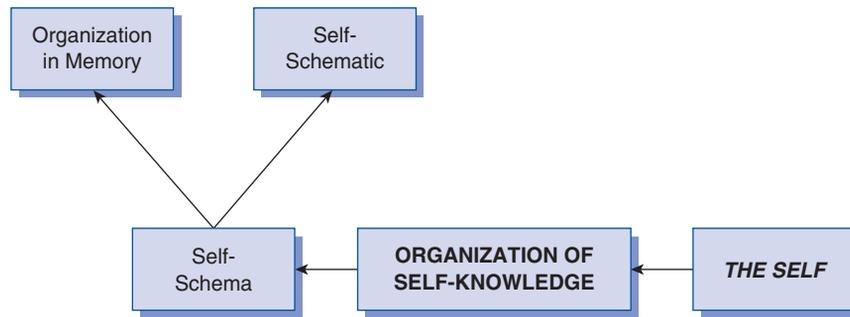


Figure 1.3 Memory map

self-schemas might be organized, Figure 1.2 shows some of the self-schemas that represent one of the authors.

We now know how our self-knowledge is organized in memory. But how does the organization of self-schemas affect how we think, feel and behave? Self-schemas become active in relevant situations and provide us with information regarding how – based on our beliefs of who we are – we should respond. Dimensions on which we are self-schematic are particularly likely to be activated in relevant domains, as a study conducted by Markus (1977) demonstrated. Participants who had either previously rated themselves as self-schematic on the trait of dependence or independence, or aschematic on both, completed a reaction-time task. Participants were presented on a screen with words that were associated with independence (for example, assertive) and dependence (for example, obliging) and were asked to press a ‘me’ button if this described them or a ‘not me’ button if it did not. Participants who were self-schematic on independence or dependence were much faster at identifying whether a word characterized them than participants who were aschematic on either of these characteristics. Moreover, self-schematic participants also had better memory for incident from the past which demonstrated their dependence or independence.

THEORIES OF SELF-CONCEPT MAINTENANCE

Having identified when and why we are likely to become self-aware, the consequences of self-awareness, and how knowledge about the self is organized in our minds, we now turn to how self-schemas develop. What is the content of our self-schemas, and why do we come to view ourselves in the way that we do? In this section, we discuss six theories that explain how our self-concept is managed and maintained. These are control theory of self-regulation, self-discrepancy theory,

social comparison theory, self-evaluation maintenance, social identity theory and self-categorization theory. All of these theories propose that how we define the self and how it subsequently affects our behaviour depend largely upon how the self *compares* to a particular point of comparison. There are three types of comparative theory which each focus on a different target of comparison. The self can be compared to perceptions of how the self *should* be, to other individuals, or to other groups. We discuss each of these types of theory below.

Theories of Self-Comparison

Many social psychologists believe that people form a sense of self from a comparison process. The first class of these comparison theories focuses on comparing the self with ... the self. This is not as strange as it might first appear. As we discussed above, people have different versions of the self. They can, for instance, know how they actually are, but also have an idea of how they would like to be. Two theories fall into this category: control theory of self-regulation and self-discrepancy theory. Both theories argue that when people are self-aware, they can think about whether they are the sort of person they want to be or whether there are ways in which they would like to change.

Control Theory of Self-Regulation

Carver and Scheier (1981, 1998) proposed that through self-awareness we are able to assess whether or not we are meeting our goals. The central element of the **control theory of self-regulation** is a cognitive feedback loop which illustrates four steps involved in self-regulation: *Test*, *Operate*, *Test*, and *Exit* (see Figure 1.4). In the first *test* phase, people compare the self against one of two standards. People who are privately self-aware compare themselves against a private standard, such as the values we believe to be important. In contrast, people who are publicly self-aware compare themselves against a public standard, for example the values held by our friends and family (see the discussion of private versus public self-awareness earlier in the chapter). If someone believes they are failing to meet the relevant standard, they put into *operation* a change in behaviour in order to meet this standard. When they next self-reflect on that issue, they *re-test* themselves, comparing their self to their values or the values of others for a second time. If the self still falls short of the standard, the feedback loop will repeat itself. If, however, the self and the standard are now in line with one another, the individual will *exit* the feedback loop.

The control theory of self-regulation is, on first glance, an optimistic theory, illustrating how we can improve the self through a combination of self-awareness and self-regulation. However, an intriguing study conducted by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (1998) showed that self-regulating one aspect of the self makes it subsequently more difficult to self-regulate other aspects of the self. Participants who had signed up

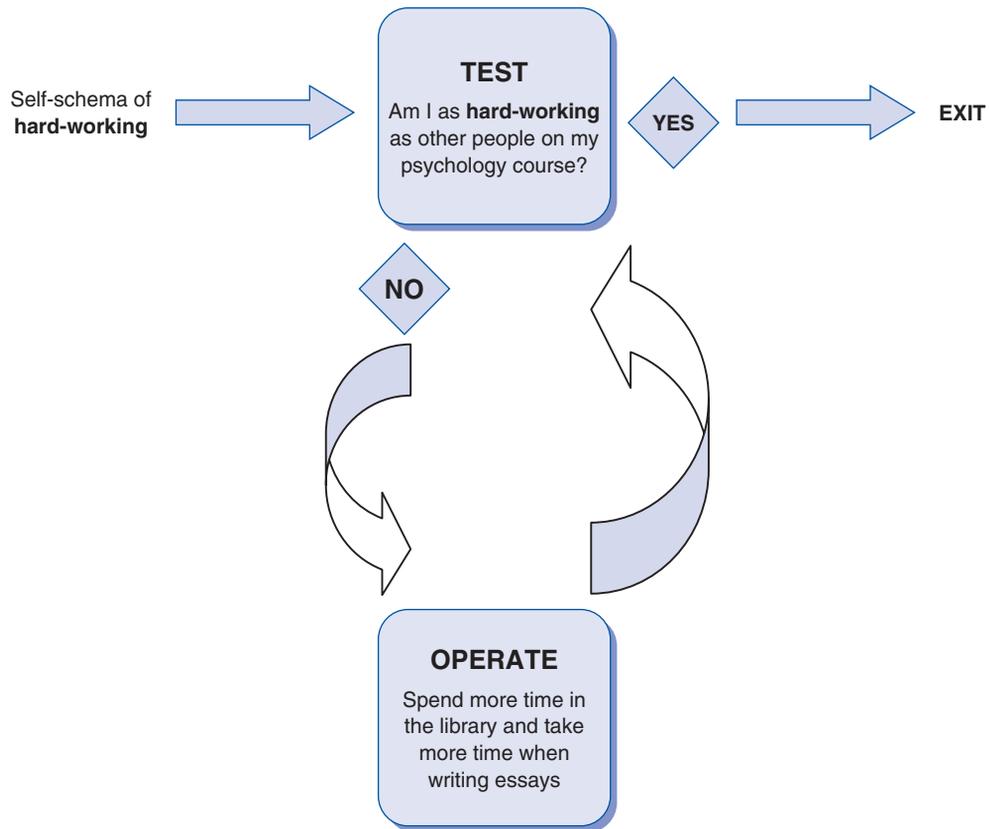


Figure 1.4 Carver and Scheier (1981, 1998)'s control theory of self-regulation. Illustration of TEST-OPERATE-TEST-EXIT feedback loop

to take part in a study which they were led to believe was about taste perception were instructed to make sure they had not eaten for at least three hours when they came to the laboratory. On arrival, participants entered a room with a small oven in which chocolate chip cookies had just been baked, ensuring that the delicious aroma of chocolate and baking filled the room. They were then seated at a table which had a stack of chocolate chip cookies on one side and a bowl of radishes on the other (see Figure 1.5). In the *radishes* condition, participants were asked to eat at least two or three radishes while in the *chocolate* condition, participants were asked to eat at least two or three cookies. In both conditions, participants were reminded that they should only eat the food assigned to them. They were left for five minutes and observed through a one-way mirror to ensure that they had followed the instructions given to them by the experimenter.

After completing this task, participants were asked if they minded helping out the experimenter by taking part in an unrelated experiment on problem-solving. In

actual fact, this was part of the same study. Participants were instructed to complete a problem-solving task, taking as much time as they wanted, and were told that they would not be judged on how long they took, only on whether or not they managed to solve the puzzle. In reality, the task had actually been prepared so that it was impossible to solve. The dependent measure in the study was how long participants kept working on the task before giving up. Participants gave up on the problem-solving task much more quickly in the *radishes* condition, after an average of just 8 minutes, than in the *chocolate* condition, where participants spent on average 19 minutes on the task. In sum, participants who had previously had to exert self-control – by eating the radishes and ignoring the chocolate – were less able to persist on the difficult and frustrating puzzle task. On the basis of these and similar findings, Baumeister and colleagues argued that we have limited cognitive resources at our disposal to self-regulate. As a result, when we self-regulate in one domain, the resources we have left to self-regulate in another domain are temporarily depleted.

