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SELF IN SOCIAL COGNITION

- The Self is a Mental Representation
- The Self Provides Information to Guide Self-Regulation
- The Self has Varied Motivations for Self-Regulation
- The Self Serves as a Reference Point

Understanding the self has been one of the most enthusiastically pursued goals in psychology. William James’s (1907) analysis laid the groundwork for many enduring concerns, and sociologists Charles Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934) provided frameworks for understanding the self in social interaction. In the past several decades, social cognition researchers have taken up this challenge and added fundamentally to our understanding of the self (Beer, 2012).

This chapter begins with mental representations of the self: namely, what makes up the sense of self that most people experience subjectively. We then explore self-regulation and consider how the self guides the processing of self-relevant information, enabling people both to understand the meaning of situations for themselves and to promote their interests, goals, and values. Overarching motives that guide self-regulation include a desire for accurate knowledge of the self, a consistent sense of self, self-improvement, and self-enhancement, which is the tendency to seek and maintain a favorable self-concept. Finally, self-knowledge affects how we interpret other people, often without our awareness.
THE SELF IS A MENTAL REPRESENTATION

Self-Concept

People’s knowledge about themselves is extensive and complex. During childhood, our parents, teachers, and friends treat us in particular ways, and we participate in religious, ethnic, or cultural activities that come to be significant aspects of ourselves. We develop a sense of our personal characteristics and what others feel we might or should do to fulfill expectations. We know ourselves by our roles, such as student or spouse. We have a private sense of self, as well as selves we present to other people. We know ourselves as active participants in the ongoing environment and as people who have already experienced and reflected on events and relationships. We can say quickly and confidently whether we are outgoing or shy, adventurous or conventional, athletic or clumsy. Our collected beliefs about ourselves is called the self-concept.

Mental representations of the self are complex. Sometimes we are concerned with maintaining self-esteem; at other times we want to maintain a consistent sense of self, and at other times our needs to belong or to be efficacious guide our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). As one result of this flexibility, much of our self-encoding occurs in person-situation interaction terms (Mendoza-Denton, Ayduk, Mischel, Shoda, & Testa, 2001). That is, we have diverse senses of ourselves in particular contexts: Each situational norm (social rule or pressure) engages different aspects of the self. A person may have one conception of herself in academic situations as bright, attentive, and interested in learning, and a different set of self-beliefs for social situations, which may include being somewhat shy but friendly and generally well-liked. In this viewpoint, self-representation in memory resembles the representation of other constructs. Which aspect of the self influences ongoing thought and behavior depends on which aspect of the self is accessed. This feature of the self is referred to as the working self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986). Thus, for example, your working self-concept for academic situations will typically differ in content from the one you have for social situations.

Besides situational variability within the self, some self variability depends on activated relations with close others. Self-concepts include knowledge about significant others (Andersen & Chen, 2002). People who influence one’s self or with whom one has been emotionally involved – including parents, siblings, close friends, and past and present partners – connect to the self through knowledge that maintains particular aspects of the self linked to these significant others. A person’s repertoire of relational selves influences emotions and behavior in social situations (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). The activation of mental representations of a significant other evokes the relational self with that significant other, a process termed transference.
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(Andersen & Chen, 2002). You may, for example, behave like an entirely autonomous mature person until you get home for the holidays, at which point your relational selves as daughter and younger sister may be activated, leading to behavior that conflicts with your usual self-concept.

Typically, we construe ourselves in complementary fashion vis-à-vis others (Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). For example, we reciprocate warm (or quarrelsome) behavior, and thus assimilate on the agreeableness–quarrelsomeness dimension, whereas in terms of control, we contrast our behavior with others, deferring when a relational partner is dominant but taking charge when the partner defers. In both cases, complementary self-construal guides behavior, especially with people we know well (Tiedens & Jimenez, 2003). In extremely tight-knit groups, our personal identities may viscerally fuse with our group identities, motivating extraordinary self-sacrifice (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Relational selves provide both stability in the self-concept (from enduring representations of significant others) and variability (when different social situations activate different relational selves).

Self-Schemas

In the array of information about themselves, most people have clear concepts of themselves on some attributes and less clear concepts on others. Those qualities about which people are certain are termed self-schemas: cognitive-affective structures that represent the self’s qualities in a given domain. People are self-schematic on dimensions that are important to them, on which they think of themselves as extreme, and on which they are certain that the opposite does not hold (Markus, 1977). Self-schemas organize information processing relevant to that domain. Colin may feel that he is hardworking and full of integrity but may be unsure whether to describe himself as shy. In this case, Colin is schematic for the dimensions hardworking and integrity but not for shy.

Possible and feared selves – that is, selves we would like to become or that we fear becoming, respectively – also guide how we think about ourselves and how we select situations and social roles (Markus & Wurf, 1987). For example, the possible self of becoming a professor might lead one to seek opportunities to supervise undergraduate research, whereas the feared self of being jobless might lead one to redouble efforts to publish research articles. Possible selves can change in response to environmental input and affect consequent behavior. For example, in one study, low-income eighth-graders participated in a brief intervention that led them to believe that their possible selves might include academic success. This brief intervention increased test scores, grades, and academic initiative and decreased depression, absences, and misbehavior in school over a two-year period; these changes were mediated by changes in the possible selves these students had incorporated into their identity (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Figure 5.1).
Understanding Individual Selves and Others

Neural Bases of Self-Views

Clearly, to function effectively in the world, people need to be able to distinguish between things that are “me” and “not me.” This function implicates activity in the prefrontal cortex’s left hemisphere (Kircher et al., 2002; D. J. Turk et al., 2002). The sense of self that most of us experience subjectively appears to emerge from the functions of a left-hemisphere interpreter (Gazzaniga, 2000), which integrates diverse self-relevant processing in different parts of the brain (D. J. Turk, Heatherton, Macrae, Kelley, & Gazzaniga, 2003). The representations people hold of themselves in long-term memory resemble those held about other concepts, but are more complex, more varied, and more likely to shape interpretation of situations and of other people’s actions than are other accessible constructs.

Some patterns of brain activity occur when people reflect on their self-views, compared with others’ views of them. In one study (Ochsner et al., 2005), participants’ brains were scanned while they rated adjectives as self-descriptive, descriptive of a friend, descriptive of the friend’s view of them, or descriptive of a person not close to them; the comparison condition was a perceptual task not related to people. For all of the person-appraisal tasks, the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) activated, relative to the comparison perception task. This finding fits manifold studies suggesting the importance of the mPFC in social judgment generally (Chapter 1; Beer, 2016). In addition, a larger network involving the posterior cingulate/precuneus and multiple regions of the temporal lobe was evoked for all self and other evaluations (Figure 5.2). Neural systems involved in direct appraisals of the self resembled those involved in appraisals of close others, and they appear to share many neural pathways, relative to appraisals of people with whom one is less close (Beer, 2012; Ochsner et al., 2005).

Just how much is the neural representation of others incorporated into our self-concept and how much is it distinct? Activation of the lateral PFC distinguishes self-ratings from close-other ratings. Direct appraisals of the self as compared to others activates mPFC and right rostrolateral PFC (Figure 5.2). Apparently, judgments about the self also selectively activate Brodmann’s area 10 (Heatherton et al., 2006). Although data are still coming in...
Figure 5.2a & b  Brain areas implicated in self-views (medial and lateral views)
Understanding Individual Selves and Others

(Beer, 2016), distinctive areas within the medial prefrontal cortex sometimes activate for self as opposed to intimate others, indicating that self-knowledge is represented at least semi-independently of information about intimate others.

