



9

Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Identity

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

Background

Definitions

Self-Concept

Formation of the Self-Concept

Pursuit of Self-Knowledge

Spontaneous Self-Concept

Self-Schemas

Culture and Interdependence

Self-Concept Change

Self-Esteem

Activity Box 9.1: Measuring Your Self-Esteem

Self-Esteem and Self-Concept

Roots of Self-Esteem

Is High Self-Esteem a Good Thing?

Why Care About Self-Esteem?

Social Motives

Plasticity

Emotion and Coping

Prejudice

Maintaining Self-Esteem

Identity

Structure and Functions of Identity

Identity Crises

Summary

Discussion Questions

Suggested Readings

Suggested Web Sites

InfoTrac College Edition Search Topics

References

BACKGROUND

What is the self? When asked that question, small children answer by indicating their bodies. Self starts with body, in the sense that people first develop a notion of self that is based on the physical self. Older children and adults, however, have notions of selfhood that go far beyond the physical self. These notions include social identity, reputation, personal values, and other factors. They think of the self as something that exists “inside,” that is, somewhere not visible to physical inspection and something separate from the palpable, physical body.

If you are asked to identify yourself, you might respond in quite different ways depending on what you were doing and who was asking. Feelings about the self may also change from time to time. There is probably a stable core to the self, but different parts or versions of the self are apparent in different circumstances. Moreover, selves do change over time in fundamental ways, so even the most stable core of the self may not be fixed and constant. You can see why it has proven difficult for psychology to come up with firm answers about the nature of the self, for the self includes stability and change, visible manifestations and inner phenomena, ideas and feelings, and other complexities.

In this chapter we will be concerned with one large region of the self—namely, self-concept and identity. Self-concept and identity refer to ideas about the self, to definitions placed on the self. This part of the self is constructed out of *meaning*. Unlike the body, which is made out of biochemical substances, the self-concept is made of meaning, which is a symbolic, social, linguistic phenomenon. Without symbols or language, there would be no self-concepts. Another way of putting this is that the self-concept is a network of interrelated ideas.

Definitions

Self is perhaps the broadest term. It has been used in many different ways, referring to many parts of a whole set of experiences and thoughts. Sometimes it is used to refer to the whole set. Some related terms are *ego*, *identity*, *self-concept*, *self-schema*. Because the term *self* has many meanings, different theorists have used it in different ways, and this varying usage generates some confusion. It's not always safe to assume that what one writer means by “self” is the same as what another writer means by it.

In this chapter, we will use “self” pretty much the same way the word is used in ordinary language. Your self is the totality of you, including your body, your sense of identity, your reputation (how others know you), and so on. It encompasses both the physical self and the self that is constructed out of meaning.

Self-Concept: Your Idea(s) About Yourself. The self-concept is the individual's beliefs about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is. The self-concept includes many things that might not be part of one's identity. For example, a person's self-concept might include many personality attributes, such as being friendly or talkative.

Self-Esteem: How You Evaluate Yourself. An important part of the self-concept is self-esteem. A self-concept is not merely an abstract summary or notion of the self, but it is full of evaluations, that is, of perceptions of the self as good, bad, or mediocre. Self-esteem refers to the person's broadest self-evaluation. Of course, people also have levels of specific self-esteem for specific domains. Someone may regard herself, for example, as an excellent tennis player, a mediocre student, and a poor cook.

Identity: Who You Are. Identity is a definition placed on the self. Your sense of identity refers to your knowledge of who you are. Identity always answers the question, "Who are you?" Self-concept, in contrast, may contain answers to other questions like "What kind of person are you?" and "How good are you?"

Identity may contain material that is not part of the self-concept, because identity is not fully contained inside the person's own mind. To use an extreme example, newborn babies do not have self-concepts, but they do have identities: They belong to a certain family, they soon have a name, and so on.

The concept of identity rests on two notions, sameness (continuity) and difference. Identity means being the same person you were yesterday or ten years ago; it also means being different from someone else. The task of eyewitness identification is to decide which person in the police lineup is the person who committed some crime. This means identifying someone as being the same person who performed some other deed and differentiating that person from other, innocent people. Likewise, a campus identification card links your identity across time (you have the same card for a period of time) and differentiates you from other people (for example, you are permitted to use campus facilities that others may not use).

SELF-CONCEPT

This section will cover current knowledge about the self-concept, except self-esteem, which is covered in the next section. Self-esteem is the aspect of self that has received the greatest amount of research attention as well as interest from the mass media and popular culture. It is, however, only one part of the self-concept, and so we begin with the broader issues of self-concept and self-knowledge.

Formation of the Self-Concept

Although psychology still has much to learn about how self-concepts form and develop, there is a reasonable amount of information available. Psychologists have recently devised several very clever strategies to study self-concepts in very young children.

The first step in forming a self-concept is learning to distinguish between one's own body and the rest of the world. The infant learns that some things are always there, whereas others come and go. The bed, like Daddy, is only present at certain times, but one's own hands and feet are always there. Grad-

ually the infant learns the boundaries of its own body. For a long time, self is equated with body.

How early does sense of self start? There is no way to be certain, but the signs suggest that it starts very early in life. By the time an infant is 3 months old, it likes to look at itself in the mirror, presumably because it can see that its own body movements “magically” produce movements in the image (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Recognizing oneself on the basis of facial features—such as recognizing a photograph rather than a moving image in a mirror—happens during the second year of life.

During this second year of life, children begin to understand that they need to conform to external standards and rules, and they begin to evaluate their own actions against external standards (Kagan, 1981). This is a big step in the growth of self-awareness. Children learn to evaluate their actions as good or bad, and they develop some concept of *mastery*, as in knowing how to do things. Obviously, at this age, there are many things one cannot do, but the child’s mastery of simple skills brings him or her pleasure and satisfaction. One sign of this is that children will smile when they successfully accomplish something (Kagan, 1981). This suggests a feeling of self as capable of performing up to certain external standards.

The proper beginnings of a self-concept seem to occur around 15 months of age. At this point, children are able to identify themselves (and others) on the basis of gender and age (Damon & Hart, 1982; Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Of course, they do not understand numerical age this early, but merely the difference between children and adults. Thus, age and gender seem to be the first ingredients of the self-concept. Familiarity is also important, implying that children’s self-concepts also soon incorporate some sense of belonging to a certain family group.

During the second year of life, the child’s self-concept begins to include active skills. Perhaps the first such skill to have a major impact on self-concept is the ability to walk (Erikson, 1968; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). From ages 3 to 5, self-concepts of children seem to emphasize skills and abilities. The self is understood in terms of what it can and cannot do (Keller, Ford, & Meacham, 1978). The child’s concept of self revolves around whether she can brush her teeth, tie her shoes, ride a tricycle or bicycle, tell time, and so on.

From ages 6 to 12, children’s sense of competency and control normally tends to increase in a steady fashion (e.g., Brim, 1976; Erikson, 1968). Children begin to see their competencies in more complex ways than simply what they can versus cannot do. In particular, they begin to compare their competencies against those of others and to measure them by hierarchies of standards. To the young child, the issue is simply whether one can ride a bike or not. The older child is concerned with riding a bike faster, farther, or better than other children (Damon & Hart, 1982).

Another development of the period from age 6 to age 12 is the beginning of a conception of self as something inner or hidden. If you ask a young child about the self, the child will point to the body, for the young child has no other way of thinking about the self. Older children begin to develop notions of a more psychological self, including thoughts, feelings, and intentions, that go

beyond the mere physical self (Mohr, 1978). The idea of an inner self is difficult for children at first, and they tend to accept whatever their parents (or other authority figures) tell them. Indeed, 11-year-old children, when asked “Who knows best what kind of person you really are, deep down inside, your mother or father or yourself?” tend to say that the mother or father knows the child better than the child knows himself or herself (Rosenberg, 1979). The idea of knowing one’s own self better than anyone else—the principle of *privileged access* to one’s inner self—does not become firm until adolescence.

The self-concept undergoes further refinements during the teen years. Increases in mental abilities greatly improve children’s capacity to consider themselves from other, outside perspectives. In particular, teenagers are much better than younger children at imagining how they appear to someone else. As a result, self-consciousness increases greatly around age 12 or 13 (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973; Tice, Buder, & Baumeister, 1985). Moral issues and dilemmas become important, and adolescents seek to ground their self-concept in a firm set of values, often in the form of universal or abstract principles. The self-concept comes to include ideological beliefs such as religious, political, and philosophical views (Montemayor & Eisen, 1977). Many people undergo identity crises at this age (Erikson, 1968). We shall return to the nature of identity crises at the end of this chapter.

Pursuit of Self-Knowledge

Undoubtedly people are very interested in finding out about themselves. From reading horoscopes to comparing oneself with others to buying self-help books to enrolling in psychology courses, much human behavior is marked by the quest for information about the self. The self-concept is largely the result of this process.