Self-Discrepancy Theory

Higgins (1987) proposed a theory which also argues that people compare the self to a relevant standard. However, **self-discrepancy theory** focuses not only on the awareness of discrepancies between actual and ideal identity, but also on people's *emotional* response to such discrepancies. Higgins argued that people possess three types of self-schema. The *actual self* reflects how we are at present. The *ideal self* is a point of reference which reflects how we would really like to be (this ideal self is made up of the traits, characteristics and qualities that an individual wishes or hopes they could possess). The *ought self*, in contrast, represents the traits or characteristics that an individual believes they *should* possess, based on a sense of duty, responsibility or obligation. According to the theory, people are motivated to ensure that their actual self matches their ideal and ought self; the greater the discrepancy between the actual self and a self-guide (either ideal or ought), the greater the psychological discomfort that will be experienced. To give a specific example of this, imagine that you work in a supermarket, but you are an aspiring artist. Your parents, however, are keen for you to pursue a medical career. In this case, your actual self (supermarket employee) differs from both your ideal self (artist) and your ought self (doctor).

The two types of self-discrepancy are thought to be related to unique emotional responses. An actual-ideal discrepancy is associated with the absence of positive outcomes, which results in dejection-related emotions like disappointment and sadness. Thus, if you are doing a painting on your day off from work, causing you to think about the fact that although you are a checkout assistant you would rather be a professional artist, you may feel somewhat depressed. Actual-ought discrepancies, on the other hand, are associated with the presence of negative outcomes, which

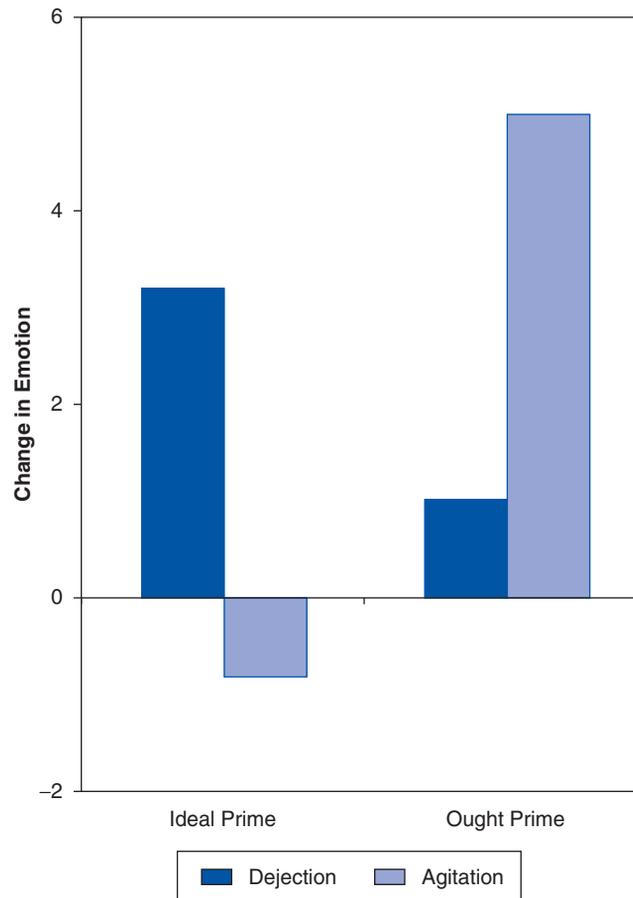


Figure 1.5 Evidence for self-discrepancy theory. Data from Higgins, Bond, Klein, and Strauman (1986)

results in agitation-related emotions like anger, fear, and nervousness. So, if you visit your parents on your day off from work, this may remind you that you are failing to meet their high expectations for you to become a doctor, making you feel anxious or annoyed. Higgins, Bond, Klein, and Strauman (1986) identified participants who had previously reported either a low or a high discrepancy between their ideal and their actual and ought selves. Several weeks later, these participants completed a task in which they either had to focus on and describe the difference between their ideal or ought self, and their actual self. Their findings are reported in Figure 1.6. Participants with a high level of discrepancy showed an increase in dejection-related emotions after thinking about their actual-ideal discrepancies, and an increase in agitation-related emotions after thinking about their actual-ought

discrepancies. In contrast, participants with low discrepancies showed no significant changes in either emotion.

Self-discrepancy theory implies that by generating negative arousal, discrepancies will motivate people to reduce the discomfort they are experiencing by making changes that reduce discrepancies (see the discussion of cognitive dissonance in Chapter 4 for a similar idea). However, this may not always be the case. Negative emotions often hinder successful self-regulation because if people feel upset they are more likely to give in to their immediate impulses to make themselves feel better rather than working towards a more distant goal. For instance, if we ideally want to be slimmer than we actually are, we may reduce our calorie intake in an attempt to reduce this actual-ideal discrepancy. However, if we look in the mirror one day and are reminded of the difference that still remains between our actual self and our ideal self, we may give in to our impulses, providing ourselves with instant comfort by eating a large piece of cake. This will reduce unhappiness and discomfort in the short term, but makes our overall goal a more distant prospect.

Theories of Individual Comparison

In the previous section we saw how people can develop a sense of who they are from observing their own behaviour and from comparing themselves to ‘better’ versions of the *self*. Social comparison theory and self-evaluation maintenance theory argue, in contrast, that we learn about the self by comparing ourselves with *other* individuals.

Social Comparison Theory

According to **social comparison theory** (Festinger, 1954), we learn how to define the self by comparing ourselves with those around us. Although comparing ourselves with different ideal and ought version of ourselves, and comparing ourselves with other people, are not mutually exclusive processes, there is one crucial difference. Social comparison theory argues that beliefs, feelings, and behaviours are *subjective*; they are, in isolation, simply the product of our own ruminations. In other words, there is no *objective* benchmark against which we can compare them. As such, while comparing ourselves with notions of how we should be or how we would like to be can lead to changes in the self-concept, the resulting self-definition remains subjectively defined: that is, without any feeling of external validation. In contrast, comparing ourselves with others provides an external, objective benchmark against which to compare our thoughts, feelings and behaviours – providing people with a sense of validation for the way they are.

Where behaviour is concerned (e.g. academic performance), rather than always comparing the self to someone who is very similar, people may sometimes make

upward comparisons (comparing themselves to someone who they believe to be better than them) or *downward comparisons* (comparing themselves to someone who they believe to be worse than them). People who are motivated by a desire for an *accurate* self-evaluation may make both upward and downward comparisons as both types of comparison are useful for deriving the most precise estimate of, for instance, academic ability. However, as we discuss in more detail in the later section in this chapter on self-motives, people are typically motivated to see themselves in a positive light. The self-evaluation maintenance model tries to explain how we maintain a positive self-esteem when comparing ourselves to others.

Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model

Imagine an acquaintance on your psychology course who always seems to get a higher grade than you on essays and projects. How would you deal with this situation? Tesser's (1988) **self-evaluation maintenance model** explains what we do when we are faced with someone whose success has implications for our own self-esteem. People respond to the success of someone else in one of two ways. **Social reflection** is when we derive our self-esteem from the accomplishments of those who are close to us, without considering our own achievement in that domain. This may help to explain why parents are often so proud of their children's achievements. However, knowing someone who is successful can also evoke an upward social comparison, comparing our *own* achievements with the achievements of the target person. When someone we know is doing very well in a particular domain, what determines whether we engage in social reflection or social comparison?

We are only likely to engage in social reflection with the successful individual under two conditions. First, the domain on which the individual is successful must be *irrelevant* to us. When this is the case, the success of someone else does not threaten our self-concept in any way. As such, we can enjoy their success because it *adds* to our abilities rather than challenging them. Second, we must be *certain* about our abilities in that particular domain. If we are confident that we are also very successful, the success of someone else should pose no threat to us. Instead, their success should actually add to our perception of success. If, for example, you are certain that you are excellent at psychology, the success of another student is unlikely to concern you. Instead, knowing that someone else is also very good should lead you to reflect on the fact that you are on a top psychology course where the students tend to be excellent, enhancing rather than threatening your self-concept.

When the domain on which another person is successful is *relevant*, however, this evokes an upward comparison. If the success of the other person is on a dimension that is important to how we see the self, this will challenge our view of the self as being successful on this domain and will have a negative impact on our self-esteem.

| | Strategy | Example |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Exaggerate the ability of successful target | 'They're just a genius so how can you compare them to normal people?' |
| 2 | Change the target of comparison | 'Yeah, anyway, forget about her, did better than Briony, Phillipa, and Tasmin.' |
| 3 | Distance the self from successful target | 'She's a bit weird – we've got nothing in common at all! I think I'm going to avoid sitting near her in class ...' |
| 4 | Devalue the dimension of comparison | 'She may get better grades than me, but I have a much better social life – and being popular is much more important!' |

Figure 1.6 Strategies used to maintain self-esteem in the face of upward comparison

Uncertainty about our own abilities will also evoke an upward comparison. If we are uncertain about our own abilities and we are then confronted by someone who is very able on a particular domain, this is likely to further increase our uncertainty in our own abilities. Again, this is likely to have a negative impact on our self-esteem. In sum, when we compare ourselves to a successful person on a domain that is relevant to our self-concept but on which we are uncertain about our own abilities, we are making an upward comparison which can have a detrimental effect on our self-esteem. But how can we maintain a positive self-concept in such circumstances?