With respect to self-views, neuroimaging distinguishes processing self-schematic information from non-self-schematic information (Lieberman, Jarcho, & Satpute, 2004). Echoing Chapter 2’s distinction between controlled and automatic processing, non-self-schematic information (e.g., athletes processing words related to acting) implicates brain regions involved in effortful and intentional processing and the retrieval of episodic memories: lateral prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and posterior parietal cortex (Figure 5.2). By contrast, processing self-schematic information (e.g., athletes responding to words reflecting sports) activates brain regions involved in automatic, motivational, and affective processing: ventromedial prefrontal cortex, nucleus accumbens, and amygdala. As self-schemas develop within a domain, their neural representation apparently moves to regions of the brain that are more affective, motivational, and automatic.

Self-Esteem

Mental representations of the self involve self-esteem, the evaluation we make of ourselves. People are concerned not only with what they are, but also with how they value those qualities. Self-esteem is a resource because it can help people maintain well-being, set appropriate goals, savor positive experiences, and cope successfully with difficult situations (Christensen, Wood, & Barrett, 2003; Creswell et al., 2005; K. L. Sommer & Baumeister, 2002; J. V. Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003).

Self-esteem has a social component too. People enjoy disclosing self to others because people value others’ thoughts about themselves (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). People’s desire for self-esteem is driven, in part, by their inherent need to connect with others and gain their approval (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). As such, self-esteem may act as a sociometer—a general indicator of how one is doing in the eyes of others.

Self-esteem can be assessed explicitly, as by (dis)agreeing “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” (Table 5.1). Implicit self-esteem can also be assessed, for example, by observing whether people value the letters in their name or quickly link positive adjectives to the self (e.g., Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001). Sometimes explicit and implicit assessments of self-esteem conflict, and people must devote more processing time to understand their self-conceptions (Briñol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006). People with high explicit but low implicit self-esteem are prone to behaving defensively (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2003). For example, they may derogate other people to maintain their own self-esteem because their self-views are fragile and require continual reinforcement (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2005; Kernis, 2003).

Distinguishing implicit and explicit self-esteem suggests that not only do people explicitly seek to feel good about themselves, but their implicit or unconscious self-evaluations also influence their judgments and behavior. People tend to prefer people, places, and things
that resemble the self, a tendency toward implicit egotism (Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005). For example, women with names like Georgia, Louise, and Virginia are disproportionately likely to have lived in the states that resemble their names (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). As noted, people prefer the letters in their own names (J. T. Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002). Unconscious self-evaluations influence not only mundane but also major life decisions.

Self-esteem reflects what people believe they need to be or do to have worth as a person (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Besides overall self-esteem, people hold domain-specific self-evaluations that influence their global feelings of self-worth. These contingencies of self-worth describe people being selective about the domains on which they base their self-esteem. For one person, being a poor student may not matter much and have little bearing on self-esteem, but if one is from a family in which intellectual achievements matter, then being a poor student may reflect back on self-esteem. In the domains of contingent self-worth, people pursue self-esteem by struggling to validate their abilities and qualities, activities that may endanger mental and physical health (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Thus, although thinking well of oneself has benefits, obsessive pursuit of self-esteem can be costly.

Culture and the Self

Conceptions of the self vary depending on one’s cultural background (Morling & Masuda, 2012; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Markus and Kitayama (1991) contrasted American and Japanese cultures to illustrate the differences in self-conceptions between Western and East Asian cultures. European Americans emphasize individuality and distinguishing oneself from others by using one’s unique

**Table 5.1** Self-esteem scale

Indicate whether each item is true (T) or false (F) for you:

1. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
2. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
3. At times I think I am no good at all.
4. I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
5. All in all, I feel that I am a failure.
6. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

If you answered “true” on items 1, 4, and 6, as well as “false” on items 2, 3, and 5, then you tend to score high on self-esteem. If the reverse, then you tend to score lower. The entire scale includes 10 items.

*Source:* Adapted from M. J. Rosenberg (1965), Copyright 1965 by Princeton University Press. Copyright renewed. Reproduced by permission of Dr. Florence Rosenberg
talents. This independent self is “a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background” (Geertz, 1975, p. 48). Comparatively, the interdependent self of many East Asian, Southern European, and Latin American cultures sees oneself as part of encompassing social relationships and adjusting one’s behavior to what one perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). An interdependent self becomes meaningful and complete largely within the context of social relationships, rather than through independent, autonomous action (Table 5.2).

Both independent and interdependent cultures ascribe internal qualities, such as abilities or opinions. However, independent cultures experience such attributes as fixed and relatively stable from situation to situation, whereas interdependent cultures consider these qualities as more situation-specific and unstable, not defining characteristics of the self (Bochner, 1994; Cousins, 1989). The interdependent self is not an autonomous, bounded whole but changes its nature depending on the social context (Kanagawa, Cross, & Markus, 2001). In interdependent cultures, the emphasis on blending in is so fundamental that individually unique attributes do not particularly represent the self. For example, a child from a family in an independent cultural context might experience pressure to develop his talents fully because achieving distinctively on the basis of one’s abilities is a valued cultural outcome. By contrast, a child growing up in an interdependent cultural

**Table 5.2** The measurement of independent and interdependent self-construals

| Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the items below based on the following scale: |
| 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    | 7    |
| Strongly disagree | Strongly agree |
| 1. | I have respect for authority figures with whom I interact. |
| 2. | I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards. |
| 3. | My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me. |
| 4. | Speaking up in class is not a problem for me. |
| 5. | I should take into consideration my parents’ advice when making education and career plans. |
| 6. | My personal identity independent of others is very important to me. |

If you answered “agree” on items 1, 3, and 5, as well as “disagree” on items 2, 4, and 6, you tend to score high on interdependence and low on independence; if the reverse, you tend to score high on independence and low on interdependence. The entire scale is longer than the excerpt above.

or familial context might experience the pressure to achieve in the form of obligations to family and to the larger social group.

Although being independent is well defined, interdependence assumes different forms, depending on culture and gender. For example, women are more interdependent than men but not in the same way that East Asians may be considered interdependent (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Women’s interdependence has been referred to as relational interdependence (Cross et al., 2000; Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, & Redersdorff, 2006). For example, a European American mother may experience interdependence as an obligation to promote the goals and talents of her children so that they will be successful, and she may make sacrifices with respect to her own personal agenda to achieve these outcomes. This is not the same as the East Asian sense of connectedness, which stems more from a sense of harmonious interdependence with the social group. These two types of interdependence differ from many Latin cultures in which social goals, such as meeting obligations to family and friends, often take priority over personal ones. And we know even less about various African cultures’ view of self. We raise this point because in the sections to follow interdependence has been studied largely as a distinction between European American and East Asian cultures. The multiple forms of interdependence have been noted but have received little attention.

Culture, Cognition, and Emotion

Some cultural differences in cognition are fundamental: European Americans tend to extract central or distinctive elements from the context, whereas East Asians are more likely to view the world in a more holistic manner (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). This distinction carries through in self-perception as well. People who hold an independent sense of self see themselves as distinctive and strive to maximize achievement of their personal goals. In one study, personally choosing a task to perform enhanced motivation for European Americans, whereas it less affected Asian students’ intrinsic motivation; the Asian students’ motivation was higher when told that someone close to them had chosen the task for them (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). European Americans select tasks on which they will do well and on which they have done well in the past, whereas East Asians’ choices of tasks are based less on such expectations and prior performance (Oishi & Diener, 2003). Motivational differences reliably follow from this distinction as well. Whereas European Americans tend to strive for personal achievement, East Asians strive for the achievement of group goals or see the goals they implement as representing group norms (Table 5.3).

