

3

The Social Self



Who are you if you have lost your memory? Consider the following movies about memory loss:

Memento (Todd & Todd, 2000): A man finds mysterious tattoos on himself after sustaining brain damage that prevents him from accessing any new memories.

50 First Dates (Giarraputo, Golin, Juvonen, & Producers, Segal, 2004): A woman has difficulty falling in love because she can't remember the romantic events from the previous day.

The Bourne Ultimatum (F. Marshall, Crowley, Sangberg, & Greengrass, 2007): A CIA agent tries to figure out who he is after suffering long-term amnesia and brainwashing.

Total Recall (Moritz, Jaffe, & Wiseman, 2012): A man in the future discovers his memory has been altered and starts an adventure to discover his true self and history.

Finding Dory (Collins & Stanton, 2016): A friendly but forgetful blue tang fish struggles to be reunited with her long-lost parents.

The characters in these memory-loss movies had to imagine their probable selves into existence. Hollywood scriptwriters are not the only ones using memory loss to imagine the self into existence. The rest of us also have imperfect memories, so we construct our sense of who we are by piecing together fragments of memory, interpreting uncertain evidence, and hoping for the best.

The self is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. William Swann and Michael Buhrmester (2012) call the self a “functional fiction” because it’s a story with a purpose. And even though it’s a made-up, pieced-together tale that has an audience of only one person, this solitary self is also a social self. That’s because the plot of our self-story always involves family, friends, neighborhood, culture, and much more. To understand how each of us live, think, and behave in a social world, we have to first understand how we define and perceive ourselves.

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

Core Questions

1. What is the “self?”
2. How do we know the self is social?
3. Why do we present different selves in different situations?
4. Is the truth always the self’s friend?
5. What is self-esteem and how can we measure it?

Learning Objectives

1. Explain how social psychology has defined self-awareness and the self-concept.
2. Analyze how our self-perceptions are influenced by others.
3. Explain how we adjust our public self-presentation to influence others.
4. Articulate why we sometimes benefit from positive illusions and moderate self-deceptions.
5. Apply both explicit and implicit methods to the many facets of self-esteem, including its dark side.

WHAT IS THE “SELF?”

■ Learning Objective 1: Explain how social psychology has defined self-awareness and the self-concept.

Perhaps the proverbial slap on a newborn baby’s backside (or the more likely suction device up the baby’s nose) first jars us into self-awareness. Before that moment, we were part of someone else’s body. With a snip of the umbilical cord and a sudden breath of air, we became a separate, living creature. But did we know it at that moment? The scientific challenge is to develop a reliable way of discovering how and when we develop *self-awareness* (also called *self-recognition*), the understanding that we are a separate entity from other people and objects in our world. The experience of becoming self-aware (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997) is not easy to document with the reliability and validity that science requires.

The Scientific Study of Self-Awareness

How we think about ourselves changes over the entire arc of our lives. The creator of psychology’s first textbook, William James (1890), wrote that the self “is the sum total of all that a person can call his [today we would add “or her”] own,” including

not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house . . . his reputation and works . . . his yacht and his bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down. (p. 292)

How has science approached the abstract and changing *construct* of self-awareness? *Early Research on Self-Awareness: Darwin and Imitation.* He was really just a proud papa. Charles Darwin couldn’t help but notice interesting things about the development of his beautiful new baby. The scientific study of self-awareness began with Darwin’s *naturalistic observations* of William, the first of the 10 children of Charles and Emma Darwin. Darwin (1877) carefully observed and reported that his infant son began imitating what he saw and heard:



Infants mirror the expressions of adults while becoming aware of themselves as independent beings.

When our infant was only four months old I thought that he tried to imitate sounds; but I may have deceived myself, for I was not thoroughly convinced that he did so until he was ten months old. (p. 286)

Since these first observations from Darwin, scientists have been studying imitation as an early sign of self-awareness (Anderson, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1988). A 1977 study documented 2- to 3-week-old infants imitating a mouth opening, a finger moving, or a tongue appearing between the lips (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977). By 1989, the same research team had documented imitation among infants who were less than 72 hours old (including a 42-minute-old infant!). Four-month-old infants reliably display a more distinct sense of self by smiling more and looking longer at pictures of others compared to looking at pictures of themselves (Rochat & Striano, 2002).

Testing Self-Awareness: The Mirror Self-Recognition Test. Imitation is interesting to see in infants, but does it really mean that they have self-awareness? To more directly test this, scientists—including Darwin—wanted to come up with a way to test whether people (and animals) seem to realize they are independent, unique entities. Do all animals have a sense of self, or is this perception unique to humans?

Darwin (1872) tried to answer that question with an experiment. He reported that

many years ago, in the Zoological Gardens, I placed a looking-glass on the floor between two young [orangutans]. . . . They approached close and protruded their lips towards the image, as if to kiss it, in exactly the same manner as they had previously done towards each other. (p. 142)

Those orangutans acted as if the creature in the mirror were another animal, not themselves, suggesting that they did not possess self-awareness.

Almost 100 years later, in 1968, Gordon Gallup followed Darwin's lead by attempting to find out whether some animals respond to their mirror image "as if their image represented another animal" (Gallup, 1968, p. 782).

So he created a more controlled version of Darwin's original experiment by first anesthetizing some chimpanzees, macaques, and rhesus monkeys. While they were unconscious, Gallup marked each animal with a nonodorous, nonirritating red dye just above the eyebrow. The animals could not smell, feel, or see the red dye without the help of a mirror.

What would it mean if an animal looked into the mirror, saw the unmistakable red dye, but did not touch the red dye? The animal probably perceived that the creature in the mirror was just some other animal that happened to have a red splotch on its forehead. But what if an animal looked into the mirror and touched the unusual red dye on its own face—not on the mirror? In that case, the animal was telling us, "That's me in the mirror: I am—and I know that I am the one with the red mark." The *mirror self-recognition test* (also called the mark test) creates an opportunity for animals to demonstrate self-awareness. In Gallup's first study, the four chimpanzees (but not the other primates) did indeed touch the red mark on their foreheads. Voila! Gallup had scientifically demonstrated self-awareness among chimpanzees.



Charles Darwin noted early signs of mental development in his infant son, William. His "eyes were fixed on a candle as early as the 9th day . . . on the 49th day his attention was attracted by a bright-coloured tassel" (Biographical Sketch of an Infant, p. 286)



Do non-human animals have a sense of self? A YouTube .com search for "animal self-recognition" results in videos on elephants, lions, chimpanzees and others toying with their image in a mirror.



Dogs seem to be aware when they have misbehaved. They appear to demonstrate something like shame - but only when they are caught.

More recently, mirror self-recognition studies have also documented self-awareness among Asian elephants (Plotnik, de Waal, & Reiss, 2006), killer whales (Delfour & Marten, 2001), and dolphins (Marino, 2002). Self-awareness among animals is no surprise to dog owners. Misbehaving dogs will slink about and put their tails between their legs in ways that suggest awareness of a guilty self.

Defining and Measuring the Self-Concept

The *self-concept* is the personal summary of who we believe we are; it is how we answer the question, “Who am I?” It includes our assessment of our positive and negative qualities, our relationships to others, our beliefs and opinions, and more. We acquire a self-concept in several ways, including the following:

- We compare our self to others (social comparison theory).
- Culture creates expectations about how the self should behave (social identity theory).
- We create mental structures that direct the self’s attention (self-schema theory).

Let’s consider each of these theories in more detail.

Social Comparison Theory. *Social comparison theory* proposes that we use social comparisons to construct our self-concept, especially when we have no other objective standard available to us (Festinger, 1954). How do you know if you are shy, competitive, rich, anxious, or anything else? These subjective ideas only become meaningful in comparison to others.

For example, if you are walking alone on the beach, you may not even be thinking about your physical appearance. But when someone much more attractive walks by, the unflattering social comparison can deliver a small shock to your previously contented self-concept (Bachman & O’Malley, 1986; Marsh, Köller, & Baumert, 2001). At a basic level, there are two types of social comparisons we can make.

- *Upward Social Comparisons.* When we make an **upward social comparison**, we compare ourselves to someone who is better than us. This type of comparison can be useful when we want to improve on a particular skill. Most people who like to watch cooking shows with celebrity chefs enjoy getting tips on how to make their own food taste or look better. The same is true for people who get ideas about home decorating from Martha Stewart or by reading magazines with ideas, or when athletes learn from coaches. However, constantly comparing ourselves to people who have excelled can lead to frustration or even depression—why can’t my cupcakes look as good as the ones on Pinterest?
- *Downward Social Comparisons.* That’s where the second type of social comparison comes into play: **downward social comparison**. This occurs when we compare ourselves to someone who is worse than we are. This might not help us improve, but it sure feels better. My cupcakes might not win any cupcake reality show contests, sure, but it’s better than the cupcake my daughter tried to make, for example. My tennis skills aren’t on a professional level, maybe, but I’m better than the guy in the next court who can’t hit a single ball over the net.

How we process those social comparisons also makes a difference (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). The W.I.D.E. guide to social comparisons identifies four factors relevant to our subjective processing of what we see around us (see Figure 3.1):

- *Who.* We evaluate our abilities automatically (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995) by comparing ourselves to similar others (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Tennis players who are about my ability level or a little better give me the most useful social comparison feedback.
- *Interpretation.* How we interpret social comparisons influences our self-concept. Moving into a group home with sick elderly neighbors could be processed in two very different ways (Michinov, 2007): (1) “Thank goodness that I’m not *that* ill,” or (2) “Very soon, I also could be just as needy” (Brandstätter, 2000).
- *Direction.* The direction of our social comparison influences our self-concept. Comparing myself to better tennis players is an upward social comparison (that makes me feel worse) and comparing to worse players is a downward social comparison (that makes me feel better). Downward social comparisons tend to enhance our self-concept (Burleson, Leach, & Harrington, 2005; Gibbons et al., 2002; Guimond et al., 2007; Major, Sciacchitano, & Crocker, 1993).
- *Esteem.* Protecting our self-esteem influences our self-concept. The losing tennis player may say to her opponent, “You played extremely well today,” implying that her opponent had to play his or her best to beat her (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). We’ll talk more about self-esteem—and how we use psychological tricks to protect it—a little later in this chapter.