According to the self-evaluation maintenance model, we have *four* strategies at our disposal (see Figure 1.6). First, we can exaggerate the ability of the person who is outperforming us. In the case of the clever psychology student, if you reclassify that student as 'a genius', the comparison is no longer relevant – the student is essentially in a different league from you – and you can still classify yourself as above average in psychology ability. Second, we can switch the target of comparison to someone who we know to be less successful than us, creating a downward comparison that is good for self-esteem. So, you might compare yourself to someone else on your psychology course who generally does less well on essays and exams than you do. By making this new and different comparison, it is now *you* who is the success. Third, we can downplay our similarity to the target of comparison or physically and emotionally distance ourselves from them. You might, for example, stop sitting with or talking to the clever student. Fourth and finally, we can maintain positive self-esteem by devaluing the dimension of comparison. You might, for example, argue that academic success is not important to you, but that having a good social life is much more important.

Theories of Group Comparison

Although early researchers investigating the self (e.g. Freud, 1921) perceived the self to be a unique identity which we share with no-one else, social psychologists now have a more flexible notion of the self. The self-concept is thought to be made up of many self-schemas, some of which reflect individual aspects of the self, such as personality, but others which reflect our *relationships* with family, friends, and social groups. Although in combination these self-schemas make us unique because no other person is likely to have exactly the same configuration, we certainly share aspects of our identity with others. ‘Social psychologist’, for example, is an important self-schema held by *both* authors of this book, and many thousands of other people (believe it or not). More broadly, being either female or male is part of all of our self-concepts, but it is a part that we share with millions of other people. Brewer and Gardner (1996) proposed three types of self that reflect these shared and non-shared aspects. The *individual self* consists of attributes and personality traits that differentiate us from other individuals (for example, ‘introverted’). The *relational self* is defined by our relationships with significant others (for example, ‘sister’). Finally, the *collective self* reflects our membership in social groups (for example, ‘British’). In this section we focus on the collective self, and how our membership in social groups contributes towards the definition of our self-concept.

Social Identity Approach

Aspects of the self, according to **social identity theory** (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), can be divided into those that reflect our personal identity and those that reflect our social identity. Personal identities are those that reflect idiosyncratic aspects of the self, such as personality traits. In contrast, our social identity reflects the broader social groups to which we belong. The organization of our self-schemas means that each identity we hold is associated with a range of associated concepts that guide our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. However, given that we hold many different identities it would be impossible, and indeed impractical, for us to use every identity to guide our behaviour. Instead, our sense of self at any particular point in time depends upon *which* of our many personal or social identities is psychologically salient (i.e. which identity we are most aware of).

Which identity is salient at any given time depends on the *context*. Imagine, for example, that you are chatting to a close friend on your college campus. At this point in time, it is your personal identity that is likely to be salient, as you talk about your personal experiences with another individual. Imagine now that you arrive at the college soccer pitch to watch a match between your college and a rival college. Because you are here to support *your* college team, your social identity as a member of that college will now be salient. Each social identity is associated with a range of attributes that characterize the prototypical group member. They are also associated

with a set of group norms, a collection of shared beliefs about how group members should think and behave.

Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherel, 1987) is an extension of social identity theory that focuses on the set of group norms that define collective identities. According to this theory, when an individual's social identity becomes salient, their perceptions of themselves and others become depersonalized. In other words, rather than seeing themselves as a unique individual, they will perceive themselves more in terms of the shared features that define group membership, thinking and behaving more in line with the norms of that group. Group members also obey what is referred to as the **meta-contrast principle**, which means that they exaggerate similarities within the group and differences with other groups.

Jetten, Spears, and Manstead (1996) illustrated the effect of social identity on adherence to group norms. Participants first had their social identity made salient by being told they were being assigned to one of two groups, based on the technique they had used during an initial task in which they were required to estimate the number of dots on a computer screen. To increase identification with their group, they then took part in what they believed was a 'group task', although in actual fact there were no other group members (see Chapter 8 to learn more about this type of 'minimal group' paradigm). In this task, they estimated the number of black squares appearing on a screen and were given false feedback about the estimates of three other group members. They were then asked to distribute money between members of their own group and members of another group. To manipulate the group norm, participants learned that 10 out of 15 members of their group who had already taken part in the study had either distributed money equally between the two groups (a 'fairness' strategy), or had given more money to their own group (a 'discrimination' strategy). The norm of the other group was also manipulated, so that participants believed that the other group tended to distribute money equally or fairly. As Figure 1.7 illustrates, participants were strongly influenced by the norms of their own group, giving a greater proportion of money to members of their own group when there was a norm of discrimination but distributing money more equally between the two groups when there was a group norm of fairness. In contrast, they paid somewhat less attention to the norms of the other group.

There are many real-life examples of how group norms can affect our attitudes and behaviour. People who are normally perfectly reasonable and non-violent sometimes become aggressive and anti-social when they act as a group member rather than as an individual. A clear example of this is the fights and riots that sometimes erupt at football matches between the supporters of different teams (see our discussion of collective aggression in Chapter 9). Similarly, research has shown that women perform more poorly on maths tests than men when their gender identity is made salient because they conform to the negative stereotypes associated with their group membership (Steele, 1997; see the discussion of stereotype threat in Chapter 3).

Finally, it is important to note that adherence to group norms does not always mean that people defined themselves as group members; in fact, being part of a group can be a way of asserting one's sense of individuality. Bengry-Howell and Christine Griffin (2007) used ethnographic methods to examine how young male 'car modifiers' from the midlands of England and North Wales constructed their identity from their cultural context. The study illustrates how discourse relating to people's identities can sometimes reveal conscious motivations that might be less readily identifiable from a purely quantitative analysis. Analysis of interviews with participants in this study showed that, on the whole, they resisted categorizing themselves as a collective ('car modifiers'), despite their apparent conformity to the norms of this culture, instead repeatedly proclaiming their (modified) cars as a source of their individuality. Their discourse emphasized the way that these young working-class men distanced themselves from 'typical' car owners, thus making them unique individuals. This study illustrates the complex processes involved in the construal of social identity, and how group membership can, perhaps ironically, sometimes be a source of individuality.

Summary

Three types of theory explain how our self-concept is formed, differing on the basis of whether the self is compared to a self-standard, to other individuals, or to other groups. Two theories propose that the self is often compared to an ideal version of the self. The *control theory of self-regulation* argues that, depending on whether we are privately or publicly self-aware, we compare the self against a private or a public self-standard, and when there is a mismatch between the self and the self-standard, we are motivated to change our behaviour to eliminate this mismatch. Similarly, *self-discrepancy theory* proposes that the actual self is compared to one of two self-guides, the ideal self and the ought self. A discrepancy between the actual and ideal self generates dejection-related emotions, whereas a discrepancy between the actual-ought self generates agitation-related emotions. In both cases, the psychological discomfort motivates a change to reduce the discrepancy.

Social comparison theory and the *self-evaluation maintenance* model both propose that our self-concept can be derived from comparisons with other individuals. According to social comparison theory, because there is no objectively 'correct' self, we compare ourselves to similar others to validate our attitudes and behaviour. The self-evaluation maintenance model proposes that we maintain a positive self-image through two processes: social reflection (deriving self-esteem from the accomplishments of others) and social comparison (comparing our achievements with the achievements of others). Finally, according to the *social identity* approach, we can also derive a sense of self from the social groups to which we belong. When

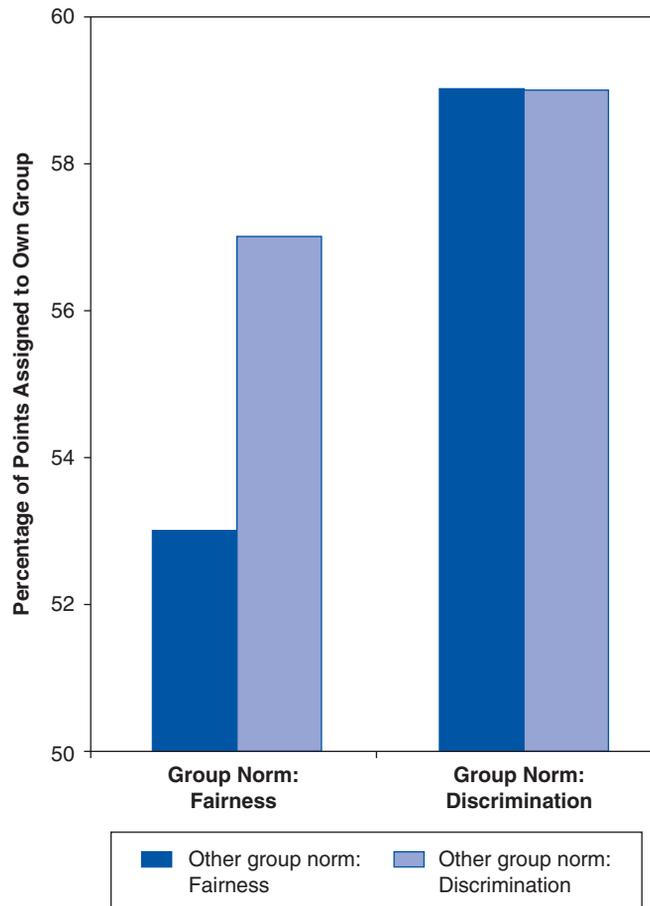


Figure 1.7 The effect of group norms on behaviour when social identity is salient. Data from Jetten, Spears, and Manstead (1996)

a particular group membership is salient, we define ourselves in terms of our social identity rather than our personal identity, and think and behave in accordance with the set of social norms associated with that particular group.