Differences in goals also affect memory (Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999). European Americans are likely to reconstruct events in terms of specific actors and their personal qualities, whereas East Asians are more likely to refer to those actors’ social groups (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). European Americans are more likely to ignore context in the inferences they draw about the social environment, whereas those with interdependent self-construals attend to relations of self or others to social context (Kühnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001).
These distinctions carry over into the experience of emotion. People with an independent sense of self experience ego-focused emotions frequently, such as pride over doing well or frustration over thwarted personal goals (Mesquita, 2001). In contrast, cultures with interdependent self-conceptions tend to experience other-focused emotions, such as Japanese *amae*, the experience of being lovingly pampered (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Sense of self influences the bases for self-esteem. People with an independent sense of self are more likely to endorse items such as “I feel I am a person of worth” on self-esteem scales than people with an interdependent sense of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yik, Bond, & Paulhus, 1998). In addition, the importance attached to self-esteem and its implication for life satisfaction varies between independent and interdependent cultures. In 31 cultures the relation of self-esteem to life satisfaction was lower in interdependent cultures, whereas in independent cultures individuals with high self-esteem reported high life satisfaction as well (Diener & Diener, 1995). In interdependent social contexts, approval from others for subscribing to social norms better predicts life satisfaction.

**Table 5.3** Summary of key differences between an independent and an interdependent perception of self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature compared</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Interdependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Separate from social context</td>
<td>Connected with social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Bounded, unitary, stable</td>
<td>Flexible, variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important features</td>
<td>Internal, private (abilities, thoughts, feelings)</td>
<td>External, public (statuses, roles, relationships)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Be unique</td>
<td>Belong, fit in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express self</td>
<td>Occupy one’s proper place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realize internal attributes</td>
<td>Engage in appropriate action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote own goals</td>
<td>Promote others’ goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be direct: say what’s on your mind</td>
<td>Be indirect: read other’s mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of others</td>
<td>Self-evaluation: others important for social comparison, reflected appraisal</td>
<td>Self-definition: self defined by relationships with others in specific contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of self-esteema</td>
<td>Ability to express self; validate internal attributes</td>
<td>Ability to adjust, restrain self: maintain harmony with social context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Esteeming the self may be primarily a Western phenomenon, and the concept of self-esteem should perhaps be replaced by “self-satisfaction,” or by a term that reflects the realization that one is fulfilling the culturally mandated task.

Individual and collective processes in constructing the self are abetted by the types of situations that different cultures afford their members. Situations in the United States encourage self-enhancement (that is, regarding and promoting the self in positive terms). By contrast, Japanese situations are more conducive to self-criticism. For example, a US student studying in Japan reported that volleyball – a relaxing, fun sport in the United States that gives people the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess or total lack of talent amidst great cheering and booing – is much more competitive and serious in Japan, organized as a win–lose situation and thus conducive to self-criticism or the implicit criticism of others for playing poorly (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

Many researchers now question the fundamental nature of self-esteem, especially whether it has any transcultural implications. Yet people from interdependent cultures who score high on Western self-esteem scales exhibit behavior consistent with Western people high in self-esteem, such as self-protective responses to negative feedback. Moreover, even in interdependent cultures people show tendencies to self-enhance indirectly, for example, by overvaluing the letters in one’s name (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997).

As may be apparent, much of the research on independent versus interdependent sense of self has contrasted North Americans with Japanese nationals. In some respects, each culture may represent an outlier on these dimensions, with European Americans being extreme on the independent sense of self, and the Japanese being extreme on the interdependent sense of self. Extreme examples tend to foster strong contrasts. Gaps in our knowledge regarding the interdependent self and its implications suffer both from lack of research in interdependent cultures generally and from examining primarily one type of interdependence.

**THE SELF PROVIDES INFORMATION TO GUIDE SELF-REGULATION**

Across cultures, people all need to get along with others, and self-regulation helps humans cooperate and belong (Hare, 2017). **Self-regulation** describes how people control and direct their own actions, emotions, and thoughts, especially how people formulate and pursue goals. Much self-regulation occurs virtually automatically, without awareness or conscious thought. Salient and goal-relevant cues in the environment can automatically guide our behavior (Lieberman et al., 2004). But at other times, we consciously and actively intervene to control our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Brandstätter & Frank, 2002).

**Sources of Influence on Self-Regulation**

Self-regulatory activities spring from several sources. One is the content of self-regulation: namely, what is in the working self-concept. Situational cues, social roles, values, and strongly held self-conceptions influence which aspects of the self predominate in the working self-concept (e.g., Verplanken & Holland, 2002). In a classroom situation, contextual
influences on our behavior are likely to be achievement-related, but our behavior will also be influenced by whether our personal goals prioritize achievement. The working self-concept, in turn, depends on the situation. Speaking publicly in class but giving the wrong answer may lead one person with low achievement goals to find the situation to be funny, whereas for someone who values achievement goals, the same incident may cause embarrassment and redoubled efforts to be accurate the next time (Crocker & Knight, 2005; Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003).

As this example also shows, sometimes the working self-concept is at odds with the stable self-concept (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). After delivering an incorrect answer in class, one may feel stupid and embarrassed, thereby influencing the working self-concept, but assuming that these events do not repeat regularly, the impact may be only short term and not affect the enduring self-concept. If these types of event recur regularly, however, the enduring self-concept may change as well. For example, if staying out late and going to clubs is part of your self-concept as a party person, that aspect of your self-concept is likely to change once you have children. The working self-concept explains how different aspects of self may guide social behavior under different circumstances, and, in turn, be modified by feedback from those situations, ultimately affecting the enduring self-concept.

**Behavioral Approach and Avoidance**

Self-regulation involves fundamental decisions about what people and situations to approach and which ones to avoid. People have two semi-independent motivational systems that help to regulate behavior in these situations: an appetitive system, referred to as the **behavioral activation system** (BAS), and an aversive system or **behavioral inhibition system** (BIS). The expression of positive, or approach, motivational concerns is associated with left frontal activation, consistent with the involvement of left frontal activation in goal pursuit (Harmon-Jones, Lueck, Fearn, & Harmon-Jones, 2006). When BAS is activated, people tend to approach other people or activities in the environment. When BIS is activated, people are more likely to avoid other people or activities (Carver & White, 1994; J. A. Gray, 1990). Negative or withdrawal motivation goes with activation of the right frontal cortex (Harmon-Jones et al., 2006).

A number of factors influence whether BAS or BIS is a predominating force, affecting behavior at any given time. Daily experiences, for example, influence the activation of these systems. If good things are happening, you are more likely to be in a state of activation (BAS) than in a state of inhibition (BIS) (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). When things are not going well, behavioral inhibition (BIS) may enable you to regroup.

BAS and BIS also reflect reliable individual differences (Table 5.4). Some people have a stronger behavioral activation system, focused on rewards, whereas others have a stronger behavioral inhibition system, focused on punishments (Carver & White, 1994). BAS-oriented people experience more positive events and positive affect, whereas BIS-dominated people tend to experience more negative affect (Updegraff et al., 2004).
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Table 5.4  Summary of Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) Self-Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Activation System</th>
<th>Behavioral Inhibition System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excited by going after something wanted</td>
<td>Worry about mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good things affect strongly</td>
<td>Concern with criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go all-out to get things</td>
<td>Frequently nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do fun things for their own sake</td>
<td>Worked up over possible unpleasantness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation from Carver & White (1994)

Self-Discrepancy Theory

In a theory related to the activation–inhibition distinction, Higgins (1987) examined how self-discrepancies guide emotions and coping behavior. Some discrepancies reflect a shortfall between one’s current self and ideal self (activating reward-pursuit), and some between one’s current self and ought self (inhibiting for fear of punishment).