There seem to be three main motives that shape the quest for self-knowledge. The first is the desire to gain accurate information about oneself (Trobe, 1983, 1986). The second is to gain some confirmation of what one already knows and believes about oneself (Swann, 1985, 1987). The third is to learn positive, favorable things about oneself. These have been called the self-assessment, self-verification, and self-enhancement motives, respectively. They do not always concur in what sort of information people want to hear.

How do the three motives compare? From the standpoint of practical, adaptive benefits, one could make clear predictions. The self-assessment motive should be the strongest, because accurate information about the self is the most useful. The self-verification motive should be next, because maintaining a stable understanding of self and world (even if occasionally inaccurate) is useful too. The self-enhancement motive should be weakest, because hearing favorable things about oneself creates pleasant emotional states but when these are not accurate they should have little or no practical value. If you are trying to decide what courses to take or what romantic partner to pursue, it is useful to know (accurately) how your own abilities and sex appeal stack up. Having an unrealistically positive view could lead you into wasting time and effort, not to mention failure or heartbreak. Hence, it seems logical that people should be most eager to get accurate information about themselves.

Research, however, has concluded that the opposite ranking is closer to the truth (Sedikides, 1993). The self-enhancement motive appears to be the strongest of the three, with the preference for consistency a distant second and the interest in simply accurate information about the self a very distant third. The quest for self-knowledge is thus dominated by the emotionally potent (but informationally dubious) preference to find out positive, flattering things about oneself. There is however some evidence that even though people may prefer highly favorable feedback about themselves, their sober cognitive responses may be skeptical, and so the cognitive (as opposed to emotional) responses to self-knowledge are influenced by the self-verification and self-assessment motives. Still, the immediate and emotional reaction strongly favors positivity.

A broad review of the research literature has concluded that self-knowledge is typically subject to three main patterns of distortion (Taylor & Brown, 1988). First, people overestimate their good qualities. They believe themselves to be somewhat smarter, more attractive, more socially adept, and otherwise more likable and competent than they really are. Second, they overestimate their degree of control over their lives. They believe that they can accomplish the things they want to and that their successes and failures in life will depend mainly on their own actions and choices instead of on external forces and fate or luck. Third, they are unrealistically optimistic. People overestimate the likelihood that good things will happen to them (such as a major promotion, becoming wealthy, or having a gifted child) and underestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen (such as being seriously injured in an accident, or having a retarded child, or being fired from a job).

In short, the average person regards himself or herself as being above average. This is true in terms of one's worth as a person, one's control over life, and one's prospects of having life turn out well. Although these illusions and distortions may depart from the truth, they do seem to help people feel good, bounce back from misfortune, and have confidence to tackle ambitious projects. Indeed, research suggests that people who show all these biases are in general an exceptionally happy group of people (Campbell, 1981). Meanwhile, depressed people seem to lack these biases and see the world in a much more accurate, unbiased, even-handed fashion (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988), which is a rather sad advertisement for being in touch with reality!

Spontaneous Self-Concept

Is the self-concept stable, or does it change and fluctuate from day to day? Many people think it fluctuates, but most researchers have found self-concepts to be quite stable. Attempts to raise or lower self-esteem often have weak or negligible effects.

One reason for this discrepancy between popular wisdom and research beliefs is that the self-concept is very large and complex, and although the entire structure of self-concept may remain rather stable, the parts of it that come to mind immediately may fluctuate. On the surface, self-concepts may seem to change from day to day, even from hour to hour, as different features of the self come to the forefront of one's mind. The concept of self is not really changing; rather, different parts of it are coming to light.

What is changing, then, is that part of the self-concept that happens to be present on one's mind at a given moment. This is sometimes called the "spontaneous self-concept" or the "phenomenal self." There is indeed evidence that the spontaneous self-concept changes, even though self-esteem and the deeper aspects of the self-concept appear to be quite resistant to change. The immediate social context brings out different features of the self, causing the spontaneous self-concept to change.

Changes in the spontaneous self-concept have been shown in a series of clever studies by McGuire and his colleagues (McGuire & McGuire, 1982; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). They reasoned that people will become aware of their attributes that make them stand out in a given situation. For example, being an American may not come to mind readily when you think about yourself here in America, because everyone else is an American too. But if you travel alone overseas, you may often be quite conscious of being an American, because it sets you apart from most of the people you encounter.

The researchers tested this idea by asking schoolchildren to describe themselves in writing. The children were tested in groups, and the researchers made sure that each group was composed of either all boys except for one girl, or of all girls except for one boy. The child who was the only one present of his or her sex was much more likely to mention that fact in describing himself or herself. In other words, a girl was much more likely to mention being a girl as part of her self-concept if she were the lone girl in a group of boys than if she were in a group of girls. Likewise, boys were more conscious of being boys when they were alone in a group of girls. Thus, the spontaneous self-concept changed in response to the social context.

It is important to remember that these changes occurred only on the surface of the self-concept, that is, only at the level of what features of the self are on one's mind at a given time. McGuire and his colleagues were certainly not claiming that a boy in a group of boys ceases to consider himself a boy. If you asked him whether he is a boy, he would certainly say yes. But if nobody asks him, he is not likely to be paying much attention to the fact that he is a boy. Being surrounded by girls, however, will make him very aware of being a boy. The immediate social context brings out certain features of the self and makes others seem temporarily unimportant, minor, or irrelevant.

In short, not all of one's self-concept is present in one's mind at any given moment. Indeed, some researchers have suggested that the self-concept is like a large, complex set of files, and current events cause people to pull out one drawer or another of these files. People may "scan" their files in different ways depending on the immediate context and recent experiences.

Self-Schemas

Another important approach to self-knowledge rejects the notion that each person has one single, integrated self-concept. Rather, it may be that people have a loose collection of specific ideas about themselves. For example, someone may regard herself as intelligent, friendly, lazy, talkative, helpful, dependent, sympathetic, and sensitive. Perhaps the important thing is not how all these

traits fit together to compose a single “self-concept” with a given level of global self-esteem. The important thing may be the individual pieces: being intelligent, friendly, and so forth. In this view, each trait or attribute about oneself is a “self-schema.” A self-schema is thus a concept of some particular attribute of the self. Instead of one large self-concept, this approach emphasizes many small concepts of parts and features of the self (Markus, 1977).

One important feature of the self-schema approach is that it makes changes in self-concept easier to understand. The person may feel that he or she remains pretty much the same across time, although specific schemas about the self may change. Another important implication of the self-schema approach is that on some dimensions, many people simply don’t have self-schemas. Thus, for example, some people may think of themselves as talkative, others may think of themselves as quiet and reticent, but many other people may not think of themselves as characteristically being either one. It is not that they regard themselves as somewhat or moderately talkative; rather, they may think that in some circumstances they are extremely talkative, while in other situations they are extremely shy and quiet. Or perhaps they have simply never thought about themselves in terms of talkativeness or quietness.

Thus, not all self-concepts are made out of the same ingredients. Dimensions or traits that may be extremely important to some self-concepts may simply be irrelevant to others. Each individual self-concept is made up of several self-schemas on certain dimensions, but other dimensions are left out.

Culture and Interdependence

Do people in different cultures hold systematically different self-concepts? Intuition says that they must, but researchers were slow to establish any clear evidence of cultural variations. Recent work, however, has identified one important dimension on which self-concepts vary across major cultural boundaries.

The dimension runs from independence to interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; also see chapter 15 in this book). To have an independent self-construal (self-construal is any kind of self-schema or specific view of self) is to focus on the things that make oneself stand out as different and special. In particular, you might focus on your unique traits and accomplishments. In contrast, an interdependent self-construal downplays these unique aspects of the self and instead emphasizes the self as part of a network of social relationships. If two people were both asked to describe what is important about themselves, the interdependent person would start by listing family and other groups to which he or she belongs, thus expressing the view that the self is important only as a part of these groups and relationships. In contrast, the independent person would answer the same question by listing what he or she has achieved and what traits set the person apart from others, often while downplaying any connections to others.

Independent self-construals are predominant in Western culture—Europe and North America. Interdependent self-construals are more common in Asian cultures. Asian cultural traditions are sometimes described as collectivist, which means that they see the value of the individual mainly in being part of the

group. Collectivist views also held sway in the West, but starting around the Renaissance (in the 15th century) Europeans began to place more emphasis on the individual, and the United States was founded with an explicit commitment to individualism. As a result of this heritage, Europeans and North Americans are unusually prone to focus their self-concepts on what is unique or special about themselves.

Self-Concept Change

People have the impression that they frequently change their opinions of themselves, but in fact researchers have tended to find the opposite: Self-concepts are remarkably durable and stable. People avoid, ignore, or discount events that can change their self-opinions. It appears that changing the self-concept is often a last resort. Indeed, psychotherapists know very well how difficult it is to induce change in the self-concept, even when the client wants to change.