Social Identity Theory. Henri Tajfel was in a bad situation when he was captured by German soldiers during World War II. He was a Polish-born Jew who had volunteered to join the French army. When the Germans asked who he was, he faced a terrible dilemma; should he admit he was Jewish? He did—but he also falsely presented himself as a French citizen, which probably saved his life. After surviving the war with other French prisoners, Tajfel became a social psychologist who proposed that the self is composed of two general categories:

- (1) personal characteristics (serious, funny, grumpy, tall, or rich), and
- (2) social role characteristics (son, mother, musician, Catholic, or accountant).

In other words, there are at least these two sides to the self, and they each have many working parts. You are not just “funny”; you are many other things: short-tempered, generous, and so forth. You are not just a student; you are also a daughter or son who has a certain ethnic heritage, religious upbringing, and sexual orientation. Your complicated self is organized around what Tajfel called *social identity theory*, which proposes that our self-concept is composed of a personal identity and a social identity (see Rivenburgh, 2000; Sherif, 1966b; Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). What are some examples of social identities?

■ **FIGURE 3.1** The W.I.D.E. guide suggests that social comparisons are made up of four factors.

W	I	D	E
Who	Interpretation	Direction	Esteem

The social self is influenced by cultural expectations and traditions that show up in surprising ways in controlled experiments.



The Regional Self. One social identity is based on where you are from. The well-known social psychologist Roy Baumeister (1986) pointed out that in Medieval times, a person’s region was sometimes part of his or her name; “Leonardo da Vinci” means “Leonardo, from Vinci.” Regional identity is also apparent in many of the World War II cemeteries in France for soldiers from different countries who died during the Normandy invasion. The cemetery designers organized the soldiers in death—as in life—in regional groups organized first by country and then by region within that country.

Regional affiliations influence how others perceive us *and* how we, in turn, perceive ourselves. For example, one research team found that within the United States, people from Massachusetts are often perceived as intelligent but snobbish, Iowans as hard-working but hicks, Georgians as hospitable but racist, and New Yorkers as ambitious but rude (Berry, Jones, & Kuczaj, 2000). Do you feel proud when someone from *your* country, especially from your region of the country, wins at the Olympics? You probably didn’t train, sacrifice, donate money, or even care very much who won until you turned on the television. Nevertheless, our national and regional identity influence our self-concept.

The Cultural Self. The tricky thing about our cultural self is that we are mostly unaware of it until we happen to bump into another culture. Cultural collisions create humorous situations that have produced some great comedic films such as *My Cousin Vinny* (Launer, Schiff, & Lynn, 1992), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, Nayare, & Chadha, 2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Goetzman, Hanks, Wilson, & Jones, 2002, 2016), and even *Elf* (Berg, Komarnicki, Robertson, & Favreau, 2003). If you have ever traveled to another country, your assumptions, way of life, clothing, and more may have suddenly become salient to you in new ways because you may suddenly realize that your view of the world is changed due to your cultural self.

■ FIGURE 3.2 Identity can be shaped by culture.



Independent and Interdependent Self-Concepts. By placing Western and Asian cultures on a cultural continuum, Figure 3.2 adds an additional layer to Tajfel’s social identity theory. This continuum is anchored by a personal, *independent self-construal* (many “Western” cultures) at one end and a social, *interdependent self-construal* (many Asian cultures) at the other end.

This means that the ideal self in one culture is very different from the ideal self in another culture. The rugged individualist so valued in the United States will likely be perceived as rude and insensitive in Japan. The conciliatory team player so valued in Japan may be perceived as wimpy and nonassertive in the United States. Table 3.1 helps us understand how cultural norms influence how we think about the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

■ **TABLE 3.1** Some Examples of How Culture Affects Views of the Self

	To guide group behavior	To get children to finish their food	To improve worker productivity
American culture recommends that the squeaky wheel gets the grease.	. . . children think of the starving children in Ethiopia and how lucky they are to be American.	. . . workers stand in front of a mirror and repeat: "I am beautiful."
Japanese culture recommends that the nail that stands up gets pounded down.	. . . children think about the farmer who worked so hard to produce the rice for you and how disappointed he or she will be if it is not eaten.	. . . workers hold a coworker's hand and repeat: "He or she is beautiful."

Self-Schema Theory. A third way to think about how the self-concept is formed is through *self-schemas*, memory structures that summarize and organize our beliefs about self-relevant information (Markus, 1977). A *schema* in general is a cognitive and memory structure for organizing the world, so self-schemas transform the raw material from cultural social comparisons into the building blocks of our self-concept (Hewitt & Genest, 1990), creating what Cervone (2004) calls "the architecture of personality."

For example, let's say that you wake up late on Wednesday morning. Is your lateness because you are lazy or because you work so hard that you're exhausted? You then speed in traffic heading to your job. Is your speeding because you are a dangerous, careless driver or because you are responsibly trying to get to work as quickly as possible? When you get to work, the first thing you do is get some coffee from the breakroom. Are you addicted and trying to procrastinate, or are you simply trying to get focused so you can be efficient? Instead of chatting with coworkers, you head straight to your desk. Are you rude or simply motivated to accomplish that day's tasks?

Your self-concept creates a coherent self by activating particular self-schemas that help you interpret your own behavior. In this example, your efforts to get to work could lead you to think of yourself in two very different ways: (1) you are lazy, dangerous, addicted, and rude, or (2) you are hard-working, responsible, highly motivated, and determined to succeed. How you interpret the flow of everyday events in your life depends on which self-schemas have been activated, as the schemas create cognitive frameworks for you to interpret the events of your life.

The Main Ideas

1. Self-awareness is the understanding that we are a separate entity from other people and objects in our world. One way that scientists have attempted to measure self-awareness is called the mirror self-recognition test.
2. Our self-concept is the personal summary of who we believe we are.
3. Social comparison theory proposes that our sense of self is influenced by different types of social comparisons, including upward (comparing the self to someone who's better) and downward (comparing the self to someone who's worse).
4. Social identity theory describes the self as a mixture of personal and social identities, and self-schema theory suggests that we organize our beliefs about ourselves into mental structures in memory.

⚡ CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Identify three activities you enjoy doing, such as sports, hobbies, and studying various subjects. Then, make one upward social comparison and one downward social comparison for each activity. As you identified one person who was better than you and one person who wasn't as advanced, what emotions resulted from each type of comparison?
- List three ways that you typically perceive the world that you think might have been influenced by your regional, national, or specific social cultures. One way to do this might be to think about how your perceptions might be different from the perceptions of people from different cultures.
- Analyze the pros and cons of having a false but positive self-concept. For example, you might delude yourself about how you are now, but would this delusion eventually shape you into a better person?

HOW DO WE KNOW THE SELF IS SOCIAL?

■ Learning Objective 2: Analyze how our self-perceptions are influenced by others.



Our “self” sometimes seems like a circus ring master. It usually directs our attention to the most positive self-performances.

Magnificent? Yes, humans are in many ways. But we are also petty, deceitful, prone to violence, moody, and many other unattractive things. Like winning the lottery, the gift of self-awareness changes our lives in both good and bad ways. We can't *un-win* the lottery once we have won it, and we can't undo having self-awareness and a self-concept once they have evolved. But how do we know that the self is social? You can think of the social self as the storytelling ringmaster in the three-ring circus of our complicated lives. It directs the spotlight of our attention and narrates a story that brings coherence to our otherwise chaotic interactions with others.

Here are three strands of evidence indicating that the self is social: (1) our self-perceptions rely on the behaviors we display to others, (2) self-discrepancy theory describes how different components of the self are influenced by others, and (3) our sense of self often includes other people. Let's talk about each strand.

Self-Perception Theory: Behaviors Tell Us Who We Are

A friend of mine [Wind's] met my parents a few years ago and was chatting politely with them. My friend casually mentioned to my parents, “Wind really loves waffles!” I was surprised—I don't think I had ever talked to my friend about waffles, and I didn't really consider myself a big waffle fan. When I asked my friend about her statement, though, she said, “Every time we go to brunch, you always order waffles.” I thought about it for a second, realized she was right, and realized that yes, I guess I do love waffles! This experience demonstrates self-perception theory.

Self-perception theory proposes that we get help answering the question, “Who am I?” by making inferences about ourselves based on observing our own behaviors (Bem, 1967; Bem & McConnell, 1970). To understand this theory, first think about how you form perceptions of other people. You watch their behaviors and infer—or guess, really—about their motivations, attitudes, values, and core traits based on the behaviors they display to you. You never really know what’s going on behind the metaphorical curtain of these outward behaviors.

Self-perception theory proposes that we form our self-concept in very similar ways. Perhaps we don’t really have special, privileged access to our inner thoughts and choices all the time—and we thus try to infer our own motivations, attitudes, values, and core traits based on observing *our own* behaviors. If you regularly volunteer at a local dog shelter, then you must be someone who cares about animals. If you love to travel and eat exotic foods, then you must be open to new experiences. We define our self, in part, by how we observe ourselves as we interact with others.

In this way, self-perception theory is the idea that our self-concept forms by observing our own behaviors in a social world. If other people seem to think we’re funny, we will likely incorporate “good sense of humor” into our self-concept. If other people look to us to make decisions about where to eat every Friday night, we might come to believe we’re decisive leaders. And if you always order waffles when you go to brunch with friends, you probably love waffles. Again, because the self-concept is abstract and subjective, one of the most straightforward ways to decide who we are is by simply observing what we do.

Self-Discrepancy Theory: Are We Trying to Juggle Three Selves?

So far, we’ve been talking about the self as if we all have a fully formed and single self-concept. Psychologist Tory Higgins (1987, 2002) suggested that in reality, we all have *three* simultaneous selves. We juggle these selves all at once, and they frequently change shape while in the air. As you learn about each one, consider how each contributes to your own self-concept.