Higgins distinguished two types of self-guides. People differ in whether they are primarily driven by the ideal self or the ought self (Strauman, 1996). The ideal self is who one wants to be; the ought self is who one thinks one should be, often influenced by one’s beliefs about behavior appropriate for self (duties and obligations) and others’ expectations. In a key study (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985), college students reported their self-perceptions, including how they would ideally like to be and how they felt they ought to be. Later, they filled out the same questionnaire from the standpoint of their mother, father, and closest friend and rated how much each of the reported personal attributes was meaningful to them. Discrepancies between actual and ideal self produced dejection-related emotions and lowered self-esteem (see also Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). For example, failing to get into graduate school produced disappointment and sadness. Perceived discrepancies between one’s actual self (not good at science) and a friend’s or parent’s vision of whom the self ought to be (doctor) produced anxiety but not sadness (Figure 5.3). The more important the personal attribute was to the respondent, the greater the emotion experienced (Higgins, 1987), and the more one was self-focused, the greater the emotions experienced as well (Higgins et al., 1997; Phillips & Silvia, 2005).

Discrepancies from one’s ideal self facilitate efforts to achieve that ideal (a promotion focus in service of behavioral activation), whereas efforts to meet the expectation of others represent an inhibitory or prevention focus ( Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998). Perhaps because a prevention focus is fueled by anxiety, people are faster off the mark to meet prevention-related goals than promotion-related goals (Freitas, Liberman, Salovey, & Higgins, 2002; Figure 5.3). This general orientation toward approach (promotion) versus avoidance (prevention), to a degree, reflects stable personality traits, with extraversion the exemplar of approach and neuroticism the exemplar of avoidance (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000).

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People experience greater well-being given regulatory fit between the goals they are pursuing and their regulatory focus (Higgins, 2005). That is, people who are motivated to achieve their ideal selves experience well-being when they feel they are moving closer to those self standards, whereas people who are driven more by desire to avoid negative outcomes and to meet others’ expectations experience greater well-being when they believe they are upholding these social expectations (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003).

Socialization and culture influence which of these regulatory foci predominates. Some families endorse the opinions of others as a primary influence on self-concept. Often, this emphasis is accompanied by a parenting style marked by criticism. Other families urge becoming one’s ideal self, an orientation more likely in a supportive environment. These differences develop different standards for self and its evaluation. Cultural differences, likewise, influence what aspects of the self govern self-regulatory behavior. People who are raised with a sense of themselves as independent, autonomous individuals are likely to be motivated by discrepancies between themselves and their ideal selves (promotion focus), whereas those who are raised with an interdependent sense of self are more attentive to the concerns of others in the social environment (prevention focus) (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000).

Different brain activations characterize promotion versus prevention orientation. A promotion regulatory focus tends to be associated with greater left frontal activity, whereas a prevention regulatory focus is associated with greater right frontal activity. This asymmetry fits promotion-focused goals being associated with approaching desired outcomes, whereas prevention-focused goals are more associated with avoiding undesired outcomes (Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004). In one study (M. K. Johnson et al., 2006), when people reflected on hopes and aspirations (promotion), medial prefrontal and anterior cingulate cortex activation predominated (relative to non-self-relevant thought), whereas when people reflected on duties and obligations (prevention), the posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus predominated. Perhaps the medial prefrontal cortex reflects

![Figure 5.3 Emotional consequences of self-discrepancies](image-url)
agentic self-reflection, and the posterior medial cortex reflects experiential self-reflection. Alternatively, medial prefrontal cortex activation may implicate inward focus, whereas posterior cingulate activation implicates outward or social focus (M. K. Johnson et al., 2006).

Self-Efficacy and Personal Control

Other influences on self-regulation include self-efficacy and sense of personal control. Self-efficacy beliefs refer to our expectations about our abilities to accomplish specific tasks (Bandura, 2006). Whether individuals undertake an activity or strive to meet a particular goal depends on whether they believe they can perform these actions. Suppose, for example, that you are offered a prestigious teaching position in the Netherlands but learn that within three years you must be able to lecture in Dutch. Although you may desperately want to accept the position, a low sense of self-efficacy for learning Dutch might lead to a decision not to accept it.

Besides specific control-related perceptions of abilities to perform particular behaviors (self-efficacy beliefs), people have a general sense of personal control or mastery that enables them to plan, cope with setbacks, and pursue self-regulatory activities. People with a strong sense of control are more likely to undertake activities in service of their goals, whereas those with a low sense of personal mastery or control may be less likely to do so.

In a study illustrating this point, L. B. Pham, Taylor, and Seeman (2001) gave college students who were either high or low in their sense of mastery a manipulation that made salient the unpredictable aspects of college life, its predictable aspects, or neutral features of the college environment. Students in the unpredictable condition were reminded of difficulties getting into one’s chosen classes, whereas those in the predictable condition were reminded that exam times and paper dates are always posted at the beginning of the term. After reading this manipulation, the students listed their thoughts and feelings about college, and their heart rate and blood pressure were assessed. Students exposed to the predictable college manipulation made more references to the future and to personal goals in their thoughts listing. They also had lower blood pressure and heart rate compared to those who read about neutral features of the college environment and especially the unpredictable aspects of the college environment. The students who were chronically high in personal mastery were more optimistic and future oriented than those low in personal mastery. Enduring expectations of control, as well as factors that make control or lack of control salient in a particular situation, influence self-regulatory activity at the cognitive, motivational, and physiological levels.

Self-Focus

Self-regulation is also influenced by the direction of attention, including whether attention is directly inward toward the self or outward toward the environment (Duval & Wicklund, 1972;
Silvia & Duval, 2001). When focused on ourselves, a state called self-awareness (Wicklund & Frey, 1980), we evaluate our behavior against a standard and subsequently attempt to meet the standard. For example, upon catching your reflection in passing a store window, you may notice your bad posture and straighten up.

**Figure 5.4** Cybernetic theory of self-attention and self-regulation

*Source: After Carver (1979)*
Self in Social Cognition

Self-attention causes people to compare themselves to various standards: intellectual performance, physical appearance, athletic prowess, and moral integrity. We try to conform to the standard, evaluate our behavior against it, decide that our behavior either matches the standard or does not, and continue adjusting and comparing until we meet the standard or give up. This feedback process appears in the cybernetic theory of self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Figure 5.4).

Implicit in these arguments is the idea that self-focus is often experienced as aversive and that people find ways not only to adjust their behavior or personal qualities but also to direct attention away from themselves (Flory, Räikkönen, Matthews, & Owens, 2000). After a bad day, people often need to keep themselves from focusing on personal issues or problems at work and so use drinking or television to reduce self-focus (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003).

Threats to Self-Regulation

Some circumstances reliably compromise the ability to self-regulate. One such condition is social exclusion. When individuals have been rejected by a social group, they have more difficulty performing subsequent tasks. The person quits a frustrating task sooner, attends poorly, and shows less self-control (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). In one experiment, participants who were told that no one else in their group wanted to work with them ate more cookies than participants who had not experienced rejection (Baumeister et al., 2005, Study 2). The excluded person adopts a defensive state characterized by lethargy, a poor sense of time, and avoidance of meaningful thought, emotions, and self-awareness (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). Less extreme self-regulatory threat can also motivate efforts to regain group membership (K. D. Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000).

