

Self and Identity: Definition and Overview

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The Nature of the Self

The *self* is at once both utterly familiar and infinitely elusive. Everyone reading these words has a self or, perhaps more correctly, is a self; yet it is difficult to say what this means or amounts to, because, unlike other objects of scientific scrutiny, the self resists being pinned down or pointed out. In frustration, some philosophers have contended that the “inner I” is an illusion (Nørretranders, 1998), the product of outdated dualistic thinking (Dennett, 1992) or of misinterpreted personal pronouns (Kenny, 1989). Even granting that the self does exist (Searle, 2001; Strawson, 1997), two problems persist for the would-be empirical analyst: first, to define the self convincingly and conclusively in view of the hodgepodge of historical meanings it has assumed; and second, to identify worthwhile ways of studying the self in view of the well-established fallibility of verbal reports based upon introspection (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

To meet such challenges, scientifically-minded psychologists typically proceed pragmatically. They accept that *reflexive consciousness*, the hallmark of human selfhood, is forever likely to elude full elucidation (McGinn, 1999), but nonetheless note that, whatever its nature, it is still a key hub around which human

psychology revolves. They maintain, moreover, that, even though the self, regarded as a transcendental locus, may be empirically intractable, the subordinate phenomena associated with it, studied in a piecemeal way, need not be (James, 1890). Praxis proves, for example, that self-esteem can be adequately conceptualized, reliably measured, and fruitfully investigated without having to specify exactly *what* is being esteemed (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). For scientific purposes, then, the self can be defined as the *totality of psychological processes intimately intertwined with reflexive consciousness*. It is not so much an object of scrutiny as an area of inquiry.

Psychologists who study the self are consequently able to deploy a range of methodologies (Reis & Judd, 2000). Common experimental techniques include short-term manipulations of self-related variables, via the staging of social situations or the presentation of bogus feedback (Aronson, Wilson, & Brewer, 1998). Common measurement techniques include not only psychometrically valid self-report inventories, but also objective indices borrowed from other disciplines, such as implicit measures from cognitive psychology (Wittenbrink & Schwarz, 2007) and brain-imaging techniques from neuroscience (Heatherton, Krendl, Macrae, & Kelley, 2007).

The Anatomy of the Self

We conceptually dissect the self by adopting a classification scheme that maps on to the traditional division of mind into three faculties: *knowing* (cognition/reflection), *feeling* (evaluation/affect), and *doing* (intention/action).

The self as knower. Compared to the rest of the animal kingdom, human beings possess a sophisticated intellect, with unparalleled capacity for linguistic invention, theoretical abstraction, and explicit computation (Pinker, 1994; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2003; Tallis, 1991). Moreover, this intellect combines with reflexive

consciousness to generate a rich tapestry of self-beliefs (Higgins, 1996). These self-beliefs, in their entirety, constitute the *self-concept*. Psychologists study, not just the content of these self-beliefs, but also what properties they possess (e.g., accuracy, consistency, accessibility, and importance; Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Markus, 1977; McGuire, & Padawer-Singer, 1976; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992), how they are represented in memory (Klein, Loftus, & Kihlstrom, 1996), and how they are structurally organized (McConnell & Strain, 2007).

The content of one's personally important self-beliefs is what constitutes one's *identity*. (Note: this is a *psychological* definition. It differs from philosophical definitions that attempt to answer the question of what underlies the uniqueness or continuity of a person, e.g., Shoemaker & Swinburne, 1984). Identity is therefore as varied as the content of such self-beliefs.

Special attention has been paid to the flexibility with which people categorize themselves. In particular, psychologists have explored how self-categorizations can occur not only at an individual level (e.g., “*I am this person*”) but also at a *collective* level (“*We are this group*”) (Searle, 1995; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), and have noted that either one or the other level can predominate depending on situational or cultural context (Markus & Kitayama, 1999; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). That said, some self-categorizations, such as those having to do with sexual orientation and gender identity, do seem to have biological roots: they are partly heritable, begin in early childhood, and resist modification (Stein, 1999; Wilson & Rahman, 2005). Moreover, contrary to the claims of the sociological models such as the “looking-glass self” (Cooley, 1902), people's self-beliefs are less determined by what others *actually* think about them than by what they *believe* others think about

them (Shrauger & Schoenman, 1979). Both latter lines of research suggest that self-categorization is not determined by social context alone.

(A word of caution is warranted here. The term “self” can be and often is used as short-hand for “self-categorization”. However, the convenience of the contraction should not prompt one to infer that the self as a whole is *reducible* to content of important self-beliefs. Rather, self-categorization is just one aspect of the self, not its essential feature, as the sections below will illustrate.)