The Actual Self. Our first self is our “actual self,” which is simply who we think we are, right now. It includes both our good and bad qualities, as well as the qualities we think other people see in us. The actual self is who we are currently, as if someone took a snapshot of our evolving lives. A meaningful actual self can acknowledge our strengths and admit our weaknesses.

The Ideal Self. Higgins hypothesizes that we also have an “ideal self,” which is the person we would like to become in the future. It includes enhancing or adding positive qualities that we don’t think are maximized in the actual self, and it means eliminating or at least reducing negative qualities we have right now. Our ideal self is our dreams and goals, the person we strive to become. Importantly, our ideal self is truly based on what *we* want, even if that means secret desires we’ve never been able to admit to anyone else. If you could, for example, have any job in the world, or look a certain way, or live a particular lifestyle, what would it be?

The Ought Self. In contrast with the ideal self, our “ought” self is what we think other people expect of us. The ought self is based on our perception of what our social world hopes for us, perhaps what our parents want us to do or be, what our friends believe would be good for us, or even what our culture tells us is proper and correct. The

ought self may influence how we dress, for example, because we know what is expected of us. Interestingly, our ought self might change based on whom our reference is. For example, what you think your parents expect of you might be very different from what you think a first date expects of you.

When Selves Don't Align: Self-Discrepancy. Higgins suggests that not only do we have to juggle these three simultaneous selves, but we also have to deal with times when the selves don't match up. He refers to the mismatch between our three selves as *self-discrepancy*. How do you feel when your actual self doesn't match your ideal self? Are these emotions different from those you experience when your actual self doesn't match your ought self?

Our discrepancies have predictable consequences that Higgins explored in research. He found that when the actual self and ideal self don't match—in other words, when we don't live up to our own ideals or we fail to achieve our dreams—we will experience “dejection-related emotions” such as disappointment, shame, embarrassment, and possibly even depression (Higgins, 1987).

On the other hand, sometimes our actual self doesn't match our ought self. When this happens, we'll feel that we haven't lived up to others' expectations—and that kind of failure produces “agitation-related emotions” such as guilt, fear, self-contempt, and anxiety. Of course, the ideal situation would be that all three selves (actual, ideal, and ought) are exactly in alignment, with perfect overlap. As you can see in Figure 3.3, this would be like a Venn diagram of three circles. Each time the selves get closer together, the circles overlap more until only a single, perfect circle remains because they are all the same self. How likely do you think this is to achieve? Can you see discrepancies between your actual, ideal, and ought selves?

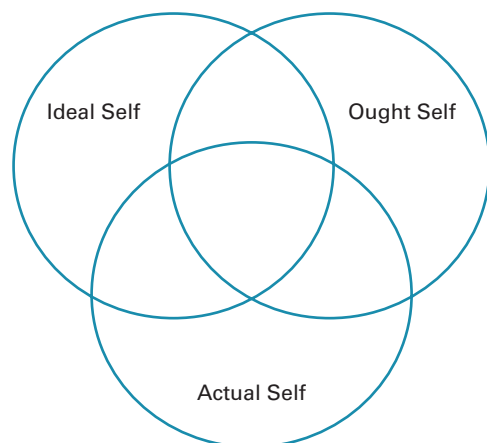
For more on self-discrepancy theory, see the Social Psychology in Popular Culture feature on “Self-Discrepancy Theory and Wonder Woman.”

Self-Expansion Theory: Inclusion of Others in the Self

While self-discrepancy theory suggested that we might have more than one self-concept, other social psychologists have suggested that our self-concept might even include other people. Certainly, social identity theory noted that our sense of self includes our group memberships and our relationships with other people. But could our abstract sense of self also actually include specific other individuals in our social world?

Self-expansion theory is the idea that all of us have a basic motivation to grow, improve, and enhance our self-concept; we all want to reach our greatest potential (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001; Aron & Aron, 1996). While other theories have noted that we can do that through things like identifying our flaws or working toward our ideal self, self-expansion theory specifically suggests that one common way we attempt to “expand” our self-concept is through close social relationships. If we psychologically bond with others and feel that these individuals now become part of who we are, then their strengths, resources, knowledge, and skills can help us grow and have new opportunities.

■ FIGURE 3.3 Three selves might exist for each of us, according to self-discrepancy theory.



SELF-DISCREPANCY THEORY AND WONDER WOMAN



Social Psychology in Popular Culture



Most superheroes have secret identities—but does this complicate how they think about their own self-concept? The most popular female superhero of all time is Wonder Woman, whose secret identity is Diana Prince. But really, both of these identities are costumes; she’s really Princess Diana from Paradise Island. When the *Wonder Woman* movie came out in 2017, it broke the record for opening-weekend ticket sales (over \$100 million) for a movie with a female director (Lang, 2017). But the original D.C. comics (which started in 1942 for this character) provides an interesting view into the character’s original conceptualization.

Applying Tory Higgins’s (1987, 2002) self-discrepancy theory, Princess Diana would be her “actual self”—her true identity and the person she is when she’s not taking on one of her other identities. Most people would probably

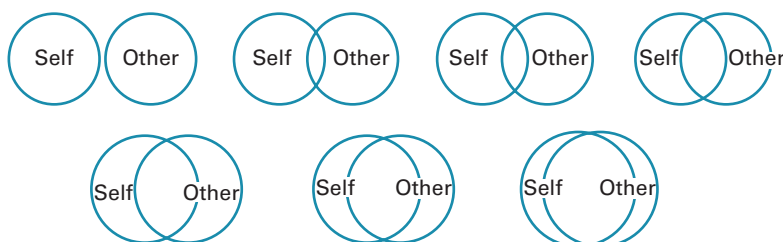
say that Wonder Woman is Diana’s “ideal self,” the self that embodies all of her goals, or the best version of the person she could be. Most regular humans strive for an ideal self in the future, but superheroes usually get to reach their ideals a bit sooner than us mere mortals. Interestingly, though, even Diana has to deal with people judging her, which makes her “ought self” come alive. In the early Wonder Woman comics, both men and women make comments about how her star-spangled outfit is inappropriate and skimpy. When Diana is pretending to be Diana Prince, a modest and gentle military secretary, her love interest Steve Trevor constantly tells her that she’s not as attractive, strong, and amazing as Wonder Woman. Diana thus is judged both when she’s embodying her Wonder Woman identity (she’s too brazen and nonconformist) and when she’s embodying her Diana Prince identity (she’s too subdued and conformist). It’s apparently hard to be a modern woman, even when you have super powers, an invisible plane, and a magic lasso.

[End note: For a more detailed analysis of self-discrepancy theory as applied to Wonder Women, see the book *Wonder Woman Psychology: Lassoing the Truth* (2017) and read the chapter “Multiple Identities, Multiple Selves?” by Goodfriend and Formichella-Elsden.]

Psychologically including others in our self-concept is measured by the ***Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) Scale***, which presents people with a series of seven Venn diagrams with increasing overlap between “self” and “other” (see Figure 3.4; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Participants simply circle the pair of circles that they feel accurately indicates how much their self-concept now includes the other person. The IOS Scale is most commonly used in research on romantic partners, such as spouses (e.g., Agnew, Loving, Le, & Goodfriend, 2004; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998), but it has also been used to measure how much people see themselves as cognitively including their social groups on a larger scale (e.g., Mashek, Cannaday, & Tangney, 2007; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013, 2014).

■ FIGURE 3.4 Figure caption missing

Please circle the picture below which best describes your relationship with your romantic partner.



From Aron, Aron, & Smollan (1992).


The Main Ideas

1. Self-perception theory proposes that we form our self-concept by observing our own behaviors, then making assumptions about our internal values, attitudes, and so on based on those behaviors.
2. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that instead of a single self, we all have three selves: (1) the actual self (who we are right now), (2) the ideal self (who we'd like to become), and (3) the ought self (who others expect us to be). When our actual self doesn't match our ideal self, we experience dejection-related emotions. When our actual self doesn't match our ought self, we experience agitation-related emotions.
3. Self-expansion theory is the idea that we all want to grow and improve, and one way to do that is to cognitively include other people into our self-concept. One way to measure this cognitive self-expansion is through the Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale, which shows a series of seven progressively overlapping circles; participants choose the one that best represents how they include someone else in their self-concept.

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Think of at least two times when you realized something about your self-concept by observing your behaviors. Why did you not have this self-insight before you noticed your own behaviors?
- Make a list of traits that make up your actual self, then one for your ideal self, and finally one for your ought self. Mark the traits that match across lists, and mark the traits that don't match. How do you feel about the traits that don't match? Are the emotions you experience in alignment with what self-discrepancy theory hypothesized you would feel?
- Do you think it's healthy for two relationship partners to circle the most-overlapping set of circles, or does this somehow indicate codependency? What do you think would be the "best" pair of circles for couple members to choose, and why?

WHY DO WE PRESENT DIFFERENT SELVES IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS?

 Learning Objective 3: Explain how we adjust our public self-presentation to influence others.

In the quaint, olden days before mobile phones, a sociology researcher observed that it was not unusual for a college woman living in a dormitory to impress her dorm mates with her popularity by arranging for "herself to be called several times in order to give all the other girls ample opportunity to hear her paged" (Waller, 1937, p. 730). That kind of shallow affirmation probably still happens today when, for example, we may subtly broadcast the number of our social media "friends" to signal our popularity.

Both cases represent behavior that Erving Goffman (1959) describes as a performance—even when we are not fully self-aware that we are performing. People perform in slightly different ways for family, friends, peers, supervisors, professors, and store clerks. This tendency is called *self-presentation theory* or *impression management*, ways that we adjust the self to gain social influence by managing the impressions that we make on others.

This is not a startling insight, but the routine use of impression management needs to be acknowledged. We do not behave the same way at a funeral as we would at a rock concert or a job interview. Put simply, in different settings, we present different parts of our self-concept. As Kurt Lewin learned while serving as a foot soldier in World War I, our behavior often depends on how we perceive the immediate situation (see Goffman, 1959).