Still, it is important to know how self-concepts can change. One method was identified in early research studies, based on a theory of *biased scanning*. According to the biased scanning theory, people can be induced to think about themselves in new, different ways. People all have a great deal of widely assorted information about themselves, and the trick is to get them to scan it in a one-sided (biased) fashion so they only attend to part of it. In these studies, researchers asked people to recall incidents in which they acted in an extraverted, outgoing fashion—or, alternatively, in an introverted, socially withdrawn fashion. By remembering only such incidents, people came to think of themselves in that way, and their subsequent views of themselves (and their corresponding actions, such as whether they would strike up a conversation with a stranger) followed suit (Fazio, Effrein, & Fallender, 1981; Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981).

More recent work has indicated that social interactions play a crucial role in these self-concept changes. Tice (1992) asked some people to answer biased questions about introverted versus extraverted behavior either in a face-to-face interview with another person, or in an anonymous session with only a tape recorder. The mental scanning should have been the same, but self-concept change occurred only in the face-to-face interview. Tice concluded that biased scanning only changes the self-concept if other people are involved to lend social reality to the interaction. Schlenker, Dlugolecki, and Doherty (1994) confirmed her findings and even challenged the biased scanning view. They conducted an experiment in which people presented themselves one way in social interaction but then the researchers privately conducted biased scanning for the opposite view of self. The self-concept change followed the way they had presented themselves to others rather than the private memory scan. For example, many people are far from certain how creative they are. You can probably think of several events from your life that suggest you are a creative person, if you specifically search your memory for them. On the other hand, if you were to make the opposite search to find evidence that you are not particularly creative, you can probably find some of that too. Neither of these private exercises is likely to have a major impact on your self-concept. But if you were to try

hard to convince somebody else of either of those positions—either that you’re very creative, or not very creative—that exercise would end up affecting how you think about yourself. Getting other people to see you in a certain way ends up having a bigger impact on your self-concept than simply ruminating privately about it.

At present, then, there is some question as to how important the role of biased memory scanning is, but it does not seem able to induce self-concept change by itself. Undoubtedly there is some role for processes such as memory shifts. Still, the interpersonal dimension seems to be strong and decisive. To change the self, it is helpful and powerful to change the way one is perceived by other people, and these socially reflected views of self can then be internalized (see also Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Moreover, when people do try to change, other people’s input and perceptions seem to make a big difference (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). If you tell everyone that you want to quit smoking or lose weight or take up a new hobby, you are more likely to follow through and succeed than if you keep your plans for change to yourself.

SELF-ESTEEM

Of all the aspects of the self-concept, one of the most important is self-esteem. When researchers set out to study the self-concept, they usually end up studying self-esteem. This is because people instantly recognize the importance of self-esteem. When self-esteem goes up, they often feel happy, whereas events that lower self-esteem generally make people feel terrible. Another reason people study self-esteem is that it is easy and convenient to measure.

There is no single measure of self-esteem that is used by everyone. Rather, there are many such measures, partly because the topic is quite important and partly because researchers criticize one another’s ways of measuring it. As already noted, one approach was to look for discrepancies between the real self and the ideal self. Another way is to ask a series of simple questions about global self-regard (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965). The most common approach is to ask a series of questions about different attributes and add them up. The problem is that such a measure might not lend the right importance to the various attributes or dimensions. Most of the common self-esteem measures tend to emphasize social self-esteem, for example. To get an understanding of this approach, please consult the Activity Box 9.1, “Measuring Self-Esteem.”

The results of these self-esteem measures yield a continuum of scores. Although everyone speaks of high and low self-esteem as if these were distinct types, they are not types in the sense of distinct clusters of scores. Rather, there is a continuum and people may range anywhere along it. Dividing the scores into high and low self-esteem groups is done for the sake of conceptual convenience (i.e., it makes results easier to talk about). Sometimes researchers divide their scores into two groups for analyzing their data—that is, to compare the typical behaviors of high versus low self-esteem groups. There are some minor statistical problems with that approach (e.g., it ignores the fact that the highest score in the low-esteem group is probably closer to the lowest score in

Activity Box 9.1**Measuring Your Self-Esteem**

Most measures of self-esteem rely on asking the person to rate himself or herself on various dimensions. Here are some sample items that are similar to those used on actual scales. Try to rate yourself on each one. Give yourself a numerical rating from 0 to 6 on each scale, such that 0 = Very Often, or Very Much, and 6 = Almost Never, or Not at All.

- _____ 1. How often do you feel superior to most other people?
- _____ 2. How often do you think that one day you will accomplish great things?
- _____ 3. Do you worry about making a good impression on other people?
- _____ 4. Do you frequently fear that other people will dislike you or think badly of you?
- _____ 5. When you complete an assignment or test, do you usually have the feeling that you did a poor or inadequate job?
- _____ 6. Do you consider yourself more physically attractive than the average person you know?
- _____ 7. How often do you do things that seem clumsy or uncoordinated?

Self-esteem is then scored by computing a total based on the number of points per item. For questions #3, 4, 5, and 7, your rating (0 to 6) is your score. The other three items (#1, 2, and 6) are *reverse scored*; that is, you compute your score by subtracting your rating from 6. For example, if you responded to question #2 by rating yourself 4, your score would be $6 - 4 = 2$.

These questions refer to various areas or facets of self-esteem. Questions 1 and 2 refer to “global self-esteem”—that is, the person’s overall appraisal of self. Questions 3 and 4 measure social self-esteem, that is, feelings of confidence and inhibition about getting along with other people. Question 5 refers to school (intellectual) abilities (confidence in your ability to do good work). Questions 6 and 7 refer to body image; #6 is concerned with attractiveness and #7 is concerned with physical skills and ability.

Most self-esteem scales use more items than these (see Fleming & Courtney, 1984, for a good example of a complete scale), so you should not place much trust in the reliability of your total score from these few items. Still, you can get a rough idea of how self-esteem is measured by considering these items and similar ones.

the high-esteem group than to the lowest score in the low-esteem group), but these can safely be overlooked in making rough comparisons.

The goal of understanding and measuring self-esteem is further complicated by new distinctions that researchers are starting to make. In recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest in a trait called narcissism, which can be understood as an obnoxious kind of high self-esteem (Emmons, 1984; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The term *narcissism* is derived from a Greek myth, in which Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his own reflected image, and narcissism is therefore used to refer to excessive or absurd self-love. Narcissistic individuals hold high opinions of themselves and want other people to regard them favorably also—or else! If you let a narcissist know that you do not admire him or her, you may become the target of his or her anger and venom.

Self-Esteem and Self-Concept

Self-esteem is essentially the evaluative dimension of the self-concept. Any piece of information about the self may be incorporated into the self-concept. It only affects self-esteem once it takes on a value judgment: Is it good or bad? High self-esteem denotes thinking well of oneself. This may include a healthy self-confidence and proper appreciation of one's genuine accomplishments and abilities. It may also exaggerate or distort the truth wildly. High self-esteem can mean being conceited, egotistical, arrogant, and narcissistic. The common thread is thinking well of oneself—regardless of whether this is justified.

In theory, low self-esteem is the opposite of high self-esteem, and so it should mean having a negative, unflattering view of self. In practice, however, relatively few people are firmly convinced that they are bad people. Most researchers define “low self-esteem” as anyone who scores in the bottom half or bottom third of a sample of scores on a self-esteem scale. An examination of these scores shows that usually they are in the middle range of *possible* scores, because almost no one scores at the low end (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). In other words, in response to self-esteem scale questions such as “Do you often feel inferior to most other people?” a high self-esteem person will answer “Never” but a typical low self-esteem person will say “Sometimes” rather than “Frequently.” In fact, hardly anyone says “Frequently” in answer to such questions.

Thus, low self-esteem is the absence of positives more than the presence of negative beliefs about the self (Baumeister, 1993). People with high self-esteem hold firm, highly favorable beliefs about themselves. People with low self-esteem lack those beliefs, but they generally do not hold firm *unfavorable* beliefs about themselves.

A powerful and influential line of research on the self-conceptions that accompany different levels of self-esteem was conducted by Campbell (1990; Campbell & Lavelle, 1993). The broad conclusion is that low self-esteem is marked by *self-concept confusion*. That is, people with high self-esteem have clear, consistent, and definite ideas about themselves, whereas people with low self-esteem do not. When people with low self-esteem answer questions about themselves, they differ from people with high self-esteem in several key ways. They tend to give uncertain answers or say they do not know. They give contradictory or inconsistent answers to similar questions. They give different answers to the same questions on different occasions. All of these suggest that low self-esteem is marked by a lack of firm self-knowledge. Once again, then, low self-esteem is not a matter of being convinced that you are bad. More commonly, it is simply the lack of firm conviction that you are good.

Self-esteem and narcissism are not quite the same thing. Most narcissists have high self-esteem, but many people with high self-esteem are not narcissists. A person with high self-esteem might be a conceited, obnoxious fool or a person with a reasonable appreciation of his or her genuine talents and achievements. Some people with high self-esteem simply accept themselves and do not worry about what others think. In contrast, narcissists tend to feel superior to others and to want very badly to have other people confirm this view.