Many circumstances involving self-regulation create self-control dilemmas that force one to choose between two preeminent goals or to sacrifice short-term costs for long-term benefits. For example, one may have to have an uncomfortable medical procedure to rule out a potentially serious condition. Anticipated short-term costs elicit self-control efforts to minimize those costs (Trope & Fishbach, 2000). One may distract oneself or focus on the long-term benefits of the short-term efforts, to act according to long-term interests, not succumbing to short-term temptations.

Do self-control dilemmas pit reason against emotion, or do some emotions support efforts at control? Although hedonic emotions characterize a short-term perspective, self-conscious emotions fit a long-term perspective and may help resolve self-control dilemmas (Giner-Sorolla, 2001). Patients with orbitofrontal lesions show regulatory deficits in self-control (Beer, Heerey, Keltner, Scabini, & Knight, 2003), and their inappropriate self-conscious emotions (embarrassment or guilt) undermine behavioral self-regulation. Self-regulation apparently depends on both rational responses and self-conscious emotional responses.
Active self-regulation requires effort, especially when one is multi-tasking. Load impairs activities that require active self-regulation but leaves untouched more automatic self-regulation. When self-regulatory resources are depleted, complex thinking is impaired, but performance of simple tasks is not (Inzlicht, Berkman, & Elkins-Brown, 2016; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Exerting self-regulation temporarily changes both motivation and attention, thereby undermining subsequent self-control (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012).

Neural Bases of Self-Regulation

In a nod to the dual-processing distinction (Chapter 2), deliberate self-regulation implicates different brain regions than does automatic self-regulation (Banfield, Wyland, Macrae, Münte, & Heatherton, 2004). The prefrontal cortex is involved in conscious self-regulation: higher-order executive control of lower-order processes responsible for planning and enacting. In particular, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) has been tied to planning, processing novel information, making choices, controlling memory and working memory, and language functioning (Banfield et al., 2004). The dlPFC is also implicated in behavioral self-regulation, specifically selecting and initiating actions (S. A. Spence & Frith, 1999). Converging evidence for this view of the dlPFC appears when damage to this region results in apathy and diminished attention, as well as compromised planning, judgment, and insight (Dimitrov, Grafman, Soares, & Clark, 1999), suggesting poor executive functioning.

Another area of the PFC, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), is connected to limbic structures that are involved in emotional processing (Pandya & Barnes, 1987) and is especially implicated in controlling behavior, emotional output, and interaction with others (Dolan, 1999). The orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), a portion of the vmPFC, activates under emotional processing, reward, inhibition, decision making, self-awareness, and strategic regulation (Banfield et al., 2004). Damage to this area links to striking behavior changes and a disregard for the potential future consequences of one’s behavior (Bechara, Damasio, Damasio, & Anderson, 1994). OFC damage also undermines the ability to adjust behavior to be perceived as acceptable or moral by others (E. Goldberg, 2001).

The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) interacts with the PFC in monitoring and guiding behavior. ACC is implicated both in cognitive processing (anterior portion) and in affective-evaluative processing (Bush, Luu, & Posner, 2000). ACC function and its connections to the motor and cognitive systems appear to be critical in translating intention into action (Banfield et al., 2004). The ACC also plays a role in processing conflicting information and has been conceptualized as a region that may trigger a shift from automatic to controlled processing (Botvinick et al., 2004). Thus, for example, if one is self-schematic for athletics, a sudden departure from one’s usual athletic prowess should trigger ACC activity and initiation of controlled processing in the PFC to comprehend the implications for the self and to regulate subsequent behavior (Lieberman et al., 2002).
THE SELF HAS VARIED MOTIVATIONS FOR SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation depends on enduring self-relevant concerns. These include the needs for an accurate sense of self, a consistent sense of self, an improving self, and a positive sense of self. In terms of social motives (Chapters 1 and 2), accuracy and consistency are versions of a social understanding motive, whereas improving and maintaining a positive sense of self are two different ways to self-enhance.

Need for Accuracy

To make our future outcomes predictable and controllable, we need a fairly accurate assessment of our abilities, opinions, beliefs, and emotions (Trope, 1975). Accurate self-assessments enable us to anticipate circumstances and control our future behavior (Trope & Bassok, 1982).

When we need to know our ability, Trope suggests that we pick tasks that will be the most informative (i.e., diagnostic) of our ability. To get accurate feedback about your mathematics ability, a sample Graduate Records Examination (GRE) math section will be more diagnostic than a children’s arithmetic test or your performance on a problem that has been frustrating mathematicians for decades.

Feedback from comparisons with others, social comparisons, can also meet a need for accurate self-assessment if no objective task is available (Festinger, 1954). For example, if you are invited to a formal dance and you’re not sure how good a dancer you are, you are unlikely to go to either a children’s dancing class or a ballroom competition. You might, instead, try out your dancing abilities in a setting that offers you opportunities to compare yourself to others, such as a club, to determine if you will need lessons to look good at the ball. Having an accurate sense of self is important when knowledge of one’s abilities is uncertain (Sorrentino & Roney, 1986).

People especially seek accurate self-relevant information if they anticipate that the news will be good, but they also often desire self-assessment even when they anticipate that the news may be bad (J. D. Brown, 1990). If you expect that your dancing ability is nonexistent, your efforts at self-assessment may confirm that belief, and it may be prudent to feign an injury on the day of the ball.

Need for Consistency

Following from the need for an accurate self-concept is the idea that we need a consistent self-concept rather than one that varies from situation to situation. We need to believe that we have intrinsic qualities and goals that will remain relatively stable over time (Swann, 1983). People often seek out situations and interpret their behavior in ways that confirm
their preexisting self-concepts; people also resist situations and feedback that are at odds with their self-concepts. This process is called **self-verification**.

For example, suppose you have just started graduate school. During the first social event you are relatively quiet and keep to yourself. If a classmate comes up to you and says “There’s no need to be shy; these people won’t bite,” you may feel offended. Perhaps you didn’t talk much because you are learning the lay of the land or perhaps you’re just under the weather, but you may think of yourself as someone who is usually fairly outgoing. At the next social event you may be more outgoing than usual as a way of convincing both yourself and others of your enduring quality as an outgoing person (Swann & Read, 1981).

People seek to confirm their positive attributes, but sometimes they seek to confirm their negative ones as well, in order to be realistic. The need to see oneself accurately and consistently affects behavior. We selectively interact with people who see us as we see ourselves (e.g., Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). For example, think of the comfort in relaxing with people who know both your strengths and weaknesses and love you nonetheless. Still, generally speaking, we like the people who see us positively and who value us for the same things we value in ourselves.

Mostly people maintain their self-views without active or conscious effort. Maintaining a consistent sense of self is part of the process of interacting with family, friends, and coworkers in familiar settings performing familiar tasks. Discrepant feedback focuses our attention on the threat to a consistent self-concept, and we either seek to expel the incorrect view or question whether to change our self-concept (Madon et al., 2001), shifting from automatic to controlled processing (Chapter 2).

As for other aspects of social cognition, the desire for a consistent self varies from culture to culture. In independent cultures, people seek to express their distinctive personal qualities. In interdependent contexts – situational influences or social norms guide behavior – people may express inconsistent beliefs about themselves across different contexts (Choi & Choi, 2002). For example, European Americans may see themselves as moderately achievement oriented across many contexts, whereas East Asians may see themselves as quite achievement oriented in some contexts and less so in others. Overall, East Asians view themselves more flexibly across situations, whereas European Americans view themselves more consistently across situations (Suh, 2002).