We Use Impression Management to Get What We Want

We employ impression management tactics as social power. We might act disappointed to get more attention, pretend to be surprised at a high price hoping for a discount, or even buy a conspicuously fancy sports car to signal sexual availability (Sundie et al., 2011). There are specific tactics associated with impression management.

Ingratiation: Other-Enhancements and Opinion Conformity. Cynthia Stevens and Amy Kristof (1995) were interested in how job applicants try to influence interviewers by presenting certain aspects of the self. One common tactic was ingratiation. This short-term impression management tactic is designed to increase liking and attraction by complimenting the other person and seeming to admire him or her. One form of ingratiation is **other-enhancement**, praising the interviewer. A variation with the same goal is **opinion conformity**, endorsing the interviewer's perceived attitudes or values.

You can probably think of some of the cruder terms used to describe people who try to ingratiate themselves with people in power by praising everything they do and agreeing with everything they say. No matter what term you use, ingratiation is explicit attempts to present a version of the self that you think the other person will like in an attempt to benefit yourself somehow—such as getting a job offer.

Self-Promotion: Self-Enhancements and Entitlements. Self-promotion is another short-term impression management tactic that uses positive statements about the self to convey competence. One form of self-promotion is **self-enhancements**; that's when you imply that your actual accomplishments are more significant than they first appear to be. Another common form of self-promotion is **entitlements**; that's when you take credit for positive events even if you had nothing to do with them. These may be effective short-term tactics, but they can backfire. For example, taking credit for someone else's work may turn a friend into a long-term enemy and damage your reputation with important people.

Conspicuous Consumption. Depending on the type of job, gaining an advantage during a job interview is a short-term tactic. But there are impression management strategies with long-term goals. A young politician with ambitions may carefully calculate the right kind of marriage partner to influence future voters. Others will attempt to influence the impression they make on others by spending money on flashy or high-status items, such as expensive homes, cars, clothes, and jewelry. Publicly displaying the use of expensive products in an attempt to impress others is called **conspicuous consumption**.

In the 19th century, the Norwegian American economist Thorstein Veblen (1899/1918) recognized that some conspicuous consumption is as *unsubtle* as a male peacock showing off its extravagant feathers to females (see Darwin, 1871; Møller & Petrie, 2002).

Can a smiling face mask your real feelings when pulled over by police?

Peacocks flash colorful tails to signal their reproductive value to peahens the same way that some men drive fancy cars to attract females. Most women, by the way, easily decode conspicuous consumption by men as a desire for uncommitted sexual partnerships (Sundie et al., 2011).

Brain Damage Can Limit Self-Presentation Ability

This next part is sad. Some people with advanced cases of Alzheimer's disease can't pass the mirror self-recognition test. They look into the mirror and have no idea who is looking back at them (see Biringer, Anderson, & Strubel, 1988; Bologna & Camp, 1997; Phillips, Howard, & David, 1996). Alzheimer's disease is not the only tragic but useful clue telling us how the self and the brain are connected. Consider one of the most famous case studies in the history of brain research and what it can teach us about our ability to purposefully change how we present ourselves to others.

Phineas Gage: A Landmark Case Study. Phineas Gage's story began on September 13, 1848, when he was working as the foreman of a crew working for the railroad (see Macmillan, 2000). The crew traveled along the path where the railroad was to be built and blew up anything in the way. Apparently, Gage was a very good foreman. Many of the railroad construction workers near Cavendish, Vermont, were Irish immigrants who had carried their ancient regional feuds into America. These were difficult-to-manage men, and an unpopular foreman was subject to "violent attacks . . . some of which ended fatally" (Macmillan, 2000, p. 22). Nevertheless, Dr. John Harlow (Gage's doctor) described the preaccident Gage as a man "who possessed a well-balanced mind," "a shrewd business man," and a man "of temperate habits and possessed of considerable energy of character." He was good at managing people.

On the day of his famous accident, Gage was using his 43-inch, 13-pound iron rod to tamp what he thought was sand on top of blasting powder. The blasting powder had been poured into a hole drilled deep into some rock. The rod was flat at one end but pointed at the end sticking out of the hole. The purpose of the sand was to direct the force of the explosion into the rock rather than back out the hole. The fuse had been set—but this time the sand was missing. Perhaps someone called to Gage to warn him that the sand was not yet in the hole. As Gage turned his head over the hole, the



Phineas Gage's personality changed after his brain accident - but not entirely. He drove a four-horse stage coach in Chile for perhaps seven years. He later told entertaining tall tales about his travels to his nieces and nephews.

iron rod somehow slipped from his fingers, sparked against the rock, and ignited the blasting powder.

The long iron rod shot upward, entered beneath and through Gage's left cheek, passed behind most of his left eye, continued through the front left portion of his brain, and exited out the top of his head. It landed about 23 meters (or 75 feet) away, greasy with Gage's brain matter—and it was still greasy the next day even after some railroad workers rinsed it in a nearby stream. Gage was knocked over, of course, but then surprised everyone by getting up, walking to an oxcart to be taken to a doctor, and writing a note in his foreman's log book—despite a very large hole in his head! Dr. Harlow cleaned the wound, shoved pieces of Gage's skull back into place, and started recording what would become one of the most famous case studies in brain science.

Say Goodbye to Self-Presentation. Was Phineas Gage harmed? Well, he could still recognize his mother and uncle. He understood what had happened to him. And, only a few days after his accident, Gage made plans to return to work. But his physical health cycled between recovery, infection, and delirium for several weeks. As his condition slowly stabilized, Dr. Harlow noticed some odd features about his patient.

Gage's memory was "as perfect as ever" but now the once shrewd businessman "would not take \$1000 for a few pebbles." That was odd. Had Gage lost his ability to understand money? About a month after the accident, Harlow wrote that Gage had become "exceedingly capricious and childish . . . will not yield to restraint when it conflicts with his desires." His self-governing mental habits had disappeared. The once effective foreman had been replaced by someone with crude speech and childish impulses. The change in his personality was so great that Gage's friends described the postaccident man as "no longer Gage." Apparently, the damage to Gage's left frontal lobes was linked to a profound change in his self—but not all of his self.

It is easy to imagine Gage's acquaintances saying, "Why doesn't Phineas just stop saying such profane things? Doesn't he know what he's doing?" The answer seems to be no; Gage seemed to have minimal *self-insight*, the ability to self-observe and evaluate our own behavior. Certainly, self-insight is essential if we want to be aware of how we're presenting ourselves in public situations and especially if we want to use impression management to get other people to like us.

In addition to his seeming lack of self-insight, the new Gage was probably less able to notice and adjust his behavior across different social situations. Curiously, patients with similar brain damage (usually due to brain surgery) tell a similar story. When Beer, John, Scabini, and Knight (2006) allowed patients with similar brain damage to see themselves on a video recording, they discovered that they were disclosing personal and inappropriate information. What we call the "self" appears to be connected to particular regions and neural pathways within the brain—and our tendency to display different aspects of our self can be affected by brain damage.

Self-Monitoring: Social Chameleons

After his brain damage, Phineas Gage seemed to lose his ability to *self-monitor*, or change how he acted in different social situations in an attempt to fit in. Self-monitoring suggests an awareness that we have a complicated self that needs monitoring. Some people excel at being "social chameleons" that can blend into almost any environment. Others just don't seem to care. There are benefits and drawbacks to both approaches.

Low Self-Monitors. Some people act the same way no matter where they are or who is around them—they are always shy, for example, or always sarcastic. People who



Chameleons can change color to disguise themselves and fit into their environment. Are people capable of similar changes, based on their social environment?

appear to have little change in their personality or self-presentation across time and situations are considered low in self-monitoring. They pay little attention to how they “come across” to other people and act consistently no matter where they are.

High Self-Monitors. However, other people are high in self-monitoring, and their behavior is the opposite: They change how they act all the time, depending on the situation. In a cooperative environment, they cooperate; in a competitive environment, they compete. High self-monitors are people who look around and assess their environment, then adapt their self-presentation to get whatever they want out of that particular situation.

Adaptability Versus Authenticity: Which Way Is Best? There are advantages and disadvantages to being high in self-monitoring. Certain careers such as sales, politics, and acting require people who can change how they act and appear on cue. It also seems reasonable that people who can easily and comfortably fit in with anyone will be more popular and may advance more quickly in their workplaces. However, sometimes people who are high in self-monitoring can seem inauthentic to others. If they are always changing how they act, others will wonder who is the “real” person?

The Symphonic Self: The Poetry of Science

Let’s take a two-paragraph pause to reflect on Phineas Gage from an artistic perspective. Gage’s life illustrates how the self constantly tries to create coherence out of the scattered experiences of our lives. Fernando Pessoa (2002) wrote in *The Book of Disquiet* that “my soul is like a hidden orchestra; I do not know which instruments grind and play away inside of me, strings and harps, timbales and drums. I can only recognize myself as a symphony” (p. 310). The self simultaneously draws on brain regions and neural pathways the same way that a symphony conductor simultaneously draws on multiple sections of an orchestra to produce an overall effect. Gage’s self after his accident was like an orchestra missing a few instruments.

One brain scientist, however, believes that what our brain does every day is far more impressive than the most beautiful symphony orchestra. Damasio (2010) continued the metaphor, writing that “the marvel . . . is that the score and conductor become reality only as life unfolds” (p. 24). The self is a symphony orchestra that plays magnificent music only once, without a score, and without any rehearsal—and then flows smoothly into its next performance. What a magnificent, creative self!

The Main Ideas


1. Self-presentation (also called impression management) refers to the ways we adjust our self in public to gain social acceptance or influence. Specific ways we alter self-presentation include ingratiation, self-promotion, and conspicuous consumption.
2. Phineas Gage’s famous accident revealed a connection between the self and the brain. After Gage suffered brain damage, his personality changed, but his ability to change his self-presentation also went away.

3. Self-monitoring refers how much we choose to alter our public presentations of self in different social situations, in an attempt to fit in. People who are high self-monitors change across situations, while low self-monitors act consistently regardless of the situation.