SELF-ESTEEM

It is clear from the theories described above that we devote much time to working out *who* exactly we are, often by making comparisons with self-standards, other individuals and other groups. Given the amount of time we spend thinking about

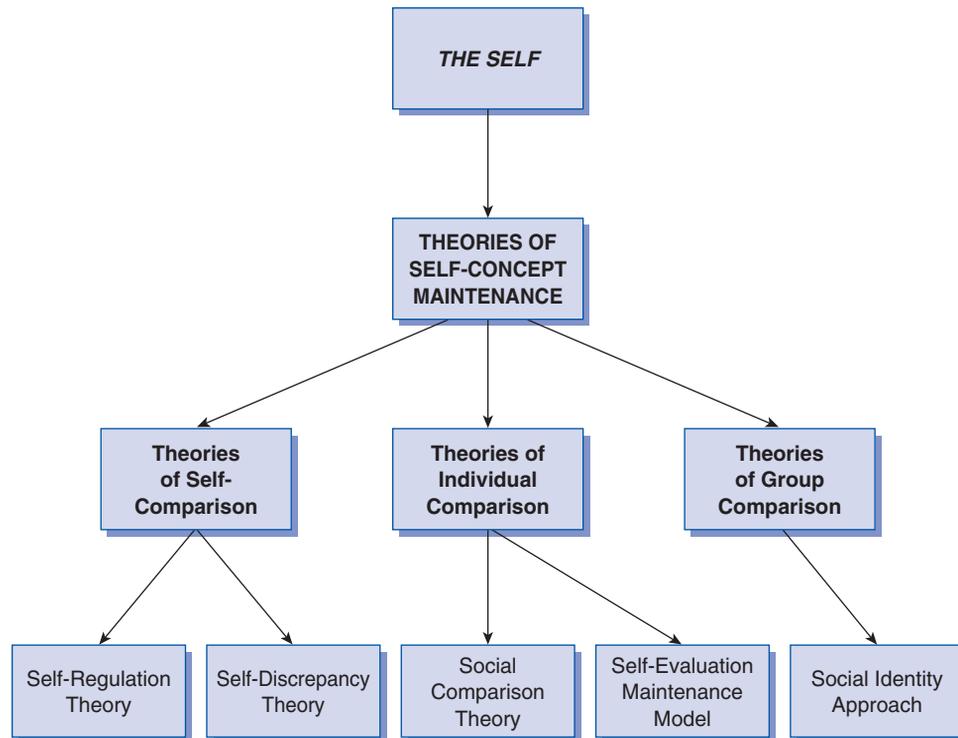


Figure 1.8 Memory map

the self and comparing it to others, it is not surprising that the self has an important *evaluative* component. We touched on this briefly above in our discussion of self-evaluative maintenance theory; we not only think about what our self-concept is, but also whether aspects of our self-concept are positive or negative. An individual's **self-esteem** is their subjective appraisal of themselves as intrinsically positive or negative (Sedikides & Gregg, 2002), and can have significant implications for psychological functioning.

Our level of self-esteem inevitably varies from time to time, depending on the context we find ourselves in. Getting a good mark for your psychology coursework is likely to elevate your self-esteem; getting a poor mark is likely to depress it. However, it is quite easy to bring to mind some people who always seem to be self-confident and others who display more self-doubt and pessimism about their lives. In this section, we talk about such *chronic* individual differences in self-esteem, how they develop and what consequences they have.

Development of Self-Esteem

How positive our self-concept is in later life appears to depend, at least to some extent, on the *parenting style* of our primary caregivers (Baumrind, 1991). There are three parenting styles which differ on two dimensions: how *demanding* (controlling, imposing rules and punishments) and how *responsive* (warm and supportive) the parent is towards the child. Children with the highest self-esteem are typically brought up by *authoritative parents*. This type of parent has a style high on both of these dimensions. They place a lot of demands on their child, imposing rules on them and disciplining them for disobedience. However, they are also responsive, supportive and warm. Children with lower self-esteem and less confidence in their abilities are often brought up with one of two less effective styles of parenting. *Authoritarian parents* are overly strict and demanding, failing to be responsive to the child's needs (see also Chapter 7, on the authoritarian personality). At the opposite end of the spectrum, *permissive parents* are responsive, but not strict enough, indulging their child's every desire.

Although the levels of chronic self-esteem people have may be determined during childhood, a meta-analysis of 50 self-esteem studies conducted by Robins and colleagues (2002) showed that over the course of people's lifespan general tendencies to have either high or low self-esteem can vary. They found that self-esteem among children aged between 6 and 11 was relatively unstable. This may be because young children are still in the process of developing their self-concept. Self-esteem was most stable among people in their 20s and remained relatively stable until mid-adulthood, probably because by this point in time, people have a fully developed sense of self and are less affected by temporary life changes. By the age of 60, however, self-esteem stability declines. Robins and colleagues explained that this might reflect the life changes that occur later in life, for example retirement, declining health and the death of others from their generation.

Consequences of Self-Esteem

Many researchers have investigated the consequences of having low or high self-esteem. However, before we go any further, it is important to note that a review by Baumeister and colleagues (1989) showed that the 'low self-esteem' individuals in most studies do not have low levels of self-esteem in *absolute* terms. Instead, they simply have *lower* self-esteem, in *relative* terms, compared to high self-esteem individuals. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there is evidence that people with *lower* self-esteem deal with life events quite differently from individuals with higher self-esteem.

Mood Regulation

There is a general assumption that everyone wants to feel positive about themselves and their lives and, to this end, do everything possible to maintain a positive

outlook. However, recent research by Joanne Wood and her colleague indicates that people with lower self-esteem are less likely to make the *effort* to feel good than people with higher self-esteem. Two studies succinctly demonstrate how people with higher and lower self-esteem differ in their reactions to positive and negative life events. Wood, Heimpel, and Michela (2003) recorded participants' memories of positive events. They found that people with lower self-esteem were more likely to 'dampen' the good feelings they experienced, by distracting themselves, trying to make themselves feel less good, and trying to calm themselves, than were people with higher self-esteem. Heimpel, Wood, Marshall, and Brown (2002) got participants who had reported a failure in their everyday life to list their immediate plans and reasons for those plans. Participants with lower self-esteem were less likely to express goals to improve their mood than were participants higher in self-esteem. Heimpel and colleagues also found that having a goal to improve one's mood was associated with a greater improvement in mood the following day.

Together, these findings indicate that people with lower self-esteem make less effort to regulate their mood; they do not try and maintain a good mood after a positive life event, neither are they motivated to elevate their mood after a negative life event. These findings demonstrate that having lower self-esteem can be maladaptive, and explain why people with lower self-esteem tend to feel worse than those with higher self-esteem after a negative event (e.g. Brown & Dutton, 1995).

Narcissism

One of the major criticisms of the study of self-esteem has been the over-emphasis on the negative consequences of lower self-esteem. Clearly, having lower self-esteem can be maladaptive for that individual, as the findings of Wood and colleagues discussed above show. However, lower self-esteem is also frequently cited as an antecedent of anti-social behaviour, including the violent behaviour of youth gangs (Anderson, 1994), perpetrators of domestic violence (Renzetti, 1992), armed robbers (MacDonald, 1975), murderers (Kirschner, 1992) and terrorists (Long, 1990). Despite these claims, there is actually very little supportive evidence for this.

Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) put forward the alternative argument that it is in fact higher self-esteem that is associated with higher levels of aggression and violence (see Chapter 9 for a more detailed discussion of the antecedents of aggression), although only under certain circumstances. Specifically, they proposed that people with higher self-esteem who have their ego threatened in some way, for example someone contradicting their viewpoint or their positive self-appraisal, will react aggressively to defend their higher self-esteem. Clearly, not all people with higher self-esteem behave aggressively when they feel threatened, so what determines *who* becomes aggressive? It seems that individuals who respond with

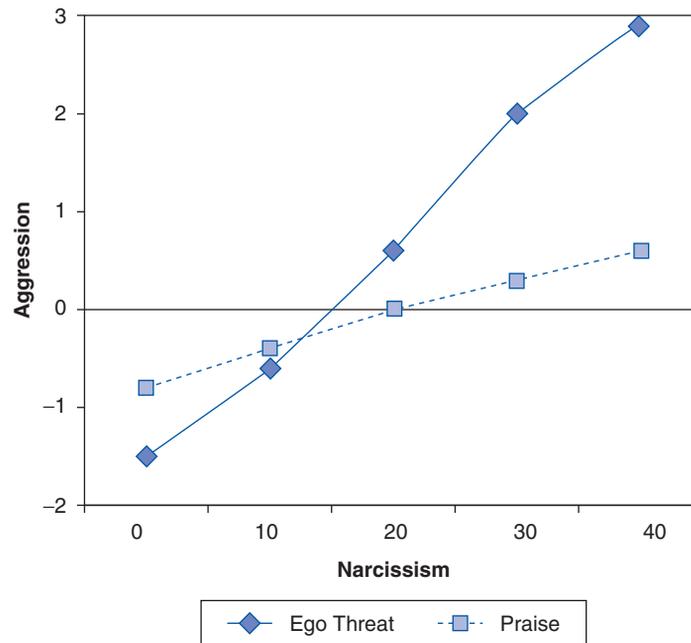


Figure 1.9 The effect of narcissism on aggression. Data from Bushman and Baumeister (1998)

aggression to an ego-threat are **narcissistic**. In other words, they tend to have *extremely* high self-esteem, believing that they are somehow special and superior to others, but at the same time, their self-esteem is *unstable*. As a result, they are reliant on validation from others in order to maintain their fragile positive self-concept (Kernis & Paradise, 2002). This may explain why criticism may generate such an explosive response from these individuals. In contrast, people with normal, *stable* higher levels of self-esteem are typically no more aggressive than individuals with lower self-esteem.

Bushman and Baumeister (1998) illustrated the relationship between narcissism and the tendency to be aggressive. Participants were told they were taking part in a study on how people respond to feedback from others and that they would be working with another participant. They then wrote a one paragraph essay which was subsequently taken away to be shown to the other participant (although there was, in fact, no second participant). Participants marked and gave feedback on the essay of the 'other participant' and were then given feedback on their own essay, supposedly from that other participant. In the *praise* condition, participants were given positive ratings and the comment 'Great essay!', whilst in the *threat* condition, they were given negative ratings and the comment 'This is one of the worst essays I have

read!’ Finally, participants were told that they would take part in a competitive reaction time task with the other participant, in which they would have to press a button as fast as possible on each trial. Whoever failed the trial would then receive a blast of noise from the other participant, which could be varied in intensity, and which therefore determined how much discomfort it would cause the recipient. The results are shown in Figure 1.10. There was a positive relationship between narcissism and aggression (measured by the intensity of noise delivered to the other participant), but this relationship was particularly strong when there was an ego threat. In other words, individuals higher in narcissism were even more aggressive than individuals lower in narcissism when they felt their ego was threatened.

Summary

An individual’s self-esteem reflects how positively or negatively they evaluate their self-concept. Although *self-esteem* inevitably varies depending on the situation, there are also chronic individual differences in self-esteem. Whether we view ourselves positively or negatively as an adult depends in part on how we were brought up; people who have controlling but responsive, *authoritarian* parents tend to have higher self-esteem than children whose parents were authoritarian or permissive. Many researchers have investigated the consequences of self-esteem for the individual. People with high self-esteem are better at *mood regulation*, and therefore better able to react constructively to life events, than people with low self-esteem, who tend to dampen positive feelings but dwell on the negative feelings that they experience. Having high self-esteem can have negative consequences, however; research has shown that *narcissistic* individuals, who have a high but fragile self-esteem, are more likely to be aggressive than people with lower self-esteem, particularly if their self-esteem is threatened in some way.

SELF-MOTIVES

Given that the self-concept is central to every individual, guiding attitudes and behaviour and determining whether people feel positive or negative about themselves, we might expect it to be a key guiding principle in motivating our behaviour. In this next section, we discuss three of these motivations.

First, we hold a motive for **self-assessment**, a desire to know who we truly are, regardless of whether the truth is positive or negative. We are motivated to have an accurate self-perception to reduce uncertainty about our abilities or personal

characteristics. For this reason, people like to complete *diagnostic* tests, which evaluate the performance of an individual and distinguish their performance from the performance of others, when evaluating the self (Trope, 1983).

Second, we are motivated to seek information that enables **self-verification** (Swann, 1997). Put another way, we want to confirm what we already believe to be true about our self-concept, even if we see ourselves in a negative light. If our search for information confirms what we already believe, this reassures us that we have an accurate self-perception and provides us with a sense of security and stability. To demonstrate the self-verification motivation, Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler (1992) asked people who had either a positive or a negative self-concept whether they would prefer to interact with evaluators who had a favorable impression of them, or an unfavorable impression of them. They found that people with a positive self-concept were more likely to choose the evaluator who viewed them positively, but people with a negative self-concept tended to choose the evaluator who viewed them negatively.

Third, we have a motivation for **self-enhancement**, a desire to seek out information about ourselves that allows us to see the self in a positive light. We discuss self-enhancement in more detail in the following section, but before we do that it is important to think about which of these three motives are the most important for guiding people's behaviour. This is not such an easy question, because the three can be somewhat contradictory, particularly for people with lower self-esteem. Self-enhancement would involve looking for positive self-knowledge whereas self-verification would involve seeking out negative self-knowledge. However, some research has suggested that individuals with lower self-esteem seek a compromise between these two motives, seeking out individuals who make them feel better about themselves without completely disconfirming their existing negative self-concept (Morling & Epstein, 1997).

Despite some inventive compromises to enable people to satisfy all three motives, ultimately one appears to come out on top. Sedikides (1993) conducted a series of studies in which the motives of self-assessment, self-verification and self-enhancement were pitted against each other. Participants completed a self-reflection task in which they could pick questions to ask themselves in order to learn what sort of person they were. Participants' strongest tendency was to ask themselves questions that focused on positive rather than negative aspects of the self. They were much less likely to ask themselves questions that focused on core aspects of themselves that they already know a lot about (self-verification) or peripheral aspects of themselves that they didn't know much about (self-assessment). In sum, self-enhancement appears to be the most powerful self-motive. As such, it has received most of the attention of researchers seeking to understand how self-motives shape our behaviours. It is this research we turn to in the next section.

Self-Enhancement

Why is self-enhancement so important to us? It is clear from the work on self-esteem discussed earlier that it is adaptive to have high self-esteem, provided it is not *too* high, and is stable rather than extreme and unstable. As we explained in the previous section, we self-regulate more effectively, and therefore cope with negative and positive life events in a more constructive way, when we have high self-esteem. But, given its usefulness, how can we maintain positive self-esteem? The types of strategies employed can be divided into two broad classes, depending on whether they involve deriving a positive self-concept from *personal* or *social* aspects of the self.

Strategies to Enhance the Personal Self

According to **self-affirmation theory** (Steele, 1975), when self-esteem has been damaged or threatened in some way, people often compensate by focusing on and publicly affirming positive aspects of themselves, thereby allowing them to maintain a positive self-concept. Steele demonstrated this effect in a study conducted among Mormon women, for whom community cooperation is an important ethic. These participants were first rung by a researcher who claimed she was conducting a poll. In the *self-concept threat condition*, the researcher commented that Mormons were typically uncooperative with community projects, whilst in the *self-concept irrelevant threat condition* they were told that Mormons were typically unconcerned with driver safety and care. Finally, in a *self-concept affirmation condition* participants were told that Mormons were typically cooperative with community projects. Two days later, participants received an apparently unrelated phone call from a researcher posing as a member of the local community asking them if they would be willing to list the contents of their kitchen as part of some research to help develop a community food cooperative. Steele found that compared to 65 per cent who agreed to help in the self-concept affirmation condition, approximately 95 per cent of participants in both threat conditions agreed to help. Presumably participants who felt threatened (even on an unrelated domain) wanted to reaffirm a positive aspect of their self-concept, and did so by publicly demonstrating their community spirit.

Another phenomenon that highlights people's tendency to self-enhance is the **self-serving attribution bias** (see also Chapter 2). There is considerable evidence that when people are making attributions about themselves on the basis of their behaviour, they show self-serving biases. When we are successful, we tend to show a self-enhancing bias, attributing our success to internal characteristics; for example, we might think 'I got an A grade in the examination because I am clever'. When we fail, however, we tend to show a self-protecting bias, attributing our failure to external characteristics. We might, for example, think 'I got a D grade because I

wasn't feeling well on the day of the examination'. People also have a memory bias in favour of self-enhancing information. Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss (1976) exposed participants to an equal amount of positive and negative information about their personality and then tested their memory of that information. They found that participants had better memory for the positive information than for the negative information. Other research suggests that people are more critical of information that criticizes them than information that praises them. Wyer and Frey (1983) had participants complete an intelligence test and then gave them either positive or negative feedback. Participants were then given the opportunity to read a report on the validity of intelligence tests which contained a mix of supportive and critical information. Participants who had been told they had performed poorly subsequently judged intelligence tests to be less valid than did participants who had received positive feedback.