**Need for Improvement**

In addition to the needs for an accurate and consistent sense of self, people are motivated by their desire to improve (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). For people to use their self-regulatory activities in service of self-improvement, they need goals. Such goals come from several sources. The concept of possible selves (Markus & Wurf, 1987), for example, incorporates the visions that people have of themselves in the future. By envisioning a possible self in the future, a person may be able to set appropriate goals, make progress toward achieving those goals, and chart progress.
Self-improvement may also be served by upward social comparisons (S. E. Taylor & Lobel, 1989; J. V. Wood, 1989). Many people believe this is why having a mentor is so important. People who embody the attributes or skills we wish to possess can motivate us and also provide specific information that is helpful for improvement.

Self-improvement is also motivated by criticism, whether explicit from other people or implicit in the feedback from one’s poor performance. The perception that one has fallen short of one’s own goal or significant others’ aspirations can be esteem-reducing, but it can also contribute to efforts to improve. The desire for self-improvement appears to be an especially important motivation for East Asians (Heine et al., 2001).

Not all efforts toward self-improvement are successful. Making and maintaining changes successfully are difficult processes. Sometimes people perceive that they have improved when they have not (A. E. Wilson & Ross, 2001). For example, if a student goes through a study skills program, she is likely to come out of the experience believing that her skills have improved, whether or not they have. This occurs because people have theories about stability and change that may distort their self-assessments, not just of their current standing but of their past standing as well (Conway & Ross, 1984; M. Ross, 1989). By distorting one’s earlier skill level as poorer than it actually was, one may assume that one’s current skill level represents improvement (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005). These insights also point to self-enhancement.

Self-Enhancement

Besides needing accurate and consistent information about self, we need to feel good about ourselves and maintain self-esteem. Western cultures show cognitive and motivational benefits of self-esteem. People with high self-esteem have a clear sense of their personal qualities. They think well of themselves, set appropriate goals, use feedback in a manner that maintains their self-esteem, savor their positive experiences, and cope well with difficult situations (e.g., K. L. Sommer & Baumeister, 2002; J. V. Wood et al., 2003).

Collectively, the need for and efforts to maintain or create a positive sense of self is referred to as self-enhancement. Self-enhancement needs appear important, perhaps even preeminent, much of the time (Sedikides, 1993), at least in Western cultures. Self-enhancement needs become especially important following threat, failure, or blows to self-esteem (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Krueger, 1998). The desire for a positive sense of self is driven at least in part by the need to connect with others and gain their approval, as noted (the sociometer; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Social threats become threats to self-esteem, which in turn activate the need to regain approval and acceptance. From this perspective, self-enhancement needs are driven socially by assessing how one is viewed by others.

People can satisfy their self-enhancement needs by holding positive illusions: self-perceptions that are falsely positive and somewhat exaggerated with respect to actual abilities, talents, and social skills (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988). At least three
types of positive illusions appear: People tend to see themselves more positively than is true; they believe they have more control over the events around them than is actually the case; and they are unrealistically optimistic about the future. When students describe whether positive and negative personality adjectives accurately describe them and others, most evaluate themselves more favorably than others (Suls, Lemos, & Stewart, 2002). We remember positive information about ourselves, but negative information often slips conveniently from mind (Sedikides & Green, 2000). If pressed, most of us have more difficulty reconstructing past failures than successes (Story, 1998). We believe we are more likely than others to engage in selfless, kind, and generous acts (Epley & Dunning, 2000). We often remember our performance as higher than it actually was (Crary, 1966). We believe we are happier than most other people (Klar & Giladi, 1999). We believe that those who flatter us are credible and discerning (Vonk, 2002). We respond to threats by bolstering our self-perceptions in other life domains (Boney-McCoy, Gibbons, & Gerrard, 1999) and by making downward social comparisons to less fortunate others (Wills, 1981). And perhaps most poignantly, we see ourselves as less biased than we believe others to be (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). People can self-enhance by seeing themselves as better than other people, or by seeing themselves as better than others see them (Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004).

How do people successfully monitor reality and maintain accurate perceptions about themselves and the world if positive illusions are clouding their vision? Although absolute accuracy may be sacrificed, relative accuracy seems to be high. If one compares a person’s self-assessments on a broad array of traits with the same assessments made by a friend, the correlation between the ratings is high, even though people see themselves more positively than their friends see them (S. E. Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003).

But some circumstances also predict which assessments of the self, the world, and the future become more realistic. When people are about to get feedback from others, they are more realistic, even pessimistic, about the anticipated news (K. M. Taylor & Shepperd, 1998). When people must decide between alternative courses of action or set personal goals, they are more accurate and honest with themselves (S. E. Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995). People are more modest in their self-appraisals when they believe other people will have accurate information about them, when their self-descriptions can be easily verified, when they expect to receive self-relevant feedback (Armor & Taylor, 2003), or when their self-assessments can potentially be disconfirmed (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), such as expecting to perform a task that will test an ability (Armor & Sackett, 2006). Thus, as accountability increases, self-perceptions become more accurate in the absolute sense. Self-enhancement is greater at the beginning of a project, motivating effort, than at the end of a project when shortfalls might be dispiriting (Shepperd, Ouellette, & Fernandez, 1996).

Why are most people so apparently self-enhancing in their self-perceptions? Moreover, why do these self-enhancing perceptions persist if they do not conform to reality? Self-enhancing positive illusions may be adaptive for mental health (S. E. Taylor & Brown,
Self in Social Cognition

1988; cf. Ackerman, Huang, & Bargh, 2012). Positive self-perceptions, unrealistic optimism about the future, and a false sense of personal control may help us to feel better about ourselves (Regan, Snyder, & Kassin, 1995), to develop the motivation to pursue goals (S. E. Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995), and to persist longer in trying to achieve our goals (Armor & Taylor, 2003). Self-enhancing perceptions foster evidence of successful life adjustment: a personal sense of well-being, persistence toward goals, and the ability to engage in creative, productive work (J. D. Brown & Dutton, 1995). Reasonably positive self-regard fosters good social relationships as well (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, the upward limit is people who are notably self-enhancing in public settings and can alienate others (e.g., Bonano, Field, Kovacevic, & Kaltman, 2002; Robins & Beer, 2001).

Moreover, under threat to self, people with excessively high self-esteem can become mean, nasty, and self-important (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996); such people increase stereotyping, disparage others, and compare downward (e.g., Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; see also Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). These self-regulation failures appear more common among people who are defensively high in self-esteem, rather than those who are more secure in their high self-esteem (Lambird & Mann, 2006).

Nonetheless, self-enhancement can often yield another unexpected benefit. When people are feeling good about themselves and not threatened by nagging questions about their self-worth, they are often more receptive to negative feedback (e.g., Trope & Neter, 1994). People who are, by nature, more optimistic about the future also process personally relevant risk-related information less defensively than people who are less optimistic (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996). When people feel good about themselves, they are more positive about other people as well (Ybarra, 1999). Social validation – being accepted for who we are – reduces defensiveness: After people have reflected on being liked for intrinsic aspects of themselves, they are more receptive to potentially threatening information (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001).

Additional evidence for benefits of a positive sense of self comes from people with chronically low self-esteem. People with low self-esteem suffer a host of disadvantages: They have less clear self-conceptions, think of themselves in more unfavorable terms, often select unrealistic goals or shy away from goals altogether, tend to be pessimistic about the future, remember their past experiences more negatively, wallow in their negative moods rather than self-regulating to restore a positive mood, have more adverse emotional and behavioral reactions to negative feedback, are less able to generate positive feedback for themselves, make upward social comparisons that yield negative self-evaluations, are more concerned about their impact on other people, and are more vulnerable to depression or rumination when they encounter setbacks or stress (J. D. Brown & Marshall, 2001; Di Paula & Campbell, 2002; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Josephs, Bosson, & Jacobs, 2003; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993; K. L. Sommer & Baumeister, 2002).