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- What do the clothes you wear tell others about yourself? For example, do you wear sports logos or clothes with the name of your school? Why do people display parts of their identity in this way?
- Under what circumstances are you more likely to use ingratiation, self-promotion, or conspicuous consumption? Are there situations where attempting to use these self-presentation tactics would backfire?
- How do the goals and tactics of impression management change across different phases of a romantic relationship?
- Do we have a core self (what some call a soul) if we constantly adjust our self to gain social power, impress people, or validate our opinions?

IS THE TRUTH ALWAYS THE SELF'S FRIEND?

 **Learning Objective 4: Articulate why we sometimes benefit from positive illusions and moderate self-deceptions.**

The self-story is a compelling story, at least to ourselves, because it is *our* version of events (Silvia & Gendolla, 2001). But what if we are telling ourselves a very nice story that is not true? Do people really lie to themselves like that? Steven Pinker compares our storytelling selves to political spin-doctors who are always looking for ways to make their candidates look good (Pinker, 2002). Like some real politicians, we create self-stories that smell a little bit too good to be true. Why not? If I am the screenwriter, producer, director, and final-cut editor of my self-story, I can make the story come out any way that I want. Does that make our self-story fiction or nonfiction?

Optimal Margin Theory: Positive Illusions Can Be Beneficial

Let's be blunt about it: Sometimes we lie to ourselves. Minor self-deceptions show up in many parts of our lives. For example, when our romantic partner asks, "Does this outfit make me look fat?" most partners understand that the desired responses are "No," or, "You look great, but your black top might look even better." But is there anything wrong with believing that we are a little bit more attractive, caring, intelligent, or insightful than we really are? Baumeister (1989) developed *optimal margin theory*, which proposes a slight to moderate range of healthy distortions of reality. A little bit of self-deception can make us feel good—but too much distortion of reality causes problems.

Instead of the "cold, hard truth," we often prefer to believe *positive illusions*, beliefs that depart from reality in ways that influence us to remain optimistic. For example, drivers know that a potential car accident is around every corner, but positive



Age can just be a number – how old you feel is subjective.

illusions help us manage such chronic stress by maintaining an illusion of more control over our driving fate than we really have (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). Shelley Taylor and her colleagues assert that we use three types of self-deceptions that promote our own positive mental health. We

- (1) cling to the belief we can control our own lives more than we can (control),
- (2) believe in an unrealistically optimistic view of the future (optimism), and
- (3) discover meaning in critical life events, such as bereavement (meaning).

For example, one way that many older people use positive illusions to feel more optimistic and in control is called **subjective age**, our sense of how old we feel compared to our chronological age. For example, the chronological age range was between 60 and 95 in a study of more than 800 French retirees (Gana, Alaphilippe, & Bailly, 2004). The researchers wanted to test (a) whether self-deception about their subjective age was harmful or helpful and (b) whether the possible benefits of self-deception stopped when people deceived themselves too much—when they, so to speak, “went off the deep end” of the self-deception continuum.

Optimal margin theory suggests that, like wine, a little self-deception can be a good thing—too much, however, can become dangerous. For the French retirees, those with positive illusions about their age “reported more satisfaction with daily pursuits (leisure time), higher self-worth, and less boredom proneness” (Gana et al., 2004, p. 63). But the people in this sample may not have gotten too close to the edge of unhealthy self-deception. The 85-year-olds, for example, may have thought of themselves as closer to 70 but probably did not think of themselves as 20-year-olds. Subjective age is not the only way we use moderate amounts of self-deception to improve the quality of our lives.

Self-Serving Cognitive Biases

Research has established that a little bit of self-deception—making us feel slightly more intelligent, attractive, funnier, more talented, and so on—has a lot of benefits. These benefits include less anxiety (Brockner, 1984), better coping with stress and setbacks (Steele, 1988), lower levels of depression (Tennen & Herzberger, 1987), and general life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995). Cognitive distortions that enhance our self-concept by making us perceive that we’re a little better than we are, objectively, are called **self-serving cognitive biases**. Let’s look at three specific examples of how we distort reality, just a little, to maintain these self-serving views.

Biased Views of Our Own Traits. On a piece of scrap paper or in the margin of this book, quickly jot down three of your best traits or qualities and three of your worst. Now, for each trait you wrote down, estimate on a scale from 0 to 100 the percentage of students at your college or university who also possess this trait.

When Marks (1984) had college students do this exact task, people underestimated how many of their peers shared their positive traits and overestimated how many people shared their negative traits. How does this cognitive bias enhance our self-concept? It works because if you think that your positive qualities are rare, that makes

you really special. And if your negative qualities are common—hey, everyone has this problem!—then your worst qualities are bad, sure, but not really a big deal.

We underestimate how many people share our talents (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991) and we normalize our negative attitudes or traits so that we don't feel singled out or stigmatized (Suls & Wan, 1987). We can admit fears, such as speaking in front of a group, but we tell ourselves that everyone else shares our anxieties and, thus, these problems are not “fatal flaws.” We comfort ourselves by simply framing our “best” and “worst” qualities in this way that makes us feel just a little better.

Biased Views of Our Own Behaviors. Another self-serving cognitive bias emerges when we consider causes for our own successes and failures. Like admitting negative traits we possess, we can admit that we've done bad things or failed at something—but we often protect our view of the self by coming up with an excuse or justification for bad behaviors.

In a review of over 20 studies on this topic, Miller and Ross (1975) found that often, people engage in self-enhancing views of success. When people succeed at a task, they are more likely to perceive that this success is due to their own behaviors, effort, and talent than when they fail. Failures are due to some external, situational factor instead. Did you get an A on the test? You must have studied hard or be really good at this subject! Did you fail the test? It's probably because you were sick, or you stayed up late helping a friend with a crisis, or the test was unfair. By attributing successes to our own efforts—but failures to something we can't control or to something about the situation—we can take credit for doing well and simultaneously avoid blame for doing badly.

Biased Views of Feedback About the Self. A third self-serving cognitive bias is the tendency for people to view feedback about themselves in a skewed manner. Many people enjoy taking little quizzes about themselves on websites like Facebook, for example. When you like the outcome, you might think, “Hey, that was a great quiz! Really insightful.” But if you don't like the outcome, it's easy for you to see how the questions were flawed.

People often “discover” validity problems in tests that depict them in a negative or unflattering light; however, they are far less critical of evidence that portrays them positively (Baumeister, 1998; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Holt, 1985). For example, one study led participants to either “succeed” or “fail” at a fake social sensitivity test. After seeing their results, participants then saw information that indicated that the test itself was either valid or invalid. Participants who had “succeeded” evaluated the valid conclusion significantly more favorably than people in the invalid condition, and the opposite occurred for people who had “failed” (Pyszczynski et al., 1985).

As usual, more research is needed. But it's interesting that we have several studies with different methodologies that seem to be telling the same story. Optimal margin theory might be right: A little bit of self-deception seems pretty common, and moderate levels can be helpful to maintaining a positive self-concept. To learn about how positive illusions can be applied to social relationships, read the Spotlight on Research Methods feature on “Positive Illusions in Dating Relationships.”



Sometimes, our view of our self isn't quite accurate. But is that a bad thing?

POSITIVE ILLUSIONS IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS



Spotlight on Research Methods

One of this book's authors [Wind] focused my graduate school research on positive illusions in romantic couples (Goodfriend, 2005; Goodfriend, Agnew, & Cathey, 2017). I measured positive cognitive biases within relationships in two different ways. First, I asked college students to list the five "best" and five "worst" aspects of their current partner. After making these lists (which everyone could easily do), the participants then considered each of these 10 traits and rated how common or rare they are in general society. As expected, people said their partner's best traits were rare—making them special and "a keeper"—but their worst traits were common and therefore no big deal. In short, the participants showed bias by thinking their partner was "better than average."

In a second study, I asked people to consider six hypothetical positive things their partner might do—such as giving them a surprise gift—and six hypothetical negative behaviors, such as betraying a secret of theirs to a third person. Each hypothetical behavior was presented as the

first half of a sentence, and participants were asked to write in the second half of the sentence to explain *why* their partner might have done this. I found that when people were in happy, committed relationships, they wrote that positive behaviors must have been done because their partner was a good person or because they were in love. But, when trying to explain negative behaviors, they wrote that there must have been strange circumstances that required this behavior to protect each other. That trend didn't reach statistical significance for people in unhappy relationships.

In other words, in happy couples, positive behaviors had "dispositional" attributions, while negative behaviors had "situational" attributions. When in love, we give our partners the benefit of the doubt and provide excuses for their bad behavior. My data suggest that the insight attributed to philosopher Francis Bacon 400 years ago is probably still true of modern romantic relationships: "We prefer to believe what we prefer to be true."

The Main Ideas

1. The self is a constructed story that we tell our selves about ourselves. Optimal margin theory explains that small to moderate levels of positive illusions can be helpful in maintaining a positive self-concept.
2. Three specific types of self-serving cognitive biases are biased views of (1) our own traits, (2) our own behaviors, and (3) feedback about the self.
3. Positive illusions can also be seen within social relationships, such as between dating partners.

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- In the movie *Liar Liar* (Grazer & Shadyac, 1997), a lawyer is compelled to always tell the truth, both to others and to himself. How is lying to others different from lying to yourself?
- If optimal margin theory is true, then how will you know when you have gone beyond the boundary of healthy self-deception? Can you identify ways that you are currently engaging in self-deception?
- What topics are we most likely to deceive ourselves about?

- Moderate positive illusions about romantic partners seem to be correlated with relationship satisfaction. How far can this tendency go before it starts to harm people and keep them in relationships that are actually unhealthy or abusive?

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM AND HOW CAN WE MEASURE IT?

■ Learning Objective 5: Apply both explicit and implicit methods to the many facets of self-esteem, including its dark side.

Let's begin with a practical question: What do we mean by “self-esteem”? Bosson, Swann, and Pennebaker (2000) compare researchers' attempts to define self-esteem to the classic story of six blind men trying to describe an elephant. One feels its trunk and says an elephant is like a large snake; another feels its side and concludes that an elephant is like a wall. A third feels its tail and reports that an elephant is like a broom. Each of the six blind men offers a different description based on their private experience of touching the elephant. Research on self-esteem can be kind of like the story of the blind men; each study or scientist can pick one aspect of the concept and examine in it detail—but encapsulating the entire idea of self-esteem can be difficult.