Strategies to Enhance the Social Self

In addition to these individual self-enhancement strategies, people also derive a positive self-image from their group memberships. According to the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), when people's social self is salient, they incorporate in their self-concept any traits that are thought to be part of the group, regardless of whether those traits are positive or negative. It is therefore understandably important to group members that their group is evaluated positively. In the same way that people try to maintain a positive personal identity by comparing themselves favourably to other individuals (see the discussion of social comparison theory earlier in this chapter), group members are also motivated to hold a positive social or *collective* identity. They do so by comparing themselves favourably with members of other groups.

The desire to maintain a positive social identity can explain why group members show ingroup bias, a preference for their own group over outgroups, groups to which they do not belong (see Chapter 8 for more on the role of social identity in intergroup relations). By expressing how good your group is compared to others, by implication, the self as a group member reaps the benefits of this positive intergroup comparison (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Given the importance of the link between the self and the ingroup, but not the outgroup, in promoting disharmony between groups, some researchers have focused on the self as a way of improving intergroup relations. In particular, if it is the absence of a link between the self and outgroup that is partly responsible for intergroup bias (including prejudice and discrimination), then perhaps forging such links can reduce such bias. We describe one of these approaches in more detail in Text Box 1.2.

Text Box 1.2

Reducing Prejudice by Including the other in the Self

People are generally motivated to see themselves in a positive light; for example, we take pride in our success and attribute it to personal characteristics, while blaming failures on external characteristics beyond our control. Although these self-serving tendencies sound selfish and biased, they actually have benefits for our relationships with other individuals and other social groups. Research in the past decade has shown that our self-concept cognitively overlaps with the self-concept of close friends and romantic partners, a process which Aron and colleagues (1992) refer to as *including other in the self*. This has a number of benefits for interpersonal relationships because the positive feelings and treatment we usually reserve for the self can then be extended to others. Indeed, Agnew et al. (1998) found that greater inclusion of other in the self among dating couples was associated with greater satisfaction, commitment and investment in the relationship.

Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) investigated the role of inclusion of other in the self in the *extended contact effect*, the finding that just knowing members of the ingroup (the group to which you belong) who have friends in an outgroup (a group to which you do not belong) reduces prejudice. Wright and colleagues argued that we spontaneously incorporate close others in the self, including ingroup members (Smith & Henry, 1996). Moreover, we have a tendency to group together people who we perceive to be friends; for example, partners in a close relationship are treated by observers as a single cognitive unit (Sedikides, Olsen, & Reis, 1993). Thus, when participants observe an ingroup member in a close relationship with an outgroup member, they will perceive there to be a considerable overlap between the two. Consequently, they come to see the outgroup member, and eventually the outgroup in general, as part of the self as well. In this situation, the outgroup will enjoy the same benefits bestowed upon ingroup members, including showing positive biases in attribution, feeling pain at their trouble, generously sharing resources and taking pride in their successes.

Method

Wright and colleagues (1997) led participants to believe they had been assigned to one of two groups based on their performance on an initial task. Participants then observed an ingroup and an outgroup member (actually two confederates) interact on a problem-solving task. The relationship

between the individuals was either one of close friends, strangers, or disliked acquaintances.

Results and Discussion

The outgroup was evaluated more positively when the observed interaction was friendly than when it was neutral or hostile. This is because the participant only perceived there to be self-other overlap when the observed ingroup and outgroup member were friends; only friends are perceived to have overlapping self-concepts.

So the groups to which we belong can provide an important source of self-esteem, and we are motivated to create a positive image of them because this then reflects well on us. But our ingroups can sometimes be seen as either positive *or* negative, depending upon factors beyond our control. Under these circumstances, group members use a number of strategies to both maintain a positive social identity *and* buffer themselves from the potentially damaging self-esteem implications of being a member of a low status group. It is easy for high status groups to maintain a positive social identity because they can compare themselves favourably with low status groups (see our earlier discussion of intergroup social comparisons). However, low status group members have to resort to other strategies, particularly if they are not willing or able to leave their group to join a higher status group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They may attempt a *social change strategy*, where they compete with the high status group to improve their status relative to that group. Alternatively, they may attempt a *social creativity strategy*, finding new dimensions on which they compare more favourably. Members of a college that is academically poor, for example, may maintain a positive social identity when being compared to a top academic college by saying that they are better at sport, or throw better parties. Finally, members of low status groups may simply dis-identify with the group, disregarding that membership as an important part of their identity.

Robert Cialdini and colleagues (1976) illustrated this dis-identification strategy when they investigated the behaviour of fans of college American football teams. During the 1973 collegiate football season, students at seven universities were covertly monitored every Monday during an introductory psychology class. The proportion of students at the class wearing apparel that identified their university name, insignia or emblem (for example, jackets, sweatshirts, scarfs and caps) was recorded. Researchers then considered whether students' apparel differed depending on whether their university's football team had won or not won at the weekend. Figure 1.10 demonstrates what they found. Students wore

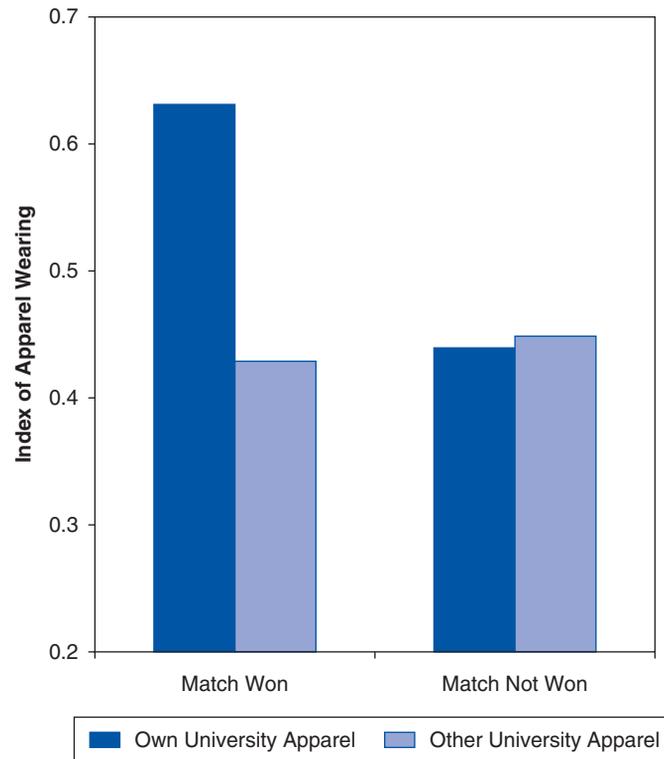


Figure 1.10 Basking in reflected glory. Data from Cialdini and colleagues (1976)

more apparel that displayed the name or insignia of their university when their university football team had been recently successful than when their team had not been successful.

Cialdini et al. (1976) called this phenomenon **basking in reflected glory**. Essentially, people derive a positive self-concept from the achievements of other group members even if they were not personally instrumental in those achievements. When one's group is performing poorly, however, group members often use a very different strategy, which is illustrated by the lack of apparel seen in Cialdini's study when the team had lost. Illustrating this in more detail, Snyder, Lassegard, and Ford (1986) found that compared to groups of college students who performed adequately on a group task, groups who failed on the task were more likely to distance themselves from other members of their group. They reported a desire to avoid the group, and took off and discarded their group name badges. This tendency is referred to as **cutting off reflected failure**.

Summary

Given how central it is to us, we do not perceive the self in a passive way. Instead, we are influenced by three key motives. First, we hold a motive for *self-assessment*, to hold an accurate self-perception in order to reduce uncertainty about the self. Second, we have a motive for *self-verification*; we want to confirm what we already believe to be true about the self. However, the most powerful self-motive we hold is for *self-enhancement*. We hold several strategies that enable us to maintain positive self-esteem. First, according to *self-affirmation theory*, when self-esteem has been damaged or threatened in some way, people maintain a positive self-concept by focusing on and publicly affirming positive aspects of themselves. Second, people have a self-serving attribution bias, attributing successes to internal characteristics and failures to factors outside their control.

According to the social identity approach we also derive a positive self-image from our group memberships, which explains why we often show ingroup favouritism. Although it can be difficult for low status groups to maintain a positive social identity, they do so by competing with the high status group to improve their social standing, comparing themselves on different dimensions, or by dis-identifying with a group. People also maintain a positive social identity by *basking in reflected glory* when their group has been successful but cutting off reflected failure when their group has not done so well.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN SELF AND IDENTITY

Although everyone has a unique sense of self, there are also some broad cultural differences in people's self-concept, depending on the society in which they were brought up. A growing number of people also belong to more than one culture and therefore have two quite different self-concepts that exist alongside one another. In this section, we discuss some of the effects that culture can have on the self.