Roots of Self-Esteem

The roots of self-esteem were the target of many years of research by Coopersmith (1967). He concluded that three factors contributed to high self-esteem among children. The first was *unconditional positive regard*, which means that parents (or others) should convey to the child the message that the child was loved no matter what. Many parents give the impression that they love the child only when the child behaves well. For building a strong, healthy self-concept, however, the foundation is apparently the sense that one is loved and valued regardless of how one is behaving.

The second factor identified by Coopersmith was the existence of clear and strong standards. That is, parents can build self-esteem by setting forth firm, definite criteria as to how the child should behave and expecting the child to live up to them. These include rules and limits on what the child is allowed to do. The modern self-esteem movement's message has been misinterpreted by many modern parents to believe that in order to build self-esteem they should approve of the child's behavior regardless of whether it is good. However, Coopersmith found that children ended up with higher self-esteem if they knew definitely what was expected of them and if these expectations were clear and consistent.

The third ingredient was that parents should give the child freedom, latitude, and respect for behavior that lies within the limits. In particular, it is important that the parents show some positive approval when the child does live up to expectations. Some parents make rules and set expectations but only show any feelings when the child falls short. It is better for self-esteem, apparently, if the parent *also* expresses pride and other positive feelings when the child succeeds.

One might think that the first and second features contradict each other: The first says to love the child no matter what, whereas the second says to set firm rules and punish the child when the child performs badly. The resolution of this seeming contradiction is that it is fine, even desirable, to disapprove of specific behaviors, but one should continue to feel and show love for the child. When the child disobeys, or fails to complete chores, or does badly in school, the ideal parental message will be, "I love you, but I hate what you are doing." Parents who can effectively combine steady love with firm rules (and consistent punishments) while they give the child freedom and approval for behavior that satisfies these rules will likely raise the child with the strongest, healthiest self-esteem.

Self-esteem may begin to take shape in childhood, but it can continue to change and develop throughout life. Recent work has begun to show the life course of self-esteem (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002). Self-esteem is relatively high during childhood, and in fact, many children hold very positive, confident, unrealistic views about themselves. During adolescence, self-esteem is often somewhat lower. Adolescents worry about how others view them and about learning how to get others to like them. After adolescence, self-esteem rises slowly into middle adulthood, and its peak is found in late midlife. Perhaps surprisingly, on average self-esteem is highest among people in their early 60s. Then it drops again (sharply) as people reach their 70s

and 80s, probably due to multiple factors, including physical impairments, loss of occupational roles and death of spouse, and gradual decline in one's physical and mental powers.

Is High Self-Esteem a Good Thing?

Interest in self-esteem has extended beyond the research community to society at large. California created a state task force to develop ideas for raising the self-esteem of all residents, in the belief that self-esteem would serve as a “social vaccine” to combat a broad array of personal and social problems, including drug abuse, teen pregnancy, crime, school failure, debt, and mental illness (California Task Force, 1990). Many school systems now devote considerable time and effort to boosting self-esteem, even devoting class time to it rather than to academic topics.

Although beliefs remain strong in the positive value of self-esteem, the research evidence does not justify them. Even while the California Task Force was touting the benefits of self-esteem, a group of researchers they commissioned to study those benefits were publishing a contrary conclusion: “The news most consistently reported, however, is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent” (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989, p. 15). Raising self-esteem does not appear to be an effective way to prevent teen pregnancy, drug abuse, school failure, or the like.

There are two crucial questions. First, are people with high self-esteem better off in important ways than people with low self-esteem? Second, does high self-esteem actually cause people to be better off? Hundreds of research studies have tried to answer those questions. Recently some researchers have begun wading through the hundreds of published reports to come up with broad, general conclusions (see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Emler, 2001).

The answer to the first question appears to be a qualified yes. To the second question, the answer is mostly no.

People with high self-esteem seem to enjoy being able to feel good about themselves. They consistently rate themselves as doing well on many measures. They rate themselves as being smarter, more popular, more physically handsome or beautiful, better able to get along with others, healthier, happier, and better adjusted than other people. Unfortunately, these patterns tell more about how people with high self-esteem flatter themselves than about objective reality. When researchers get objective measures, most of these advantages of high self-esteem disappear. Thus, people with high self-esteem rate themselves as more intelligent than people with low self-esteem, but actual IQ tests show no difference (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). Likewise, they rate themselves as better looking than people with low self-esteem, but when judges rate photographs for facial beauty, people with high self-esteem are not any more attractive than those with low (Diener, Wolsic, & Fujita, 1995; Gabriel et al., 1994).

There are many reasons to expect that high self-esteem will lead people to do better in school, and studies have tried to show that self-esteem leads to

better grades or other signs of intellectual achievement. It doesn't. Doing well in school may lead to a slight rise in self-esteem, and certain factors like having a good family background or having high intelligence can lead to both success in school and high self-esteem, but self-esteem has not been found to have any causal impact on school performance (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977, 1986; Maruyama, Rubin, & Kingsbury, 1981; Pottebaum, Keith, & Ehly, 1986; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989).

Likewise, many psychologists have long advocated the view that "in order to love others, you must first love yourself," but careful studies have failed to show that high self-esteem leads to better interpersonal relationships or greater popularity. Laboratory studies have tested the effects of self-esteem by having people meet and get acquainted and then afterward rate their impressions of each other. People with high self-esteem often think they made a great impression (and better than the impression that people with low self-esteem think they made), but their interaction partners give them about the same rating that they do people with low self-esteem (Brockner & Lloyd, 1986; Campbell & Fehr, 1990). If anything, people sometimes end up liking the person with low self-esteem better than the one with high self-esteem, especially if the low-esteem person has been criticized or offended. People with high self-esteem tend to respond to criticism or other threats to esteem by becoming huffy or obnoxious, and so they make a bad impression on others (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000).

The link to violence may even be the opposite of what the self-esteem movement assumed. A large-scale review of the research literature by Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) found that the evidence massively contradicted the theory that low self-esteem causes violence. In general, violence seems to occur primarily among people who hold very favorable, even inflated views of themselves—and who then encounter someone who questions or challenges their high self-esteem. From gang members who shoot someone who "disses" (i.e., shows disrespect to) them, to adults who beat their spouses and lovers to prove that they should be the boss in the family, to playground bullies who victimize other children to prove their own superiority, to tyrannical governments headed by megalomaniacal dictators, to nations who make war to avenge threats to their honor, to ethnic groups who oppress or attack others based on flimsy notions of racial pride, the same pattern was found over and over: Threatened egotism is the decisive cause of violence and aggression. Not all high self-esteem causes aggression, but when self-esteem consists of inflated, exaggerated, or narcissistic notions of personal superiority, the results can be dangerous. In controlled laboratory studies, people with high self-esteem are found among both the aggressive and nonaggressive individuals—while the most aggressive people were prone to narcissism, which is a rather nasty and obnoxious form of high self-esteem (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

Are there any benefits to high self-esteem? Two main benefits were identified after a long search by Baumeister et al. (2003; see also Emler, 2001). The first is that high self-esteem supports initiative. People with high self-esteem are more willing to approach strangers to strike up a conversation, more likely to speak up in a group (especially when they do not agree with what the group is doing), more able to resist other people's attempts to tell them what to do, and

better able to persist in the face of failure. People with high self-esteem are more likely than others to be bullies—but they are also more likely to be the one who stands up to the bully and protects the victim. Probably the difference in initiative has to do with simple confidence: High self-esteem fosters a confidence that one's own judgment is sound and one's actions will lead to good outcomes. Meanwhile people with low self-esteem may suffer from self-doubts and therefore be reluctant to take independent action.

The second benefit of high self-esteem is that it appears to consist of a stock of good feelings. In a sense, high self-esteem is an emotional resource that people can draw upon. People with high self-esteem are happier than others, better able to recover from trauma or cope with stress, and less vulnerable to mood swings in response to external events. Common sense tells us that it simply feels good to think well of yourself, and in this respect common sense appears to be quite right.

Thus, researchers are slowly moving toward a more balanced view of self-esteem that acknowledges both its advantages and its disadvantages, as well as recognizing that its causal impact on important social and personal problems may be far weaker than previously hoped. Low self-esteem is linked to social anxiety and shyness, which can impair people's chances of making friends and getting along with others (Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982)—but people with inflated (high) self-esteem tend to irritate others and turn them off, and in the long run these self-centered, conceited individuals show poor social skills and psychological maladjustment (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995). Low self-esteem is associated with some patterns of self-defeating behavior, such as giving up too easily—but high self-esteem is associated with other patterns, such as overconfidence (Heatherton & Ambady, 1993). When things are going well, people with high self-esteem manage themselves better than those with low, such as by making appropriate commitments and selecting optimal performance goals—but in response to an ego threat, people with high self-esteem often become irrational and set unrealistic, macho goals for themselves, leading to costly failures (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).

Much of the downside of high self-esteem seems to involve overestimating oneself, as in being conceited or narcissistic. The present state of the evidence does not indicate that there is anything wrong with having an accurate appreciation of one's good points and strengths, particularly if this is tempered with some interpersonal humility and with an accurate recognition of one's faults and weaknesses. Some experts conclude from this that there are right and wrong (or “true” and “false”) kinds of high self-esteem. To make such a distinction, however, is already to shift the focus away from self-esteem *per se* (in the sense of thinking well of oneself) and on to the issue of how good a person one can manage to be.