Defining Self-Esteem

Here's a definition to get us started on the path to understanding: *Self-esteem* is our subjective, personal evaluation of our self-concept. Earlier, we learned that our self-concept is our perception of qualities, relationships, beliefs, and opinions. When we *evaluate* that self-concept and decide that it is good, bad, worthwhile, worthless, or any other type of judgment, that's self-esteem.

Unfortunately, the nonpsychology public's understanding of self-esteem includes many related constructs that, like barnacles on a boat, have attached themselves to the construct of self-esteem—and taken a free ride into our social thinking. Let's start scraping off some of those barnacles by clarifying what self-esteem is *not* (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker & Major, 1989, 2003; Greenwald et al., 2002).

For example, self-esteem is not the same thing as *self-compassion*, an orientation to care for oneself. Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (2007) describe self-compassion



Students are more likely to wear their school colors after a big athletic win. We make our group identity more obvious to others.

as self-esteem but without the “the self-enhancing illusions” (p. 887). Self-esteem is also separate from *narcissism*, an excessive self-love based on unwarranted belief in one’s specialness relative to others (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Narcissism is basically arrogance. Self-esteem focuses on whether we regard ourselves as a person of worth; narcissism focuses on whether we regard ourselves as *more* worthy than others (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005).

Self-esteem is also distinct from *self-efficacy*, the degree to which you believe that you are capable of completing a specific task or achieving a particular goal. Self-efficacy seems to be a good thing, at least most of the time. Self-efficacy contributes to self-esteem (Begue, 2005), helps people cope with failure in the workplace (Newton, Khanna, & Thompson, 2008), and encourages resilience in the face of chronic diseases such as diabetes (Yi, Vitaliano, Smith, Yi, & Weinger, 2008). Self-esteem is not self-compassion, narcissism, or self-efficacy. It’s our evaluation of our own worth, based on our assessment of our self-concept.

Two Strategies for Measuring Self-Esteem

Because self-esteem is a complex, abstract, and subjective *construct*, it’s important to think about how researchers *operationalize* it in scientific studies. There are two general strategies for measuring self-esteem: explicit, direct measures and implicit, indirect measures (Bosson et al., 2000).

Measuring Explicit Self-Esteem (Directly). One of the most popular self-report scales in the entire field of psychology is a short and simple, 10-item questionnaire created by Rosenberg over 50 years ago (1965). Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale is a direct, explicit measure. It has what is called *face validity* because it is obvious (on its face) what the scale is intended to measure: how much you value your self. The Rosenberg scale has clarified many of the connections between self-esteem and related psychological constructs (Brummett, Wade, Ponterotto, Thombs, & Lewis, 2007; Hair, Renaud, & Ramsay, 2007; Penkal & Kurdek, 2007).

Try it for yourself in the Applying Social Psychology to Your Life feature (you will find it easier to understand the material that comes next if you know your own self-esteem score). As we discussed in Chapter 2 (Research Methods), the idea of any direct or *self-report* measure is simple: We ask; you tell. The critical assumption is that you are able and willing to provide a consistent (*reliable*) and accurate (*valid*) response to each item. Notice that some statements indicate high self-esteem and others (such as Question 2) indicate low self-esteem. Researchers often use this technique, called *reverse scoring*, to encourage careful reading of each item on a scale; it prevents people from simply writing the same response to every question without really reading them. Read the scoring instructions to make sure you come up with the correct result.

Measuring Implicit Self-Esteem (Indirectly). As you learned in Chapter 2, sometimes people are neither willing nor able to give researchers an accurate report. A problem called *social desirability* (one type of impression management) may encourage inaccurate responding to topics that, if answered honestly, might trigger an uncomfortable response. For example, social desirability might encourage dishonest responses to self-reports of taboo or personal sexual behavior, family violence, or out-of-favor political loyalties. When this is the case, indirect or *implicit* methodologies may produce more reliable, valid responses than direct, explicit, self-report approaches to collecting data.

ROSENBERG'S (1965) SELF-ESTEEM SCALE



Applying Social Psychology to Your Life

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. If you strongly agree, circle SA. If you agree with the statement, circle A. If you disagree, circle D. If you strongly disagree, circle SD.

- | | | | |
|---|-----------|---|-----------|
| 1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. | SA A D SD | 7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others. | SA A D SD |
| 2. At times, I think I am no good at all. | SA A D SD | 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. | SA A D SD |
| 3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities. | SA A D SD | 9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. | SA A D SD |
| 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people. | SA A D SD | 10. I take a positive attitude toward myself. | SA A D SD |
| 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. | SA A D SD | | |
| 6. I certainly feel useless at times. | SA A D SD | | |

Scoring Instructions: Assign the following scores to your answers by writing the appropriate number on the blank next to each item. Then, add your scores up:

For Items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10: SA = 3, A = 2, D = 1, SD = 0.

For Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9: SA = 0, A = 1, D = 2, SD = 3.

Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-reported self-esteem.

The *Implicit Association Test (IAT)* is an indirect way to measure the strength of particular beliefs and constructs (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Pinter & Greenwald, 2005). The IAT does not rely on pesky critical assumptions such as being willing and able to accurately respond to each item, as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale does. Instead, the IAT measures our implicit associations between two constructs. It attempts to measure, for example, whether your mental view of “self” is more associated with positive words or with negative words.

The underlying procedures of the IAT are a bit complicated, but faster *reaction times (the dependent variable)* suggest a strong mental connection for whatever constructs we are trying to measure (see Schnabel, Asendorpf, & Greenwald, 2008; von Stülpnagel & Steffens, 2010). If you can respond more quickly to a computer task that pairs “self” with positive words (compared to pairs of “self” and negative words), then the IAT results might indicate that you have a positive self-esteem.

This is a game-like measure that most people enjoy experiencing. However, it's important to note that there are many criticisms of the IAT and whether scores on this test can really predict behaviors, whether scores are reliable over time, and so on (see, e.g., Blanton et al., 2009). You might want to try it for yourself by going to the website <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. You can then compare your score to the averages of thousands of others who have taken the test and think about whether

you believe this is a good way to measure people's implicit attitudes about anything, including their self-esteem.

Collective Self-Esteem

Earlier, we learned that the self-concept includes both individual parts of the self (such as our attitudes and personality traits) and our relationships with others—the self is social. Given the fact that our self-concept includes our group memberships, our self-esteem must also then be tied to how we evaluate the worth of our in-groups.

Collective self-esteem is our evaluation of the worth of the social groups in which we are members. Tajfel (1981) defined it as “that aspect of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). You have collective self-esteem for the reputation of your college or university, for example; do you feel proud of your school? What about your religious group, political party, chosen major, and so on? Do you feel good about these groups?

Collective Self-Esteem and Race. One group of psychologists (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994) studied collective self-esteem in college students in terms of how they felt about their own racial group; participants were White, Black, and Asian. To do this, they created a new self-report scale to measure collective self-esteem. It includes items such as, “The social groups I belong to are an important reflection of who I am,” and, “In general, others respect the social groups that I am a member of.”

Their findings showed that on average, people from these three races felt differently about their own status regarding their race (Crocker et al., 2004). Specifically, Asians said that they didn't feel like they were very worthy members of their racial group. Black students perceived that their race was judged most negatively by the general public. White students (members of the dominant group) said that their racial membership didn't matter in terms of how they thought about their identity—but both Asian and Black participants said that race did factor into their self-concept. How we think about our group memberships—and what we think other people think about those groups—seems to have an influence on how we view ourselves.

Sports Fan Psychology: Basking in Reflected Glory. If evaluation of our social groups affects our self-esteem, then it makes sense that when our groups are successful, we'd want to make our membership more obvious to others. The opposite should also be true; if our group does badly or embarrasses us, we might not be so excited to display our group membership for everyone to see. This general hypothesis can be tested in fascinating ways by exploring one aspect of social psychology tied to many people's lives: the world of sports fans.

Being a sports fan often involves much more than just rooting for your favorite team; hard-core sports fans identify personally with their team and incorporate how well their team does into their collective self-esteem. Robert Cialdini began investigating the connection between fan psychology and our sense of self after he noticed that his Ohio State university students tended to say, “*We* won,” after a school victory but, “*They* lost,” following a defeat. The pronoun *we* includes the self, as if the person speaker were personally involved. He also noticed that Ohio State students were more likely to wear clothing displaying their school name and colors following a victory compared to a defeat (Cialdini et al., 1976).

Cialdini called this kind of behavior **BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory)** because participants' sense of self is enhanced by the success of the groups with whom



Should children receive trophies just for participating or only for winning?

they identify. We try to make our membership or affiliation with the group more obvious to others in order to feel good about ourselves—but only when our group has succeeded. One easy way to do that is by wearing clothes showing that we're part of that winning group. However, when the group is getting negative press or has a failure, we tend to try to distance ourselves from the group by choosing to wear more generic clothes or by using pronouns like *they* instead of *we*. These are subtle but fascinating insights into the world of collective self-esteem.

Self-Esteem Has a Dark Side

Our students often express bewilderment and even shock when we suggest that building self-esteem is not necessarily a good idea. Debates about the complexities of self-esteem have been around for a long time (see Hume, 1888). We certainly do not want to dismiss the genuine benefits of high self-esteem (Swann et al., 2007) or the problems associated with low self-esteem (Donnellan et al., 2005). But the evidence is becoming clearer: Self-esteem has a dark side.

The Boosting Self-Esteem Movement. On the surface, the case for boosting self-esteem makes sense. Low self-esteem is associated with a wide range of minor and major social problems, from overusing a cell phone when you can't afford it to child abuse, school failure, teenage pregnancy, crime, welfare dependency, substance abuse, aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. There is a long, impressive list of troubles associated with low self-esteem (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005; Donnellan et al., 2005; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Phillips, Butt, & Blaszczynski, 2006).