The self as feeler. People do not, like indifferent androids, process self-related information dispassionately; rather, they react to it affectively, delivering positive or negative evaluations, and exhibiting agreeable or aversive emotions (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Moreover, the type of reaction that occurs (e.g., basking in reflected glory, or cringing in reflected ignominy) depends on exactly who the self is being compared to, and on how well that comparison person performs in domains of varying importance to the self (Tesser, 1988). In addition, the information eliciting affective reactions need not be directed at the individual self, but also at entities with which the self identifies: that is, to directly praise or criticize “us” is to indirectly praise or criticize “me”. As noted above, people can self-categorize flexibly with collectives beyond themselves; also remarkable is how readily partisan preferences for one collective over another develop (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Greenwald, Pickrell, & Farnham, 2002). People’s level of commitment to such collectives, which often defies utilitarian analysis, moderates the strength and nature of their affective reactions to collective threats (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

People’s overall affective reaction to themselves—which may both direct and derive from their social identifications (Cialdini et al., 1976; Tajfel & Turner, 1986)—corresponds to their *self-esteem*. Having high self-esteem seems to make people’s

subjective lives brighter; but whether and to what extent it confers objective or interpersonal advantages is much debated (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). However, it may matter not only what *quantity* of self-esteem people possess, but also what *quality* of self-esteem they possess—for example, how *stable* it is over time (Kernis, 2003).

The self as doer. People do not merely contemplate themselves and then react emotionally; they also *act*. Indeed, self-reflexive thoughts and feelings arguably direct adaptive action. One key component of adaptive action is *self-regulation*. This denotes the executive management of spontaneous mental and behavioural inclinations, essential for attaining long-term goals and preserving psychological equilibrium. Consequently, psychologists spend time studying successes and failures of self-regulation (Vohs, & Schmeichel, 2007), and building heuristic models of the self-regulation process as a whole (Carver & Scheier, 2000). Foundational research also addresses the question of whether there is anything more to the exercise of voluntary agency than the mere attribution of authorship to the self, the deed really having unconscious determinants (Wegner, 2002; Libet, 1985).

Note that self-regulation can be either direct or oblique. When direct, an attempt is made to manage the mind from within (say, by trying to suppress feelings of worthlessness); when oblique, an attempt is made to manage the mind from without (say, by trying to impress others to feel worthwhile). Oblique self-regulation, as in the example given, is often accomplished by strategic *self-presentation* (Jones & Pittman, 1982), a form of impression management that highlights the interplay between self and society. People also vary in their penchant for presenting a polished image to the world, an individual difference explored under the rubric of *self-monitoring* (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000).

Self-Related Motivations

What is the psychological glue that binds the three domains of selfhood together? One plausible answer is *motivation*: when people strive after many non-elementary goals, their self-directed thoughts, feelings, and actions fuse. For example, Higgins (1987) postulates that perceiving a disparity between one's *actual* self and one's *ought* and *ideal* selves (implicating the self as knower) leads respectively to the emotions of anxiety and depression (implicating the self as feeler) that then prompt remedial action of trying to lessen the disparity in concrete ways (implicating the self as doer).

Several grand theories of self-related striving posit the existence of fundamental needs that must be met in order to maintain psychological stability, as well as motivational systems designed to service those needs. For example, *sociometer theory* posits a need to belong to significant social groups (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995); *terror management theory* (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997), a need to construct meaningful worldviews; and *self-determination theory* (Ryan & Deci, 2002), needs to act autonomously, accomplish goals effectively, and bond closely with others. All such needs theorized to be linked, in one way or another, with self-esteem. This in turn suggests that the motive to *self-enhance*—that is, maintain a positive view of self—is a cardinal motive, an hypothesis further supported by the sheer variety of documented ways, overt and subtle, in which people defend and promote their positive self-view (e.g., *positivity bias*, *self-handicapping*, and *self-serving attributions*; see Sedikides & Gregg, 2003, in press; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). However, people do not inevitably self-enhance: sometimes other motives, such as finding out the truth about oneself, predominate (Trope, 1982). After all, even imperfectly rational human beings are guided, out of pragmatic necessity, by

reality constraints. Complex dispositional and situational factors determine which self-motive predominates in particular situations.

One controversial question is whether people most want (a) to maintain a firm sense of identity per se, and so seek to reassure themselves that they are who they already think they are, whatever it is (i.e., to *self-verify*); (b) to maintain a positive identity, and so seek to reassure themselves that, whoever they happen to be, it is good (i.e., to *self-enhance*). Empirical research shows that, when people with negative self-views are given the choice, they predominantly opt for sources of information that confirm rather than contradict their pre-existing self-views. This finding has been interpreted as indicating that the motive to self-verify is stronger than the motive to self-enhance (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). However, an equally if not more plausible interpretation is that people with negative self-views do not feel rationally entitled to believe positive feedback, and turn it down despite keenly wanting it to be true (Gregg, in press).

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