To understand this, suppose there were an effective way to sort “true” from “false” versions of high self-esteem. For example, a team of researchers might identify all the students who think they are smart and then give them an IQ test to see which ones are really smart. The ones who are smart and know it have “true” high self-esteem, and the ones who overestimate their intelligence

have “false” high self-esteem. Suppose, then, that the researchers found that “true” high self-esteem was associated with success in school, whereas “false” high self-esteem tended to backfire (a likely outcome). Would this show that some forms of self-esteem are better than others? On the contrary, it seems to show that self-esteem is irrelevant. Remember, the students with “true” self-esteem are by definition smarter than those with false high self-esteem, and so it is no surprise that they do better in school. Both groups think they’re equally smart—which suggests that the mere fact of thinking oneself smart is irrelevant. What matters is the underlying reality of actually being smart.

In other words, it is perhaps the underlying reality rather than the perception that matters most. Self-esteem is merely the perception, not the reality. When perception does matter, the best state may well be close to accurate—neither overestimating nor underestimating oneself. Those who underestimate their intelligence may avoid challenges or give up too easily. Those who overestimate their intelligence may get in over their heads or may not bother to work hard enough. Either distortion can interfere with learning.

Achieving a balanced, accurate appraisal of oneself is unfortunately quite difficult. In the meantime, the world might be a better place if more people would forget about trying to boost their self-esteem and concentrate instead on trying to be a better person. Focusing on self-esteem, after all, is merely a matter of trying to *think* that you’re a better person.

Why Care About Self-Esteem?

People everywhere care about self-esteem. Anything that gives a boost in self-esteem is almost universally welcome, and by the same token hardly anyone enjoys events that constitute a blow or loss to their self-esteem. Yet as we have seen, self-esteem does not lead to many palpable, direct material benefits. Self-esteem does not make people richer, smarter, better liked, or more successful. In a few small ways, people with high self-esteem do better than others; in a few other ways they do worse—and the overall effect is quite small. Why are people so concerned with something that seems to mean so little?

The emotional implications of self-esteem contain a partial answer, but only a partial one. People do feel better when their self-esteem is high or rising, and they feel bad when self-esteem is low or dropping, and so it is only natural that they should become concerned about self-esteem. Yet this answer is hardly satisfactory because it raises the next question of why emotions should be so strongly tied to something that has little practical value. We have emotions for good reasons: They help us adapt to the world and pass on our genes to the next generation. Fear makes us avoid danger. Love makes us stay with desirable partners, especially when we may reproduce. Anger helps us assert our rights and tackle obstacles. But why should self-esteem be linked to emotions?

At present, several possible answers have been suggested, but none is fully satisfactory. One answer is that people are driven by fear of death, and self-esteem helps comfort them in the face of human mortality (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon; 1986; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). Critics of this view point out that self-esteem does not seem to correlate with death anxiety and that high self-esteem would seemingly make

death seem worse, not better (because the value of one's own life is higher). In support of this view, however, researchers have shown that high self-esteem seems to hold back anxiety in response to cues designed to evoke thoughts of death and pain (Greenberg, Solomon, et al., 1992).

Another view is that self-esteem is sought because it is a valuable aid in coping with stress, trauma, and misfortunes (Steele, 1988). Self-esteem may be of little value under normal circumstances, but in response to adversity people need self-esteem to keep their spirits up and to keep striving for positive outcomes. Self-esteem is thus a valuable resource. This theory does correspond well with the actual, limited benefits of self-esteem, especially the emotional benefits and the improved capacity to persist in the face of failure, but it is not clear that people want self-esteem merely in order to have a resource in case they encounter misfortune. Even when times are good, people seem to want self-esteem. Moreover, this theory still does not explain why it is that people should find that self-esteem helps them cope with failure or misfortune.

A third view is that self-esteem is a *sociometer*, that is, an internal measure of how well one is connected to other human beings (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). There is a large amount of evidence that forming good social relations and getting along with others is conducive to health, happiness, and well-being, as well as the evolutionary goal of survival and reproduction, and it is fair to say that human beings are partly driven by a fundamental and powerful *need to belong* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Self-esteem may be fairly unimportant in terms of its direct consequences, but it could be very important as an inner meter that keeps track of this all-important project of forming and maintaining social bonds. (By analogy, the gas gauge in the car has no direct importance for helping the car run, but it is very important as a measure of something crucial, namely how much fuel the car has.) To support this theory, Leary and his colleagues (1995) showed that self-esteem rises based on events that are linked to social inclusion—such as being accepted by others, proving one's competence, being found attractive, and so forth. Meanwhile, events that can lead to social rejection also tend to lower self-esteem. Moreover, we have already seen that self-esteem is strongly (inversely) correlated with social anxiety, which means that low self-esteem is often linked to a fear of social rejection.

The sociometer theory is a novel solution to the question of why self-esteem matters. It leaves several issues unresolved, however. Can people have high self-esteem even if they do not have strong social connections and relationships? And how can some people have low self-esteem even when they seem to be well connected to family and friends? Still, it is probably no mere coincidence that the main criteria on which self-esteem is based—being likable, attractive, and competent—are the same criteria that groups use to include versus exclude individuals.

Social Motives

What do people with low self-esteem want? This question has led various theorists to pose a wide assortment of answers. Some have asserted that people with low self-esteem desire to fail or suffer. Some have proposed that they want to confirm their bad opinions of themselves. Some have proposed that they

want to gain esteem at all costs. Others have proposed that their motivations are largely the same as those of people with high self-esteem.

After many years of research, some answers have finally emerged. The notion that people with low self-esteem desire to fail or suffer in order to prove how bad they are has not been confirmed. People with low self-esteem want to succeed as much as people with high self-esteem; they are simply less confident that they will be able to do so (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).

The broadest motivational pattern associated with low self-esteem seems to be one of self-protection (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). That is, people with low self-esteem worry about failure, rejection, humiliation, and other unpleasant outcomes, and they seem to go through life watching out for such dangers and trying to minimize them. People with high self-esteem, in contrast, seem to spend much less time worrying about failure or protecting themselves from it. They do hate to fail, but in general they do not expect it to happen, and so self-protection is not an overriding concern.

To put this in broader perspective, it is helpful to realize that nearly everyone wants to do well—to succeed at work, to make friends, to have good intimate relationships, and so forth. As part of that, nearly everyone wants to be well regarded by others and to be able to respect himself or herself too. This motive to think well of oneself can be subdivided into two motives: *self-enhancement*, which is the desire to gain esteem, and *self-protection*, which is the desire to avoid losing esteem. Often the self-enhancement motive and the self-protection motive operate together, in tandem, as when someone tries to make the best possible score on an examination.

Other times, however, the two motives are opposed. For example, calling someone up to ask for a date pits the two motives against each other. If the other person accepts the invitation, you may feel a gain in esteem; but if the other person rejects you, you may lose esteem. Asking someone out is therefore risky from an esteem point of view. If the self-enhancement motive predominates and you are mainly concerned with the opportunity to gain esteem, then you may well take the chance. But if the self-protection motive predominates, you would not make the call, to prevent the possibility of being rejected. Similar arguments apply in many other situations, such as accepting a challenge or undertaking a public performance when there are significant opportunities for both gaining and losing esteem.

In general, people with high self-esteem are oriented toward self-enhancement. They are looking for ways to gain esteem and to do even better than they have done so far. They do not expect to fail or be rejected and so they do not worry about it much. In contrast, people with low self-esteem give priority to self-protection. They might be happy to gain esteem, but gaining esteem does not dominate their outlook on life. Instead, they look for ways to avoid or minimize possible failures, rejections, and setbacks.

Plasticity

People with low self-esteem tend to be more malleable and gullible than people with high self-esteem (Brockner 1984). This is a common pattern across many spheres of behavior. People with low self-esteem are more likely to change their

attitudes when someone tries to persuade them (e.g., Janis, 1954). They may yield or conform to group influence more than others, and they are more willing to take advice. Their behavior changes more from one situation to another.

The malleability may well be connected with the broad patterns we have already identified. First, because people with low self-esteem lack firm, consistent self-concepts, it is harder for them than for other people to resist situational influences and follow their own inner promptings. Second, because they are oriented toward self-protection, they may find it safer to go along with the group and do what they are told rather than strike out on their own. Third, because high self-esteem is linked to greater initiative, people who have it may be more willing to resist someone else's influence or pressure. It may take confidence to reject someone's advice and do what you think best, because if you end up being proven wrong, the other person can say "I told you so." With high self-esteem, a person will tend to think that he or she will not be proven wrong, so the person does not worry about that possibility.

Emotion and Coping

High self-esteem does not contribute to a great many advantages or successes in life, but it does undoubtedly make one feel better. As a result, some of the most important differences between high and low self-esteem involve emotion.