As a psychology student, you understand better than most people that *correlation does not imply causation*. Just because certain behaviors are correlated with low self-esteem does not mean that they were caused by low self-esteem. Being related to a problem is not the same thing as causing the problem, just as being second cousin to a bank robber doesn't make you guilty of robbing a bank. Nevertheless, the self-esteem movement caught fire in the public's imagination. The California State legislature even created a special task force on self-esteem and eventually published a book titled, *The*

Social Importance of Self-Esteem (Mecca et al., 1989). Self-esteem was such a nice thing to believe in that its influence didn't stop in people's optimistic imaginations or even at the California State legislature. Twenge (2006) discovered that among elementary schools, the word *self-esteem* is often included in the opening part of the school's mission statement, sometimes listed before reading, writing, and arithmetic. For example:

Cannon Elementary School, Spartanburg, South Carolina: "We are committed to building self-esteem, enhancing creativity and individuality."

The Margaret Gioiosa School, Staten Island, New York City, New York: "We believe that a child's self-esteem directly affects his/her achievement."

Oak Park Elementary, Laurel, Mississippi: "To provide a safe and positive learning environment, promoting high self-esteem and parental involvement. . . ."

Green Lake School, Seattle, Washington: "In pursuing its mission, Green Lake School adheres to these values: Building self-esteem. . . ."

Grant Foreman Elementary School, Muskogee, Oklahoma: "The mission of Grant Foreman Elementary School will be achieved when all exiting sixth grade students possess: A healthy sense of self-esteem. . . ."

Dangers of Elevated Self-Esteem. But, you might argue, don't we want children to feel good about themselves? Yes, probably—but not to such an extreme that they feel "better," "more deserving," or even "more pure" than other people or other groups (see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003).

Elevated self-esteem closely resembles narcissism, especially when it's built on platitudes instead of actual achievements. It probably won't surprise you to learn that school bullies usually have high self-esteem. In fact, Scottish researchers discovered that the self-esteem of 14-year-old bullies was highest when they were comparing themselves to the people they bullied: other 14-year-olds (Karatzias, Power, & Swanson, 2002). It wasn't beating up just anybody that made them feel good about themselves—they evaluated themselves the highest when they were bullying their peers. And, in case you are wondering, bullies don't seem to be putting on a public show of high self-esteem to hide their private or secret low self-esteem. Instead, the crux of the problem appears to be that "what individuals want is not necessarily what society values" (J. I. Krueger, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2008, p. 64).

Negative Feedback Can Help Us Improve. Here's a different way to get at an understanding of the questionable benefits of high self-esteem: If you were about to go into surgery, would you prefer a surgeon with

1. high self-esteem despite low skills,
2. low self-esteem despite high skills, or
3. moderate self-esteem and moderate skills?

The teaching doctors in the department of surgery at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine were not trying to study self-esteem directly, but they were asking a similar question. They were worried about whether their chronically high-achieving medical students were paying attention to the feedback they were giving them. So they arranged for "an academic surgeon, who was seen by (medical) students as being an expert" (Boehler et al., 2006, p. 747) to provide two different kinds of feedback to medical students learning how to tie two-handed surgical knots.

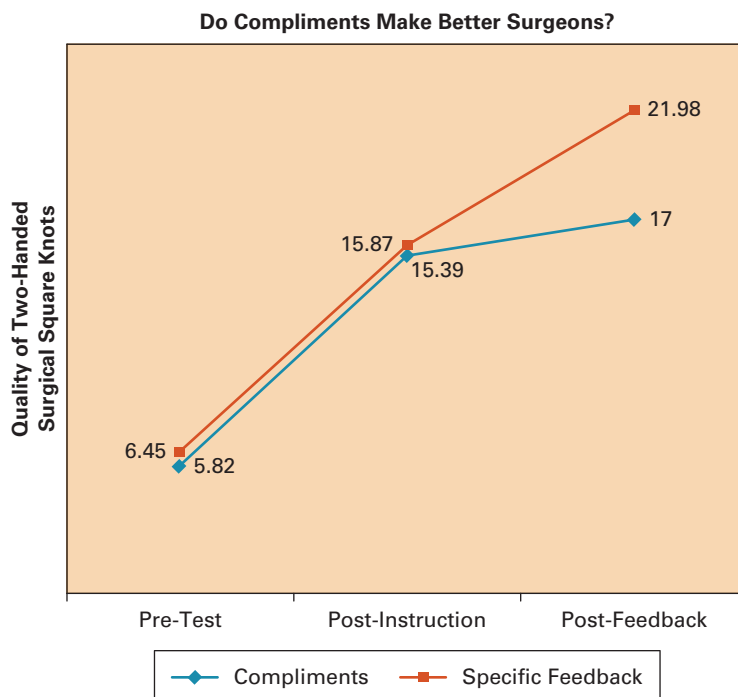
The surgeon gave one group of medical students self-esteem boosting feedback such as, “Great job,” “You’re making progress,” and “Outstanding”—the kind of praise that high-achieving medical students had probably received most of their lives from their teachers. The *comparison group* of students was given feedback based on their deficiencies, things they were doing wrong. In other words, the *independent variable* was whether the medical students got false but esteem-boosting praise or accurate, specific, but potentially harsh feedback. The *dependent variable* became the quality of their knots by the end of training. Did their ability improve?

How do you fairly evaluate the quality of two-handed surgical knots? In this case, “three faculty evaluators observed and scored blinded videotapes of each performance” and made sure that there was “agreement among expert ratings of performance.” This is an example of a *blind study* because the three expert evaluators did not know the experimental group each student belonged to. The goal of this (and all other) procedural tricks of the trade is to produce fair, unbiased assessments. If one of the expert raters wanted the study to come out a certain way, she might unconsciously evaluate knots from one of the two experimental groups in a biased manner.

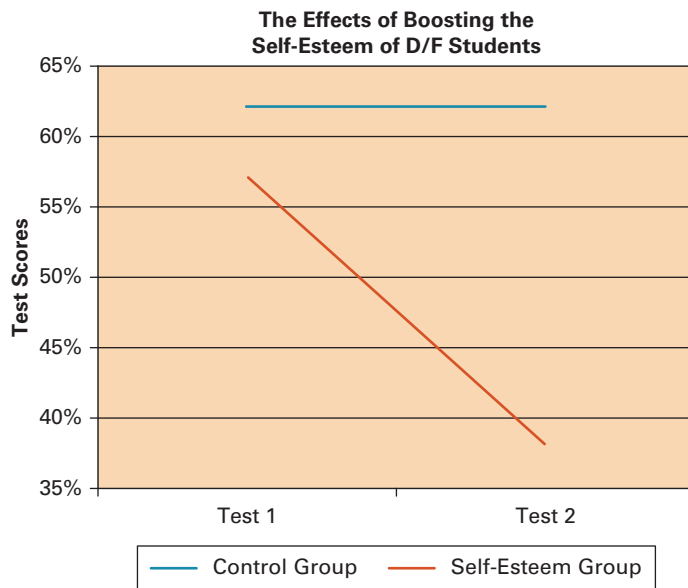
Figure 3.5 tells a sobering but also amusing story. It’s sobering because the group that had been criticized tied better surgical knots than the group receiving complimentary (esteem-boosting) praise. It’s amusing because they also measured student satisfaction ratings. Although the self-esteem group was less competent at tying surgical knots, they gave higher ratings to the teacher.

The Self-Esteem Intervention That Backfired. Instead of high-achieving medical students, a second study about the dangers of boosting self-esteem involved low-achieving psychology students who were earning grades of D and F (Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette, & Baumeister, 2007)—the kind of people that the California State legislature was trying to help by boosting their self-esteem. Their professors sent some of them self-esteem boosting email messages such as, “Studies suggest that

■ **FIGURE 3.5** Boosting self-esteem in surgeons might not lead to positive medical consequences.



■ FIGURE 3.6 Can too much self-esteem lead to poor academic results?



students who have high self-esteem not only get better grades, but they remain self-confident and assured. . . . Bottom line: Hold your head—and your self-esteem—high.” They thought they might be helping students, but the results were so startling that the authors subtitled their paper, “An Intervention That Backfired.”

Here’s what happened: First of all, the self-esteem boosting messages worked; more than two thirds (70%) of the participants recorded the highest possible self-esteem scores that the scale would allow. But Figure 3.6 tells us that their academic performance actually got *worse*. Promoting self-esteem didn’t just fail to help between Test 1 and Test 2—it backfired. The struggling students’ scores fell dramatically, from 57% to 38%, while the group that did not receive those messages (the *control group*) stayed the same. This study, unfortunately, is sobering without being amusing. Boosting self-esteem appeared to harm these students—and there is nothing funny about that.

What in the world is going on? Why isn’t boosting self-esteem helping high-achieving medical students or struggling psychology students?

The Relentless Pursuit of Self-Esteem May Be Harmful

What if self-esteem itself just isn’t all that important to our lives—but the relentless pursuit of self-esteem is harmful? Other research indicates that the relentless pursuit of self-esteem triggers a wide range of negative behaviors: making excuses, self-sabotage, blaming others, arguing, scheming, and cheating (Crocker & Nuer, 2003). Why not? If the goal is to feel good about ourselves by, for example, scoring well on a test, then it is as easy to justify academic cheating as it is speeding in traffic—others are doing it and I have to keep up with them (see Wajda-Johnston, Handal, Brawer, & Fabricatore, 2001).

Insidious Dangers of Overvaluing Self-Esteem. There are other insidious dangers lurking behind the relentless pursuit of self-esteem (see Baumeister et al., 2003; Crocker & Nuer, 2003). Research shows that people with fragile but high self-esteem:

1. Are more reluctant to take intelligent risks
2. Make fewer mistakes from which to learn
3. Substitute competitive social comparisons for cooperative social supports
4. Decrease their academic performance
5. Avoid helpful feedback
6. Increase levels of intergroup prejudice
7. Increase bullying and aggression toward others



In Greek mythology, Narcissus fell so deeply in love with his own image that he continued to stare at his reflection until he died. The personality disorder called narcissism is not the same thing as self-esteem, a subjective assessment of one's own self-worth.