Individualist and Collectivist Cultures

As we have discussed earlier, social psychologists recognize that there are both individual aspects of the self, including traits, states and personal behaviours, and collective aspects of the self, which reflect our relationships with other individuals and groups (Triandis, 1989). Although it is highly likely that most people, regardless of their culture, have both individual and collective self-schemas, there are some broad cultural trends. In **individualist cultures** such as the United States and Europe, from an early age children are encouraged to think of themselves as unique

individuals. In **collectivist cultures**, on the other hand, children are encouraged to be obedient and respectful of their family and to conform to societal norms. Given these differences in emphasis, you will probably not be surprised to learn that people in collectivist societies have a more collective sense of self, whereas people in an individualist culture have a more individual sense of self.

To illustrate this difference, Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) had North American and Chinese participants write down 20 self-descriptions. They found that North American students wrote down a significantly greater proportion of individual self-descriptions than Chinese students, for example 'I am intelligent'. In contrast, Chinese students wrote down significantly more collective self-descriptions, for example 'I am a Roman Catholic', than North American students.

These cultural differences in self-conception help to explain the different values held by people from individualist and collectivist cultures. Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee (1999) demonstrated the relationship between self-construal and values by priming American students to temporarily have either a more individualist or a more collectivist self-concept. Participants read a story about a trip to the city. The story either used independent pronouns (e.g. I, mine) or interdependent pronouns (e.g. we, ours), a technique which has previously been shown to prime the personal and cultural self-concept respectively. Participants then wrote down 20 self-descriptions and completed a questionnaire in which they reported the values which were most important to them. The findings to this study are illustrated in Figure 1.11. Participants primed to hold a personal self-concept wrote more individual self-descriptions and more strongly endorsed individualist values, such as freedom and independence, whereas participants primed to hold a collective self-concept wrote more collective self-descriptions and more strongly endorsed collectivist values, such as friendship and family safety.

Biculturalism

Many countries are now multicultural, made up of not only the original inhabitants of a country but of a diverse body of immigrants from all over the world, generated by increasing geographic mobility, wars and humanitarian crises. In the US in 2000, for example, 26.4 million people – approximately 10 per cent of the population – were born overseas. Immigrants often find themselves in a position where they have to deal with multiple identities, derived from their original culture and that of the majority or 'host' society (Phinney, Lochner, & Murphy, 1990). Given the diversity of different cultures, this may mean incorporating into the self-concept two cultures that are likely to differ in terms of values, attitudes, customs and styles of interaction (Berry & Annis, 1974). Some individuals struggle to deal with the presence of two different identities, either assimilating to the identity of the host society *or* retaining

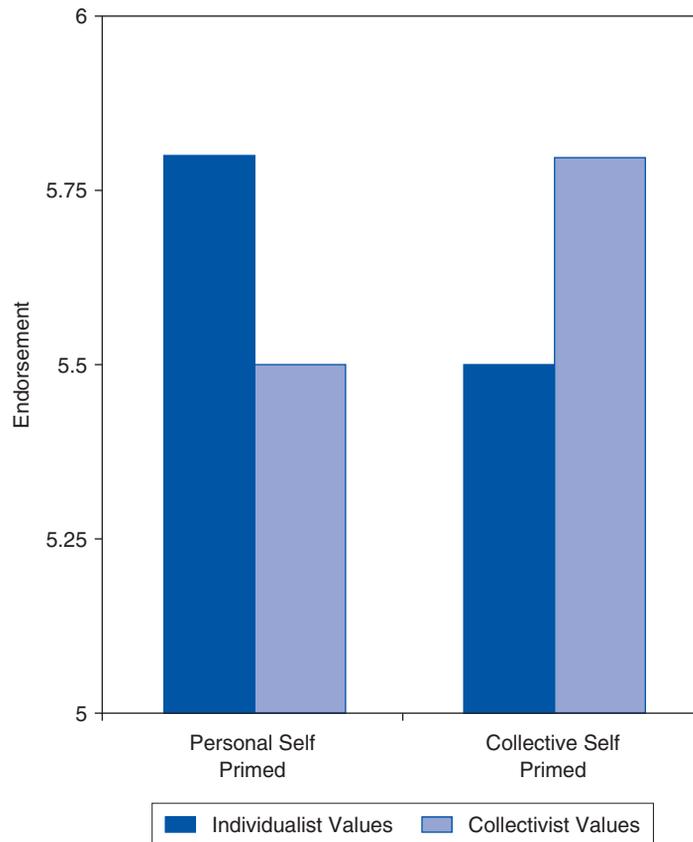


Figure 1.11 The effect of priming the personal versus the collective self on endorsement of individualistic and collectivist values. Data from Gardner, Gabriel and Lee (1999)

their original immigrant identity, but others maintain their original sense of identity while also sharing an identity with the host society. People who are adept at dealing with both cultures are known as *bicultural* (Ramirez, 1983).

The **alternation model** suggests that it is possible for an individual to deal with multiple identities by understanding the cultural assumptions that guide behaviour and using this knowledge to think and behave appropriately in each (Yamada & Singelis, 1999). The model argues that by alternating one's cultural orientation depending on the situation, it is possible for an individual to have a sense of belonging in two cultures without compromising his or her sense of cultural identity. Hong, Morris, Chiu and Benet-Martinez (2000), for example, found that Chinese American bicultural individuals primed with Western or East Asian cues changed their behaviour in line with the cued culture.

The ability to hold two identities simultaneously has a number of benefits. Buriel and colleagues (1998) found that bicultural individuals felt more at ease interacting with individuals from outside their ethnic minority, and had better problem-solving strategies and interpersonal skills. Similarly, Schwarzer, Bowler, and Rauch (1985) found that minority students who were proficient at communicating with the majority culture had not only higher levels of self-esteem than less bicultural individuals but also reported having less experience with racial tension and interethnic conflict. Bicultural individuals who alternate are also thought to have higher cognitive functioning, better mental health (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991) and higher self-esteem (Martinez, 1987) than those who are monocultural.

It is worth noting, however, that not everyone is so optimistic about people who simultaneously hold two different cultural identities. Lorenzo-Hernandez (1998) argued that those who alternate will be neither committed to their group of origin nor the dominant group, potentially leading to negative reactions from both. LaFromboise and colleagues (1993) suggested that for bicultural individuals to successfully alternate between two identities, they must hold positive attitudes towards both cultures and the ability to communicate effectively. It is also important that their culture of origin is strongly represented in the host society to provide a support system and to buffer the bicultural individual from stress.

Summary

There are some broad cultural differences in people's self-concept, depending on whether someone has been brought up in an *individualist* or a *collectivist* culture. In individualist cultures, people tend to hold a stronger individual self, thinking of themselves in terms of uniquely personal traits, and holding values of freedom and independence, whereas in collectivist cultures, people tend to see themselves in terms of a collective self, describing themselves in terms of group memberships and their relations with others and strongly endorsing values like friendship and family safety.

A growing number of people, particularly immigrants, now have to juggle two identities, one derived from their original culture and another from their host society. Some individuals struggle to deal with two very different identities and their associated norms and values, but other individuals are *bicultural*, adept at dealing with both cultures. According to the *alternation* model, bicultural individuals are able to alternate their cultural orientation when the situation calls for it and derive a number of benefits from this ability, including better problem-solving and interpersonal skills.

SUMMARY

The way in which we can look inwards, to think about who we are and why we think, act, and behave as we do, is a uniquely human ability, and something that affects every aspect of our lives. Research on the self has largely focused on how our self-perceptions affect our thoughts, feelings, and actions. These effects only occur when we are *self-aware*. We are not born with self-awareness, but develop the ability to be introspective during early childhood. Self-awareness appears to be connected to a particular area of the brain, the *anterior cingulate* in the frontal lobe. Self-awareness varies depending on the situation and our personality, and can be public or private in nature. When we are *privately self-aware*, we tend to experience intensified emotional reactions, behave in accordance with our true beliefs, and have a more accurate self-perception. In contrast, when we are *publicly self-aware*, we are more likely to suffer from *evaluation apprehension* and behave in accordance with *social norms* regardless of our true beliefs. The information about the self that we access when we are self-aware is stored in *self-schemas*, cognitive structures that hold knowledge about different aspects of the self. Self-schemas vary on a continuum, from self-schematic schemas that are central to our self-concept, to aschematic schemas that are irrelevant to us.

Numerous theories have been offered to explain how we perceive the self and how this perception affects our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Two theories propose that the self is often compared to an ideal version of the self and that discrepancies have certain consequences for the individual. The *control theory of self-regulation* argues that depending on whether we are privately or publicly self-aware, we compare the self against a private or a public self-standard. When there is a mismatch between the two, we attempt to change our behaviour to increase their congruence. According to *self-discrepancy theory*, the actual self is compared to one of two self-guides, the ideal self and the ought self. A discrepancy between the self and a self-guide causes psychological discomfort which motivates change to reduce the discrepancy. However, the two types of self-discrepancy are thought to be related to unique responses: actual-ideal discrepancy with dejection related emotions and actual-ought discrepancy with agitation related emotions.