Self-enhancement also confers biological benefits during times of stress. Stress produces familiar symptoms: The heart beats faster, blood pressure goes up, and we feel
anxious. People who perceive themselves positively, even more positively than others do, have lower cortisol (stress hormone) levels and lower heart rate and blood pressure under laboratory stressful tasks (Creswell et al., 2005). Self-enhancement can protect against stressful circumstances that might otherwise be personally threatening and adversely affect health. Self-esteem and internal locus of control in younger people may lower cortisol response to psychological stress and increase hippocampal volume; in older adults, they decrease age-related cognitive decline, improve cortisol regulation, and decrease brain-volume decline (Pruessner et al., 2005).

Self-Affirmation

Self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) maintains self-enhancement needs and helps people cope with threats to their self-worth by endorsing unrelated aspects of themselves (D. K. Sherman & Cohen, 2006). When people can affirm valued aspects of the self, they are less likely to respond defensively to threat. In an experiment (D. K. Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000), one group of participants reflected on a personally important value; the other group reflected on a less important personal value. The participants then saw an AIDS education video. Those who had completed the value-affirmation task recognized themselves as at risk for HIV and engaged in more positive health behaviors (namely, purchasing condoms and taking educational brochures) compared to those who had reflected on a relatively unimportant value. These findings suggest that self-affirming reduces defensive responses to threatening health information. This fits the evidence just reviewed indicating that when people feel good about themselves they are more receptive to potentially negative information. Affirmation of personal values can attenuate perceptions of threat (D. K. Sherman & Cohen, 2002), reduce the tendency to ruminate after failure (Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999), and attenuate physiological reactions to stress (Creswell et al., 2005).

One implication of findings from self-affirmation theory is that self-enhancement is a maintenance motive. People do not strive to have the most positive self-assessment possible, but rather they strive to maintain an adequate level of self-regard. Indeed, once reaching a certain level of self-esteem, people may actually avoid activities that might enhance it further (Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000; Zuckerman & O’Loughlin, 2006).

Self-Evaluation Maintenance

Tesser (1988) suggested another social mechanism whereby people facilitate and maintain their positive self-regard – namely, in dealing with the performance of close others with whom they might compare themselves. For example, John’s best friend, Mark, recently won a prestigious prize for writing a short story. Will John be pleased and eager to tell others about his friend’s success, or might he instead feel envious of Mark’s success and unhappy to be reminded that he is a less talented writer? Tesser’s self-evaluation maintenance theory deals with questions like these.
Generally, the behavior of close others matters more, psychologically speaking, than the behavior of distant people. Thus, a critical situation arises when a close other person performs well. Whether John will be delighted for Mark or feel envy instead will depend critically on how central writing is to John’s self-concept. If John is also a writer who has been trying to get his work published, then Mark’s strong performance is likely to be personally threatening and lead to negative emotions and efforts to avoid Mark in the future (the comparison effect). However, if John is an attorney and does not write short stories, he may be delighted with Mark’s success and take pride in Mark’s award (the reflection effect). Thus the same factors – personal closeness to a target and the target’s strong performance – can lead to opposite effects on one’s own reactions, depending on whether the person’s performance is relevant or irrelevant to one’s self-definition (Figure 5.5).

**Terror Management Theory**

Threat can stimulate self-enhancement, and there is perhaps no greater threat than death (Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006). **Terror management theory** draws on this insight (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). According to the theory, people are biologically driven for self-preservation, and they manage the threat of death at both the cultural level, by developing worldviews that provide meaning and purpose, and at the individual
level, through self-esteem. People form belief systems that endow their lives and their world with enduring meaning. These views help manage the mortality salience and the anxiety that vulnerability produces (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). At the individual level, people strive to maintain a positive sense of self, which likewise reduces the anxiety associated with mortality. Implicated in this death anxiety is a neural network including the amygdala, insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and ventral PFC (Quirin & Klackl, 2016).

The theory generates specific predictions as to how both cultural worldviews and self-esteem ward off the threat of death. One well-supported prediction is that people suppress death-related thoughts when death is made salient (Greenberg, Arndt, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2001; Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). The importance of a cultural worldview for coping with the terror of mortality also predicts that when death is salient, people especially subscribe to culturally approved standards. Such actions protect them from the anxiety that their vulnerability to death might otherwise create (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; H. McGregor et al., 1998). Thus norms are, in essence, reassuring.

In the face of death, subscribing more fully to social norms also means that people more harshly evaluate others who violate norms. In one study, following a mortality-salience manipulation, people were more likely to blame severely injured innocent victims – in an apparent effort to restore a sense of order to a frightening environment (Hirschberger, 2006). Likewise, activities that promote self-esteem help people manage the terror of mortality by reaffirming their intrinsic value. The threat of death requires active self-regulation to alleviate disturbing thoughts about mortality (Gailliot et al., 2006).

Culture and Self-Enhancement

Both self-enhancement and related needs represent insights about the self within cultural boundaries. The characterization of self-enhancement described here better reflects Westerners, particularly people in the United States, than people in other countries, especially East Asian countries. East Asians are more self-critical, and self-serving attributions are less common in East Asian cultures (Heine & Renshaw, 2002; Chapter 6). In East Asian cultures, self-effacing biases emerge more commonly than self-enhancing biases. In one study, when Japanese students outperformed another student, they regarded their success as situationally caused, whereas when they were outperformed by another, they were more likely to attribute that person’s performance to personal qualities (Takata, 1987). These more modest self-perceptions among East Asians appear consistent (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000; Oishi, Wyer, & Colcombe, 2000).

However, perhaps needs met by self-enhancement in Western cultures are met in different forms in Eastern cultures. For example, enhancing the social group and one’s standing with respect to the group may meet enhancement needs in interdependent cultures (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Comparing participants from collectivist (Singapore, China) and individualistic (Israeli Jews) cultures, self-enhancement of traits reflecting personal agency was associated with an independent self-construal.
Self-enhancement of communal traits was associated with an interdependent self-construal (Kurman, 2001). Maybe enhancement of the self or one’s social group has some universality but assumes different forms, depending on cultural values (Sedikides et al., 2003).

Reconciling the Motives that Guide Self-Regulation

Each of the motives just described – need for accuracy, consistency, self-improvement, and self-enhancement – governs behavior under somewhat different circumstances. The search for accurate feedback about the self predominates under instability or ambiguity regarding one’s standing (Sorrentino & Roney, 1986; Trope, 1979). The quest for consistent information is strongest when one is certain of one’s standing, but feedback or circumstances challenge self-perceptions (Pelham, 1990). A consistent sense of self, about which one is certain, is also more characteristic of people who have a prevention focus in their lives (Leonardelli, Lakin, & Arkin, 2007).

Self-enhancement needs prevail, at least in Western cultures and under conditions of threat. Self-presentational needs may also trigger self-enhancing behavior (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). Cognitions about the self stray in the direction of consistency, whereas affective reactions to the self stray in the direction of enhancement. That is, we like to feel certain of our attributes, whether positive or negative, but we are happiest when we get positive feedback (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). People motivated primarily by a promotion focus (a concern with growth and nurturance) are more concerned with self-esteem, compared to those with a prevention focus (Leonardelli et al., 2007).