One difference is simply in the overall positivity of emotion. People with low self-esteem are more likely to suffer unpleasant emotional states. As we have already seen, low self-esteem correlates strongly with anxiety and depression, which are two of the most common and serious patterns of emotional distress. In a recent study in which people kept diaries of their emotions, people with low self-esteem showed more negative emotions of all sorts (Campbell, Chew, & Scratchley, 1991). They had more bad moods and fewer good moods.

Beyond the simple issue of good versus bad emotions, however, there is another emotional difference. People with low self-esteem have higher emotional *lability* than people with high self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1991; Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). That is, their emotions fluctuate more widely from one day to the next or one hour to the next. High self-esteem apparently helps keep one on an even keel, whereas low self-esteem can have one riding an emotional roller coaster.

Probably the emotional lability of low self-esteem is linked to the plasticity of low self-esteem. After all, it is hard not to respond to the immediate event or situation if you are having a strong emotional reaction to it. The self-concept confusion may also be connected. If your ideas about yourself are not firmly fixed, then each event can have a bigger impact on the way you think and feel about yourself, which in turn will set off stronger emotional reactions.

Self-esteem can thus be understood as an emotional resource, and this may explain the difference in resiliency in the face of stress, trauma, and setbacks. People with high self-esteem seem to have a stock of positive feelings, possibly associated with all the positive beliefs they hold about themselves, and so when something goes wrong they can draw on these beliefs and feelings to help themselves shrug off the misfortune, feel better, and maybe try again (Steele, 1988).

In contrast, people with low self-esteem have a much smaller stock of positive beliefs and feelings, and so they may feel overwhelmed or devastated when something goes wrong.

Prejudice

On the surface, it seems that people with low self-esteem are more prejudiced than people with high self-esteem. Several studies have shown, for example, that people with low self-esteem give more negative ratings to minority group members and other stereotyped groups. But one must recall that low self-esteem means giving *oneself* a negative rating. To examine prejudice, one must ask: Do people with low self-esteem rate others worse than themselves?

The answer appears to be no. People with low self-esteem rate themselves, members of their own group, and members of other groups all about the same (Crocker & Schwartz, 1985). All of these ratings tend to be somewhat negative relative to the ratings given by people with high self-esteem. But the negativity does not reflect any selective prejudice, for it applies to everyone. People with low self-esteem are apparently more critical of everyone—including minority groups and themselves. When one looks at the difference between how one rates oneself and how one rates members of outgroups, it is people with high self-esteem who emerge as more prejudiced (Crocker & Schwartz, 1985; Crocker et al., 1987). A meta-analysis (i.e., a statistical technique that combines the results of many different studies, thereby furnishing especially conclusive findings) recently confirmed that prejudice and discrimination are higher among people who have high self-esteem. They rate the groups to which they belong more favorably than outgroups, and they tend to give preferential treatment to members of their own groups. People with low self-esteem tend to treat ingroups and outgroups about the same (Aberson et al., 2000).

Maintaining Self-Esteem

How do people keep their self-esteem up? And why do some people seem unable to form a favorable view of themselves? In principle, one way to achieve high self-esteem would be to succeed at everything. As long as work and social life go well, there is not much danger to one's self-esteem. Unfortunately, life does not usually cooperate, and nearly everyone experiences periodic setbacks, failures, rejections, interpersonal conflicts, and other events that strike painful blows to one's sense of self-worth.

Most studies have not found that people with high self-esteem are really more talented, intelligent, likable, attractive, or otherwise superior. Indeed, the more common finding among laboratory researchers is that the actual performance of people with high self-esteem is, on average, no different from that of people with low self-esteem. People with high self-esteem do *believe* they are better: They rate their performance better, they consider themselves more beautiful or handsome, and so forth, compared with people who have low self-esteem. But the difference seems to be mainly one of perception. As we have already noted, studies that ask unbiased judges to rate people's attractiveness conclude that people with high and low self-esteem are about equally attrac-

tive—but studies that ask people to rate their own physical appearance find that people with high, compared to low, self-esteem consistently rate themselves as being more attractive (e.g., Harter, 1993).

Success in life depends on more than ability, however. Two people may have precisely the same amount of talent, but one may succeed better than the other by virtue of choosing more appropriate undertakings. (For example, two equally smart and equally knowledgeable people may get different grades depending on which courses they take.) Remember, people with high self-esteem seem to have superior knowledge about themselves (Campbell, 1990), and this knowledge can prove very useful in selecting the optimal courses, jobs, challenges, projects, and dating partners. Experiments have indeed shown that people with high self-esteem are better at choosing the right level of challenge for themselves to ensure maximum success (as long as they are not distracted by an ego threat; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993). This kind of advantage may be what helps people with high self-esteem to perform a little better in school (and elsewhere) without actually being any smarter (Felson, 1993; Hattie & Hansford, 1982).

Thus, it is plausible that some people can sustain higher self-esteem than others by achieving more successes, even without any superior gifts. Undoubtedly, however, the other route to maintaining high self-esteem involves various styles of thinking that boost one's self-appraisal. Many of these techniques involve self-deception, to the extent that people fool themselves in systematic ways to maintain comfortable, flattering illusions about how great they are. A famous article by Anthony Greenwald (1980) compared the self to a totalitarian regime in the way it rewrites history to make itself look good. Researchers have identified several esteem-boosting and self-deception techniques, described in the following paragraphs (from Baumeister, 1998).

First, people systematically take credit for success but deny blame for failure. This *self-serving bias* has been widely documented in many contexts and studies (Zuckerman, 1979). When something important happens, people are quick to judge whether they are responsible, and they make those judgments in a one-sided fashion. People with high self-esteem are especially prone to show this pattern of grabbing the credit but denying the blame (e.g., Fitch, 1970).

Second, people happily and uncritically accept information that makes them look good, but when someone criticizes them they often stop to find faults or flaws in the critic's reasons. For example, when people take a test and are then asked whether the test was valid, their answers depend heavily on how well they are told they performed (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985; Wyer & Frey, 1983; see also Kunda, 1990). As many instructors know, students who do well think the test was fair and objective, whereas those who do badly are more likely to believe that the test was biased or inappropriate. A variation on this is that people dismiss criticism as motivated by prejudice or personal animosity, and so their self-esteem is unaffected even when someone tells them that they have done badly or have undesirable traits (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991).

Third, people shift the amount of attention they pay when they receive feedback about their abilities or performances (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992). When people receive positive, flattering feedback, they often linger over it,

study it carefully, and let its full implications sink in. In contrast, when they hear criticism of unfavorable remarks, they tend to skip over them or pay much less attention.

Fourth, people show biased memory. They recall their successes and good points better than their failures and bad points (Crary, 1966; Kuiper & Derry, 1982; Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1976).

Fifth, they have ways of sorting through their memory to prove to themselves that they fit whatever pattern is desirable. Thus, when people are led to believe that being an introvert leads to success, they recall more of their own actions as introverted, and they are quicker to come up with introverted memories, than when they are told that extraversion is associated with success (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990).

Sixth, they compare themselves selectively against targets that make them feel good. In particular, they engage in downward comparison, which means that they identify people who are doing worse than themselves to use as a baseline for evaluating themselves (Wills, 1981). People like to have some contact with people who are less intelligent, less attractive, or fatter than they are because seeing such individuals makes them feel good about themselves.

Seventh, people distort their perceptions of others so as to furnish a rosy view of their own traits and opinions. With opinions and beliefs, people exhibit a *false consensus effect*, which means that they overestimate the proportion of people who would agree with them—and which encourages them to think they must be right: “I must be correct, because everybody agrees with me.” In contrast, with abilities, people show a *false uniqueness effect*, which means that they underestimate the proportion of others who are similar. This helps people feel that their abilities are special because they think hardly anyone could perform as well as they do. The combination of false uniqueness and false consensus effects has been especially linked to high self-esteem, and indeed it seems well designed to give people a comfortable sense of personal superiority (Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984; Suls & Wan, 1987).

These patterns are fairly common and widespread. This is not to say that everyone always uses them, but most people do show some of them. More to the point, people with high self-esteem use them more than others. We noted earlier that self-esteem seems to be somewhat inflated across the U.S. population today, and these techniques indicate how people give their self-esteem an extra boost, perhaps beyond what is warranted. These are the means, in other words, by which the average person convinces himself (or herself) that he is above average.

IDENTITY

We turn now to consider identity. Although the terms *identity* and *self-concept* have some things in common, they are different. A self-concept exists only in one person’s mind, whereas identity is essentially social. That is, identity rests on a definition of the self that is shared by the person, other people, and society at large.

Structure and Functions of Identity

Identity, as we said earlier, is a definition of the self. It is actually a composite definition made up of several partial definitions. The components of identity are these partial definitions. Any answer to the question “Who are you?” is an identity component, for to answer that question is to give a partial definition of oneself. Examples of identity components include being an employee of a certain company, a lawyer, a student, someone’s nephew, a member of the swim team, and so on.