Social comparison theory and the *self-evaluation maintenance* model both propose that our self-concept can be derived from comparisons with other individuals. According to social comparison theory, because there is no objectively 'correct' self, we compare ourselves to similar others to validate our attitudes and behaviour. The self-evaluation maintenance model proposes that we maintain a positive self-image through two processes: social reflection and social comparison. Finally, according to the *social identity* approach, we can also derive a sense of self from the social groups to which we belong.

It is clear from these theories that we do not think about the self in a detached way. Instead, we are keen to determine whether we should evaluate the many aspects of the self in a positive or a negative light. Although our level of *self-esteem* inevitably varies depending on the situation, there are also chronic differences in self-esteem which may in part reflect the way in which we were brought up. Self-esteem has far-reaching consequences for how we deal with life events. In contrast to people with lower self-esteem, those with higher self-esteem are better able to regulate their moods, buffering themselves from the negative impact of unpleasant events and deriving pleasure from positive events. It is worth noting, however, that high self-esteem is not always a good thing; *narcissistic* individuals with very high but unstable self-esteem tend to have aggressive tendencies, particularly if their ego has been threatened.

Given the importance of a positive self-esteem, it is unsurprising that we have a strong motivation for *self-enhancement*, which appears to override our motives for *self-assessment* and *self-verification*. We use a number of strategies to enhance our personal and social self. According to *self-affirmation theory*, if our self-esteem has been threatened on one dimension, we maintain a positive self-concept by publicly affirming an aspect of ourselves that we know to be positive. We also maintain a positive self-concept through self-serving attribution biases, by paying more attention to positive information about the self than negative information, and by being more critical of negative information about the self than positive information. When our group membership is salient, we use group-based strategies to maintain a positive social identity, for example *basking in the reflected glory* of successful group members, but cutting off the reflected failure of unsuccessful group members.

Finally, there are some broad cultural differences in people's self-concept, depending on the society in which they were brought up. People from individualist cultures like Europe and the United States have a stronger individual sense of self, whereas people from collectivist cultures like China and India are more likely to see themselves in terms of their relationships with family members and social groups. There is also a growing minority of *bicultural* individuals who have two sets of cultural identities because they have been brought up in one culture and have then migrated to a country with a sharply diverging culture. Although it can be difficult to juggle two different self-concepts, people that successfully *alternate* between the values and attitudes of two cultures develop excellent problem-solving strategies and interpersonal skills, and have higher cognitive functioning, better mental health and higher self-esteem than monocultural individuals.

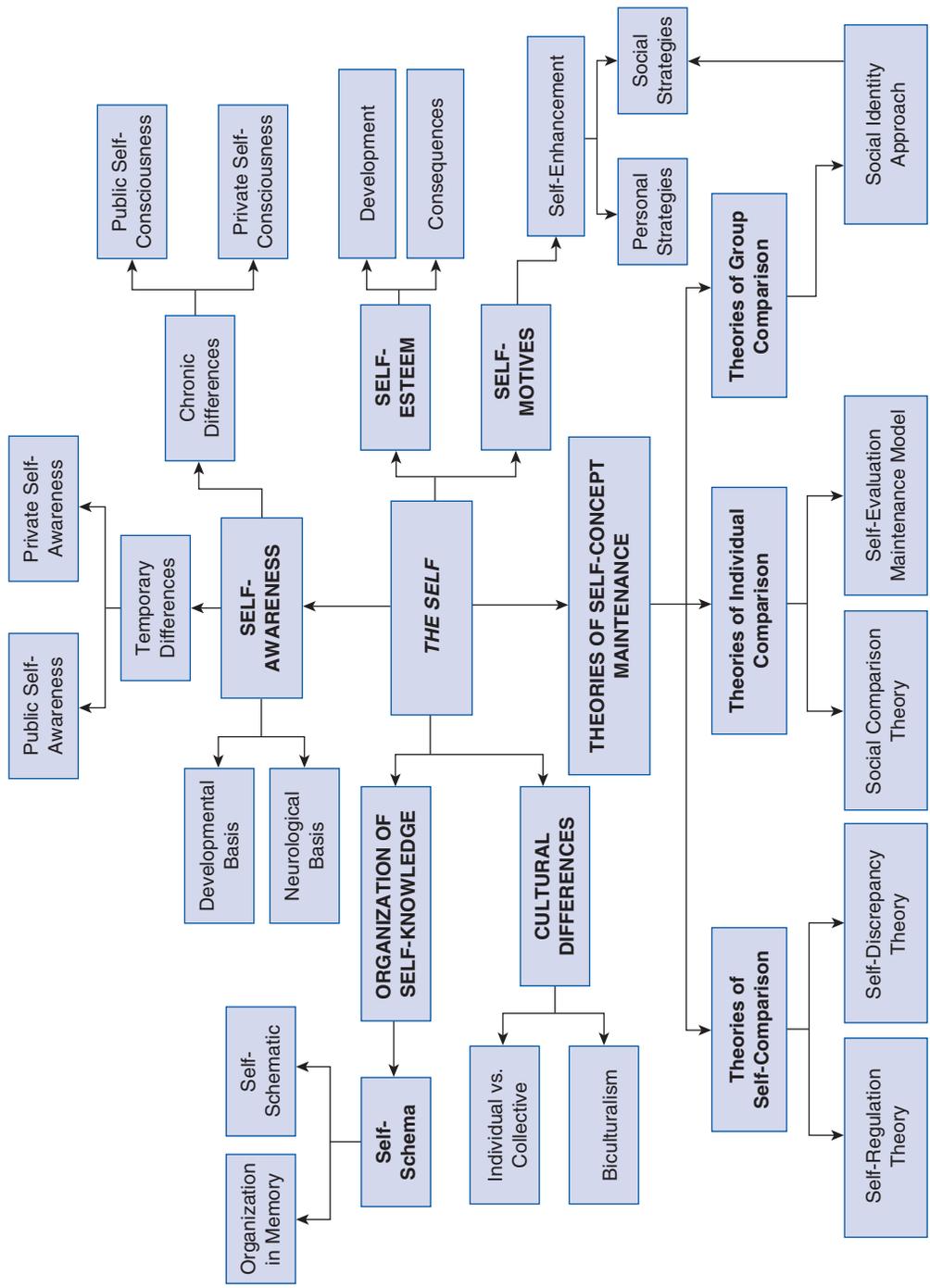


Figure 1.12 Memory map

Taking it Further

Try This

Look back to Figure 1.2 and the organization of Rhiannon's self-schema. With a friend do two self-schemas. First do a self-schema for yourself, positioning the traits closer or further away from the centre of the diagram to illustrate the extent to which they describe you. Second, do a self-schema for your friend. Does the schema you created for your friend match the one they created for themselves? Does their schema for you match your schema? If there are any traits that differ ... or differ in terms of how central they are ... can you identify reasons why? (maybe think about the difference between public and private views of the self ...).

Debate This

Does the apparent dominance of self-enhancement mean that we all have inherently fragile egos, preferring to seek out and engage only in behaviours that will furnish us a positive self-image, avoiding or ignoring unwelcome 'home truths'? How would we ever grow as individuals if we never acknowledge things we could do better? In what situations might we be encouraged to focus on self-assessment or self-verification motives rather than self-enhancement? Are there some situations where self-enhancement might be better for us (e.g. in the wake of a particularly bad set of events, or when we are already down for other reasons). Could you develop a 'self-help' strategy that engineers a focus on the different self-motives that is most adaptive following different life events?

Something for the Weekend

Think back to the last time that someone annoyed you because they did better than you at something. If you were annoyed it was probably something that was important to you (maybe they beat you in a classroom test, or maybe you both ended up buying the same dress and SHE looked better in it!). Did you use a strategy of self-evaluation maintenance? Perhaps you devalued the dimension of comparison (well, you know what, I think I've gone off that dress ...) or maybe you distanced yourself from the target (who? her? Sorry, don't know who you mean ...). What other strategies could you have used, and are there any factors that might make some of these strategies more likely to be used over others?

Further Reading

The Essentials

Baumeister, R.F. (1998). The self. In D.T. Gilbert, S.T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th edn, Vol. 1, pp. 680–740). New York: McGraw-Hill.

This is an excellent, accessible and contemporary overview of what we know about the psychology of the self – a good first step.

Next Steps

Abrams, D. & Hogg, M.A. (2001). Collective identity: Group membership and self-conception. In M.A. Hogg & R.S. Tindale (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Group processes* (pp. 425–460). Oxford: Blackwell.

This chapter is an excellent introduction to social identity – how groups and social categories provide us with a basis for self-definition that goes beyond a sense of our individual identity. It will also set you up nicely for later chapters on social cognition, group processes and prejudice.

Delving Deeper

Benet-Martínez, V., Leu, J., Lee, F., & Morris, M. (2002). Negotiating biculturalism: Cultural frame-switching in biculturals with ‘oppositional’ vs. ‘compatible’ cultural identities. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33, 492–516.

This is a fascinating paper showing that when people develop a bicultural identity through extended exposure to both their home and host culture, they also develop a flexible ‘frame-switching’ approach to thinking that mirrors what they have to do on a day-to-day basis.