Much self-regulatory activity serving self-enhancement (at least in Western cultures), and potentially also self-improvement, may occur automatically without awareness. However, a search for accurate or consistent feedback is more likely to implicate controlled processing because automatic processes are likely to have been interrupted by a challenge to or ambiguity regarding one’s self-perceptions. A final way to satisfy these motives simultaneously is the flexibility of the human mind, capable of construing information to fit a variety of motives. People want to believe that they are consistent and may distort the degree to which this is true (R. E. Wells & Iyengar, 2005). People want to maintain a positive sense of self and can do so by criticizing their distant past selves, thereby achieving an illusion that they have improved (A. E. Wilson & Ross, 2001).

THE SELF SERVES AS A REFERENCE POINT

The self-concept not only explains how people perceive and regulate themselves but also provides a lens for interpreting the qualities and behavior of other people.
Self-Referencing

Information learned with reference to the self has a memory advantage over other kinds of information. Early research supported a depth of processing account (T. B. Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977): Self-relevant information leaves a richer, more interconnected, and more enduring memory trace. Developments in social cognitive neuroscience help explain the neural basis of such effects (Heatherton, Macrae, & Kelley, 2004). For example (W. M. Kelley et al., 2002), participants judged trait adjectives as either self-descriptive, descriptive of George Bush, or appearing in uppercase letters. Semantic processing tasks typically activate the left prefrontal cortex, and this was true for all three experimental conditions. For self-referencing trials, the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) was also implicated. Moreover, the level of activity in the mPFC correlated with how well participants remembered the items, suggesting that mPFC contributes to the formation of self-relevant memories (Macrae, Moran, Heatherton, Banfield, & Kelley, 2004).

Simulation theory describes self-referencing effects: One way that people infer the mental states of others is to imagine their own thoughts, emotions, or behaviors in a similar setting. A region of the ventromedial PFC previously implicated in self-referencing tasks activates in response to ratings of similar others, but not dissimilar others (Mitchell, Banaji, & Macrae, 2005b). Converging evidence comes from studies of people who have damage to areas of the prefrontal cortex (Stuss & Levine, 2002); such damage may impair the ability to reflect on the self and to be introspective. The self-reference effect in memory may depend on the ability to reflect on the self, and neural activity in the mPFC may underlie that self-reflection (Heatherton et al., 2004).

Social Projection

The self actively constructs the social world, to a large degree, in its own image. Our beliefs and personal qualities help construct our assessments of others. Social projection refers to people estimating their own preferences, traits, problems, activities, and attitudes to be characteristic of others, or at least more than the evidence warrants (Mullen & Goethals, 1990). We assume that others share our characteristics, emotions, and motives (Holmes, 1978), and we use the same traits to describe acquaintances as we use to describe ourselves (Shrauger & Patterson, 1974). Social projection effects can occur even when people have time to think about their assessments (Krueger & Stanke, 2001), when they receive accuracy feedback (Krueger & Clement, 1994), and when they have relevant information about others (Alicke & Largo, 1995; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001).

Do we project our own attitudes, characteristics, and values onto others because we have a motivation to see our characteristics as good or because the self provides a useful set of cognitive heuristics by which people can draw inferences rapidly and confidently? Both appear to be true. Decades of research pitting cognitive explanations against motivational ones suggest that these two sources of influence are hard to separate. Motivational
influences are likely to affect judgments by exerting effects on cognitive processing (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990).

The desire to see the self in positive terms contributes to various social projection processes. We define social concepts that we use for judging others in self-serving ways (Dunning, Perie, & Story, 1991), use traits central to our own self-concepts for evaluating others (Alicke, 1985), make self-serving social comparisons to others (Dunning & Hayes, 1996), spontaneously judge other people by comparing them with ourselves (Mussweiler & Bodenhausen, 2002), assume that others share our weaknesses but that our strengths are unique (J. D. Campbell, 1986; Mullen & Goethals, 1990; Suls & Wan, 1987), and distance ourselves from others who share our weaknesses (Schimel, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, O’Mahen, & Arndt, 2000).

Nor is the target on whom we project our positive qualities randomly selected. We tend to attribute our own attitudes and qualities to attractive targets (Granberg & Brent, 1980; G. Marks & Miller, 1982), and we project our undesirable qualities onto unattractive or unfavorable targets (e.g., Bramel, 1963; Sherwood, 1979). Both types of projection increase under threat to self-esteem, such as negative feedback or a poor performance. By contrast, when a person has affirmed the self or has received positive feedback, social projection and defensive social projection are muted (Dunning, 2003; Kunda, 1990). For example (S. J. Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1984), participants given false feedback about their task performance then estimated how many other students would perform well or poorly. Those who had apparently failed estimated that more others would also fail, compared to participants who had merely received information that someone else had failed. Depressed people likewise show less social projection, suggesting a compromised ability to repair threats to the self (e.g., Agostinelli, Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1992; Tabachnik, Crocker, & Alloy, 1983). People use the self as a standard for inferring qualities in the social world, at least partly guided by self-enhancement needs.

Projection guides judgments in stereotyping processes as well. Threats to self-image reliably increase negative stereotyping. In one study (Fein & Spencer, 1997), participants received positive or negative feedback about their performance on an intelligence test, and in an ostensibly unrelated study, they evaluated an applicant for a job based on her credentials and interview. The applicant was portrayed as either Jewish or not Jewish. Participants who had received negative feedback rated the job candidate less favorably if she was labeled as Jewish, whereas participants who had received positive feedback rated the job candidates equally regardless of background. Research from terror management theory makes a similar point: Reminding people of their own mortality increases their need to affirm self-worth, which in turn enhances their using stereotypes to characterize others (Greenberg et al., 1990; Schimel et al., 1999).

Stereotypes also help us to invalidate the expertise of those who view us negatively. After being criticized, for example, a person may negatively stereotype to discredit an evaluator and minimize the self-deflating aspects of the criticism. For example, students’ evaluations of their professors depend heavily on the grades they expect to receive (L. Sinclair & Kunda, 2000). When flattered by others whom they might otherwise stereotype, people instead
suspend their stereotypes and judge the positive evaluator in a positive manner (L. Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). Thus stereotyping can serve a self-enhancement purpose.

Summary

People hold complex and varied representations of themselves, including both their current attributes and attributes that may characterize them in the future. The self-concept varies depending on one’s situation, temporarily altering the working self-concept; the relational self-concept also represents significant others. Beliefs about one’s current and future qualities act as reference points for setting goals and guiding behavior. Self-esteem is the explicit and implicit valuation of self.

Self-concepts and the cognitions, emotions, and goals that accompany them vary by cultural context. Whereas the independent self, characteristic of Western cultures, reflects a conception of self as autonomous and self-serving, the interdependent self reflects a self-concept interconnected with the social group and influenced substantially by its standards. These differences affect self-regulatory motives and processes.

Self-regulation refers to people controlling their actions, partly influenced by holding a promotion or a prevention focus with respect to personal goals. In attention directed inward toward self or outward toward the environment, generally self-focus increases the correspondence between behavior and salient standards. Self-regulatory behavior may be either self-consciously activated or automatically pursued.

Self-regulation is guided by underlying motivational processes, overarching goals such as need for accuracy, need for a consistent sense of self, desire to improve, and self-enhancement. Each motive affects behavior under different circumstances.

Self-beliefs influence the accessibility of constructs used for judging others. Under neutral circumstances, a person may use personal beliefs and characteristics as a basis for inferring the qualities of others. But conditions of personal threat potentiate social projection processes, ranging from assuming one’s weaknesses are widely shared to stereotyping vulnerable social groups.

Further Reading