If identity is a definition, then there have to be certain criteria used for defining it. There are two major *defining criteria* of identity—namely, continuity and differentiation. *Continuity* means sameness over time. Part of having an identity is being the same person today as yesterday, last week, and last year. People do change in various ways, but they retain some continuity of identity, as signified by having the same name and other things. *Differentiation* refers to the things that distinguish someone from other people. Being identified with a certain family or organization, for example, marks one off as distinct from non-members.

Anything that furnishes continuity and differentiation thus helps to define identity. A strong sense of identity arises from having many sources of continuity and differentiation. A stable home, strong family ties, a secure job, an established reputation, and such things make identity secure, and someone with all those things is not likely to have identity problems. One reason for the increased concern over identity in modern life is that many things that once provided continuity and differentiation no longer do so (Baumeister, 1986). For example, in previous centuries many people would live their entire lives in the same locale, even having the same neighbors and friends, but now people are much more mobile, so home and friendship networks are no longer the sources of stability that they once were.

The makeup of each individual identity is different, but there are certain broad common features. Identity seems to include at least three major types of things. First, it includes one’s interpersonal self: how others know you, your interpersonal style, your reputation, and so forth. Second, it includes some concept of potentiality, that is, of what you may become. Third, it includes some general values, principles, and priorities.

Identity Crises

The notion of an “identity crisis” appears to be a modern phenomenon. People in the Middle Ages, for example, do not seem to have had identity crises or anything resembling them. Likewise, there is not much evidence of identity crises in cultures very different from our own. Probably identity crises are fostered by some of the unique features of modern Western cultures (see Baumeister, 1986, 1987).

The term *identity crisis* was coined by Erik Erikson in the 1940s. It was quickly adopted and used by many people, which suggests that it named an experience that was already common and widespread. Erikson thought that

nearly everyone has an identity crisis during adolescence, although in many cases this could be an unconscious crisis so the person would be unaware of it. Erikson believed that the identity crisis resulted from the need to separate oneself emotionally from one's parents (cf. Blos, 1962) and to make basic decisions about one's values, goals, and ambitions in life.

In the 1960s, psychologists started to do research on identity crises. They soon abandoned Erikson's original theory that everyone goes through an identity crisis. Instead, they began to think that some people go through life without ever having such a crisis, although many others have important crises. Researchers became interested in comparing people who had identity crises against people who did not have them.

James Marcia (1966, 1967) developed a typology of people based on identity crises. Four types of people were distinguished, based on two dimensions: (1) Has the person ever had an active period of identity crisis? (2) Does the person have a stable identity based on firm commitments? Here are the four types:

Identity Achieved: Crisis plus Commitment People who have had an identity crisis and resolved it are classified as identity-achieved. They are typically regarded as being mature, capable individuals, whose identity is solidly based on the outcome of a personal struggle.

Moratorium: Crisis but no Commitment When there is evidence of an identity crisis but firm commitments are lacking, the individual is classified as having "moratorium" status. In most cases, this means that the identity crisis is currently in progress. These people are thus currently, actively struggling to form an identity. They are often thoughtful individuals, open to experimenting with new ideas and lifestyles. They sometimes seem to change their personalities and styles from day to day. Part of this process of change results from their efforts to try out different ways of being in order to see how these feel and what reactions they get. The term *moratorium* comes from Erikson's term *psychosocial moratorium*, which he used to refer to the modern status of adolescence in which the individual is psychologically grown up in many respects but is not well integrated into society. Rather, the person is left for several years (as in college) with minimal social obligations and commitments so as to be free to try out different ways of forming an identity.

Foreclosure: Commitment Without Crisis When the person has a stable, committed identity but there is no sign of having had a period of crisis, he or she is classified as foreclosure status. In most cases, these are people who have remained close to how their parents brought them up, perhaps with minor modifications (usually ones that the parents would approve). Children are almost all classified as having "foreclosed identities" until an identity crisis starts, and if no crisis ever happens the person simply remains in the foreclosed status.

Foreclosure status is a complex one. On the surface, these people tend to seem unusually mature, often having adult values, plans, and opinions while still in their teens. But this is partly an illusion, for these signs of maturity are simply accepted from the parents rather than acquired personally. Upon closer

inspection, many people with foreclosed identities turn out to be rigid and inflexible, defensive, even insecure. They are often the exact opposite of the “moratorium” status individuals who are open to trying out new things; foreclosures tend to be uninterested in new ideas or experimental lifestyles. The rigidity of the foreclosed individual may cause problems when the person comes under stress or tries to form intimate relationships.

Other work soon showed, however, that foreclosure status is a reasonably healthy one for females (e.g., Damon, 1983; Waterman, 1982). Apparently, females can grow up to be normal and capable without an identity crisis. In our culture, maturity may require the male to reject parental teachings and find his or her own identity, but a female may do just fine to remain close to the values and goals her parents taught her. Given the rapid recent changes in the feminine sex role and woman’s places in society, these results are likely to change from one generation to the next. For the present, though, it is important to remember that most of the disadvantages of the foreclosure status have mainly been documented among males.

Identity Diffusion: Neither Crisis nor Commitment The last category refers to people who have neither had an identity crisis nor remained foreclosed in the commitments they were brought up with. These “identity diffuse” people lack a stable, committed identity, but they do not seem to mind this, and they are not engaged in any struggle to form one. Identity diffusion can border on psychopathology. This may be because the mentally ill do not tend to have and resolve identity crises and are most comfortable with a vague, uncommitted position in society. At best, individuals with diffuse identities tend to be “perpetual teenagers,” people who seem to thrive on the uncommitted lifestyle of adolescence and who may seek to prolong it long after others have formed adult identities. They may shun long-term relationships that might lead to marriage, and they postpone career choices and other decisions that solidify the adult identity.

Perhaps surprising, most of the research suggests that identity crises are good for you, even though they may be unpleasant. Research shows that people who experience identity crises—especially people who successfully resolve them and reach identity-achieved status—are superior to others on many things, including academic performance at college, motivation and ambition, ability to adapt and perform under stress, and ability to form mature, intimate relationships (Bernard, 1981; Bourne, 1978). Many of the studies providing this evidence used males only, so it is less clear whether identity crises are good for females. There is some suggestion that women with foreclosed identities are just as capable and mature as those with achieved identities, although identity-diffuse females are worse off (e.g., Marcia & Scheidel, 1983). There is almost nothing to suggest that identity crises have negative effects on males or females. The best conclusion at present, then, is that identity crises are beneficial for males and either beneficial or neutral for females.

What is an identity crisis like, and how does it happen? When researchers attempted to answer this question, they came to the conclusion that all identity crises are not the same. There appear to be at least two major types of identity

crises, which follow quite different patterns and processes. These two types of identity crisis may be called *identity deficit* and *identity conflict* (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985; Baumeister, 1986). Let's take a look at these two types of identity crisis.

Identity deficit is just what it sounds like, that is, the person does not have “enough” identity to deal with life and make major decisions. This type of identity crisis may be caused by reaching a point in life where major decisions need to be made, but the person does not have a satisfactory inner basis for making them. Adolescence is a prime example, for in our culture adolescents need to make the choices that will shape their adult identities—especially choosing a career and a spouse—but such decisions are enormously difficult because one lacks information and there are many possible options. As a result, the person often feels a need to look inside himself or herself to find the basis for making these decisions. Sometimes a person will “look inside” and immediately feel a strong preference for one course of action, but in many other cases there is nothing inside to make the choice. That is called an identity deficit.

Identity deficits arise when people reject some beliefs or values or ambitions that they have been taught or have long held. Adolescents, for example, are often in the process of rejecting many things their parents taught them. Evidence suggests that adolescent identity crises may be more common in males than females, probably because males tend to make more drastic breaks with their parents than females do (e.g., Blos, 1962). There is also evidence that adolescents are more likely to have an identity crisis if they attend college than if they go right to work out of high school (Morash, 1980), because college presents individuals with many new ideas and opinions that encourage them to question parental teachings.

The individual who rejects many of his or her beliefs, values, and goals thus creates an inner vacuum that constitutes the identity deficit. This inner vacuum often causes an active search for new views to replace the discarded ones. People having identity deficit crises are often very interesting people, for they are busily exploring and trying out many new ideas and new ways of relating to others. They are also more vulnerable to influence than other people are, probably because the inner vacuum makes them receptive to new views. Recruiters for religious cults, for example, may often have their best success with people in the midst of identity deficit crises.

The emotional side of an identity deficit may seem like a roller-coaster ride from despair to euphoria and back again, in rapid succession. People having such crises may feel depressed and bewildered at times, and the lack of certainty about where their lives are going may seem alternately like an exhilarating breadth of opportunity and freedom, and a dispiriting, confusing meaninglessness.

Not everyone has an identity crisis at adolescence, of course, and not everyone who does have one manages to resolve it. But for those who do, the resolution of an identity deficit seems to be a two-step process. First, the person resolves the fundamental issues of value and meaning. That is, he or she decides on basic, abstract principles, such as what is important in life. The second step is to translate these abstract values and convictions into concrete, realistic ambitions. For example, someone may first struggle to reach the decision that

what he wants out of life is to help others and to earn a comfortable salary; in the second stage, these general values are elaborated into a specific desire, such as becoming a physician or psychotherapist. Once this is done, the identity crisis is ended, and the person begins to work toward fulfilling these goals.

Identity crises are most common at adolescence, but there may be a second set of them at midlife (Levinson, 1978). Some evidence indicates that many men grow dissatisfied with their lives around the age of 40. They often feel that things have not turned out the way they had envisioned them. They come to realize that the goals that have guided them ever since adolescence are either not going to be reached—or, if they do reach them, this will not bring satisfaction and fulfillment. As a result, many men begin to discard, downplay, or reject these goals, and an identity deficit is the result. Males with midlife crises show many of the same signs and symptoms of adolescent identity crises. They may detach themselves from their family, experiment with new opinions and lifestyles, rethink their career ambitions or even change careers, and so forth. Most often, they change their priorities among career, family, religion, and other involvements, such as by deciding to work less hard and spend more time with their wives and children. Although this initial research has used only male subjects, there may well be comparable patterns for women.

If identity deficit means having too little identity to make vital life decisions, identity *conflict* is the opposite problem. An identity conflict is an inconsistency or incompatibility between two parts of the self. In most cases, these parts of the self were not initially in conflict, but circumstances brought them into conflict (such as by forcing a decision that affects both parts). Identity conflict means that the person has several identity components that disagree about the best decision to make. For example, a working mother who is offered a promotion that would entail increased responsibility and travel may be torn between her work identity (which tells her to accept the promotion) and her identity as a mother (which may tell her not to take time away from her family). This form of identity crisis also occurs among immigrants, who want to remain loyal to their old culture while embracing the new one. It can also occur in marriages between people who come from strong but different religious backgrounds, especially if there is pressure to convert. Loyalty to spouse may then conflict with maintaining one's most deeply held beliefs. It may well also arise among students who are the first in their family to attend college: They may be proud and highly motivated to get an education beyond what their parents and relatives received, yet they may also find that the education moves them away from their heritage and causes them to question the values that linked them to their families.

We saw earlier that identity deficits can be an emotional roller coaster, with both exhilarating and depressing phases. Identity conflicts do not appear to have these fluctuations, for there is little that is positive or pleasant about identity conflict. People having such crises tend to suffer, to feel that they are being “traitors” who are “betraying” some important part of themselves and others as well. They do not tend to show the openness to new ideas or the exploration and experimentation typical of identity deficits. Also, unlike the effect of identity deficits, there is nothing to suggest that identity conflicts are good for you.

Resolving an identity conflict is a difficult matter. Sometimes people simply have to renounce some important part of themselves. In other cases, there are various compromise solutions. The person may choose one of the conflicting parts of identity but find some way of retaining something of the “loser” of this inner struggle. Some people compartmentalize—that is, try to keep two rigidly separate spheres of their lives, to prevent the two parts of their identity from coming into open conflict.

Identity crises, whether deficit or conflict, are difficult periods in life. They involve changing the self to adapt to new circumstances. Although they may be depressing and even painful, most people apparently come through them quite well in the end. In many cases, the person is better off for having had the crisis.

SUMMARY

The self is a large, complex structure. Self-concept refers to how the person thinks of himself or herself, that is, the person’s own beliefs and ideas about this self. Self-esteem refers to the evaluative dimension of the self-concept—that is, how good a person one is. Identity refers to definitions of the self that are created jointly by the individual, relatives and acquaintances, and society.

Children’s self-concepts begin with awareness of their bodies and with knowing that they are male or female children belonging to a particular family. Around age 2, self-concept begins to be heavily based on knowledge of what the child can and cannot do. The emphasis on competency and control grows steadily through the later phase of childhood and increasingly involves comparing one’s own abilities against those of other children. Older children also gradually begin to develop a notion of the self as something inner, including thoughts and feelings.

The quest for self-knowledge is dominated by three main motives: the desire to learn accurate information about oneself, the desire to confirm what one already knows about oneself, and the desire to hear favorable, flattering things about oneself. The first (self-assessment) of these motive is seemingly the most adaptive, because it should yield the most useful information. Nonetheless, the last (self-enhancement) motive seems to be the most powerful.

Self-knowledge does not seem to be all integrated into a single, unified structure. Rather, people have a great deal of knowledge and information about the self that is only loosely interrelated. At various times, different aspects of self-knowledge take center stage in awareness, often in response to the immediate situation or context, so people may regard themselves differently in different situations. Rather than speaking of a single self-concept, it seems more appropriate to speak of a collection of self-schemas. These include ideas about what sort of person one is, as well as ideas about how one might possibly become or would want to avoid being.

Once people form ideas about themselves, these are often strongly resistant to change. Self-concept change can occur, however, especially when people internalize their own actions or new ways of looking at themselves. The social network of interpersonal interactions seems to play a strong role in facilitating versus preventing change in the self-concept.

Self-esteem is a very important and influential aspect of the self-concept. Most people think well of themselves and desire to increase their esteem (self-enhancement) and desire to avoid loss of esteem (self-protection). In general, people with high self-esteem are oriented toward self-enhancement, whereas those with low self-esteem lean toward self-protection. Low self-esteem is associated with greater vulnerability or susceptibility to influence, confusion in self-knowledge, unpleasant and fluctuating emotional states, greater difficulty in bouncing back after adversity, and less prejudice toward members of other groups. High self-esteem appears to have the benefits of bringing a stock of good feelings that can be a valuable resource (such as in times of stress) and supporting greater initiative by the person.

Self-esteem does not seem to be as valuable or beneficial as is widely supposed, and indeed high self-esteem (such as in a conceited person) can have significant drawbacks and dangers. Nonetheless, people have a strong desire to maintain self-esteem and think well of themselves. There are competing theories about why people are so concerned with self-esteem, including the view that it helps them cope with misfortune, that it shields them from fear of death, or that it keeps track of their social standing with regard to getting along with other people. People pursue and protect their self-esteem with a broad variety of strategies, many of which involve stretching or distorting the truth so as to make themselves look and feel better.

Three main patterns of parenting seem to be associated with strong, high self-esteem in children. These include showing unconditional love for the child, setting firm rules and expectations, and giving the child approval and freedom when the child's behavior stays within the prescribed limits.

Identity consists of a set of partial definitions of the self, each of which is one answer to the question "Who are you?" Identity is defined according to continuity across time and differentiation from others. It has three functional aspects: an interpersonal aspect (social roles and reputation), a potentiality aspect, and a values aspect.

Not everyone has identity crises, but many people do. The two main types of crisis include identity deficit, in which an inner vacuum is created when the person rejects some important parts of the self, and identity conflict, in which two or more parts of the self disagree about the best course of action. Identity deficits occur most commonly at adolescence and midlife; they appear to have beneficial effects on males, and perhaps for females as well. Identity conflicts can occur at any point in life. They are difficult to resolve and seem to have little positive value for the individual.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When people tell you about themselves, how much can you believe them? What factors might prevent them from giving accurate answers?
2. Should American schools try to increase self-esteem among pupils?
3. Is self-esteem as important in other cultures as it is in modern North America?
4. Do you think an identity crisis is a beneficial experience for most people? What people might benefit most and least from it?

5. Do you think people are born with a certain level of self-esteem, or is self-esteem entirely the result of experiences?
6. Why do you think people are so interested in learning about themselves—yet so willing to hear biased or distorted or unreliable information (such as in horoscopes)?

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Baumeister, R. F. (1998). The self. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., pp. 680–740). New York: McGraw-Hill. This is a thorough coverage of what personality and social psychologists have learned about the self.

Emler, N. (2001). *Self-esteem: The costs and consequences of low self-worth*. York, England: York Publishing Services. A recent and easy-to-read summary of research on self-esteem, presenting a balanced view of what high self-esteem does and does not contribute to desirable outcomes.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton. This is one of the classic works on identity, in which Erikson explains his seminal theory of identity based on clinical observations.

Kagan, J. (1981) *The second year: The emergence of self-awareness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. An eminent child psychologist describes in a vivid and entertaining manner how children learn to know themselves.

Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1988). Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin*, 103, 193–210. One of the most heavily cited articles on the self of all time, this review of multiple studies shows how self-concepts are systematically distorted—and argues that such distortions are not only normal but even healthy and desirable.

SUGGESTED WEB SITES

<http://www.psych.neu.edu/ISSI/>

This is the official site of the International Society for Self and Identity, which as the title indicates is an international organization of experts and researchers on the topic. The site reports the doings of the organization and useful new information in the study of self and identity.

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pp/selfandidentity.html>

This web site is devoted to the scientific journal *Self and Identity*, which publishes cutting-edge new research on those topics. Log on to learn the latest findings by leaders in the field.

INFOTRAC COLLEGE EDITION SEARCH TOPICS

Self-concept
Self-knowledge

Self-esteem
Identity

Identity crisis

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