So, what can we say about the effects of boosting self-esteem? Yes, we can improve self-esteem. But no, boosting self-esteem doesn't solve the social problems that the self-esteem movement hoped it would solve. In fact, there is increasing evidence that, under some circumstances, building self-esteem is an intervention that backfires.

The Dangers of Narcissism. The extreme dark side of high self-esteem is narcissism, an absorbing love of oneself. Narcissism can even be considered a mental health personality disorder when it gets so out of control that it starts interfering with someone's ability to have a happy, healthy life and relationships with other people. This is perhaps fitting given the original Greek myth of Narcissus.

Narcissus was a proud hunter who loved himself more than anyone else. In most versions of this story, Narcissus is out in the forest one day and happens to see his own reflection in a pool of water. He's so arrogant and self-absorbed that he immediately falls in love with himself and stops eating or giving anyone else any attention at all. Narcissus eventually dies because he can't do anything except stare at the reflection of himself with absolute admiration. While the myth is clearly an extreme example of what can happen when self-esteem is too high, the moral of the story is pretty simple: A little humility might go a long way toward building a healthy, resilient, socially productive self.

The Main Ideas

1. Self-esteem is our subjective evaluation of our self-concept. It can be measured through explicit, direct tests such as self-report scales or through implicit, indirect tests such as the Implicit Association Test.
2. Collective self-esteem is our evaluation of the social groups in which we are members. One example is how we view sports teams; when our favorite team does well, we tend to show our affiliation with that team. This tendency is called Basking in Reflected Glory.
3. Despite many attempts to boost self-esteem, many research studies show that elevating self-esteem can lead to negative effects (such as decreased academic performance).

CRITICAL THINKING CHALLENGE

- Considering BIRGing in your own life. Do you tend to show more affiliation with certain groups, such as sports teams, when the group is more successful? Do you distance yourself when the group is failing? In what specific ways does this happen?
- Beyond sports, there are many social groups created for people with similar self-interests, such as *Star Trek* conventions or religious retreats. What is the function of this sort of social gathering in terms of how it strengthens self-reflection and social aspects of the self? How do these types of groups exemplify BIRGing?
- Describe three situations that might lead you to alter your answers while filling out the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.
- How important is having self-esteem to you? Based on the research reviewed above, should elementary and middle schools focus on increasing students' self-esteem? Why or why not?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Core Questions

1. What is the “self?”
2. How do we know the self is social?
3. Why do we present different selves in different situations?
4. Is the truth always the self’s friend?
5. What is self-esteem and how can we measure it?

What is the “self?”

The self is an abstract and subjective psychological construct that makes it sometimes hard to define and measure. We start with self-awareness, the understanding that we are a separate entity from other people and objects in our world. Infants seem to show self-awareness from very early on when they imitate the facial expressions and sounds they observe. Scientists have created the “mirror self-recognition test” to measure self-awareness; here, they place red dye on an animal’s forehead then show the animal a mirror. If the animal touches the dye on its own head—and not on the mirror—this seems to indicate that the animal is aware that the dye is on itself.

The self-concept is a personal summary of who we believe we are, including our qualities (both good and bad), our relationships, beliefs, values, and so on. This book has covered three theories on how our self-concept is formed. The first is social comparison theory, which says that we define subjective traits (such as whether we are “good looking” or “shy”) by comparing our self to others. Upward social comparisons are when we compare ourselves to people who are better than us, which can help us improve but don’t usually make us feel particularly good about ourselves. Downward social comparisons (when we compare ourselves to people who aren’t as good as we are on any given trait) may make us feel better but don’t help us improve.

Social identity theory suggests that the self-concept is made up of both personal, individual characteristics (such as our personality traits) and social role characteristics, which include our relationships

(e.g., brother, mother) and our social groups (e.g., Muslim, student, Republican). Our social self-concept can include regional or cultural selves or self-construals. Finally, self-schema theory suggests that we interpret our own actions and decisions through schemas, which are cognitive and memory structures for organizing the world. The same action—say, not giving money to a homeless person—can be perceived along a schema that distinguishes between selfish versus generous people, or along a schema that distinguishes between savvy city dwellers versus gullible suckers. Which schemas we use to perceive ourselves form our self-concept.

How do we know the self is social?

Self-perception theory notes that when we form impressions of others, we do so by observing their behaviors, then making guesses about those people’s values, opinions, and so on. The theory suggests that we form our self-concept in the same way; we observe *our own* behavior and form our self-concept by inferring what our own values, opinions, and so forth are based on those behaviors.

Self-discrepancy theory is the idea that instead of one, single self-concept, we actually have three self-concepts. Our actual self is our perception of who we are right now, while our ideal self is the person we’d like to be. Finally, our ought self is the self-concept we have that reflects what we think other people in our social world expect of us. Self-discrepancy theory hypothesizes that when our actual self and ideal self don’t match, we’ll feel dejection-related emotions such as disappointment and shame. On the other hand, when our actual self and ought self don’t match, we instead feel agitation-related emotions such as guilt or anxiety.

A third theory, called self-expansion theory, suggests that we all want to grow and improve over time, reaching the best possible self-concept. One way to “expand” our self-concept is to include other people into our cognitive view of our self, which provides us access to other people’s skills, memories, perspectives, and so on. A measure of the degree to which we’ve included someone else into our self-concept is called the Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) Scale, which asks people to choose one pair of overlapping circles out of seven choices. The choices show progressive degrees of overlap, with one circle labeled “self” and the second circle labeled “other.”

Why do we present different selves in different situations?

Self-presentation is the tendency to adjust how we publicly display the self to gain social influence; this tendency is also called impression management. For example, ingratiation involves attempts to get others to like us by either praising other people (other-enhancement) or pretending to agree with other people (opinion conformity). Self-promotion is an impression management technique that makes us appear more successful or more significant than we really are, and conspicuous consumption is when we show off the use of expensive, flashy products such as cars or jewelry.

Brain damage can apparently decrease someone's ability to manage self-presentation. A famous case study can be seen in the story of Phineas Gage, a man who experienced an explosion that caused portions of his frontal lobe to be destroyed. This damage caused Gage's personality to change, and it also seems to have prevented him from being able to engage in self-presentation strategies.

People who often look around to assess the current situation to change their self-presentation are called high self-monitors. On the other hand, people who act consistently regardless of the current situation are called low self-monitors. There are advantages and disadvantages to either approach to self-presentation.

Is the truth always the self's friend?

Optimal margin theory is the idea that it can be healthy to maintain a small to moderate distortion of reality when it comes to our self-concept. In other words, maintaining some positive illusions about how wonderful we are may be beneficial. For example, some older individuals seem to be happier when their subjective age (how old they feel) is younger than their actual age.

Specific ways we maintain these positive illusions are called self-serving cognitive biases. One self-serving cognitive bias is that we tend to perceive that our positive qualities or traits are rare (and therefore special), whereas our negative qualities are common (and therefore not

particularly stigmatizing). We also tend to attribute successes to something internal about ourselves (such as talent or effort) but attribute failures to something about the situation; in this way, we can take credit for success but avoid blame for failure. Finally, we also question feedback about the self that is negative but happily believe that positive feedback about our self is valid. This type of bias has also been seen in people's views of others, such as current romantic partners.

What is self-esteem and how can we measure it?

Self-esteem is our subjective, personal evaluation of our self-concept. It is not the same thing as self-compassion, narcissism, or self-efficacy. There are two general strategies for measuring self-esteem. The first is explicit, direct tests such as self-report scales that simply ask people about their view of themselves. The second is implicit, indirect tests that measure self-esteem in other ways. For example, the Implicit Association Test measures how quickly people respond on a computer when given different pairs of concepts. If people can respond more quickly when the "self" is paired with positive words or images, compared to negative words or images, then that might indicate a positive self-esteem. There are several criticisms of this approach, however.

Collective self-esteem is our evaluation of the worth of social groups in which we are members, such as our racial groups. Another example of collective self-esteem is seen in sports fans, when people affiliate with certain teams. Researchers have noticed that sports fans are more likely to make their chosen affiliations salient or obvious to others when their team is doing well compared to when it's not; this tendency is called Basking in Reflected Glory.

Despite the popularity of movements to increase self-esteem, several studies have shown that boosting self-esteem can actually lead to negative effects, such as lower academic performance. It seems that receiving negative feedback about one's performance may cause self-esteem to suffer, but it can also lead to improved performance next time the task is attempted.

LIST OF THEORIES IN CHAPTER 3

- Social comparison theory
- Social identity theory
- Self-schema theory
- Self-perception theory
- Self-discrepancy theory
- Self-expansion theory
- Self-monitoring
- Self-presentation theory/impression management
- Optimal margin theory
- Self-serving cognitive biases
- Collective self-esteem

COMPREHENSIVE CRITICAL THINKING, ANALYSIS, AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 3

- Do you think it's possible for any individual to really achieve full matching between his or her actual, ideal, and ought selves? Would this full matching be a good thing or a bad thing, and why?
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages to presenting different versions of yourself in different settings. Is this simply having social intelligence, or is it being less than authentic? Is the success and popularity that may follow from high self-monitoring worth changing who you appear to be? Or is your changing self always authentic—and you're simply choosing different aspects of yourself to be highlighted, like when stores choose to display

certain products in more prominent locations? If you knew that a certain friend, politician, or romantic partner was very high in self-monitoring, could you truly trust that person and feel you knew who he or she “really” is?

- You’ve probably heard the phrase, “Ignorance is bliss.” Would you rather have an extremely positive view of yourself, even if it were completely wrong, or have an accurate view of yourself that showed all of your flaws in glaring detail? On a scale of 0 to 100,

how much “positive illusion” do you think would be the ideal amount, with 0 indicating none (potentially unhappy accuracy) and 100 being complete (happy but inaccurate perceptions)?

- What is your personal opinion about cultural or educational programs designed to enhance the next generation’s self-esteem? Are the benefits from this type of program going to outweigh the potential drawbacks, such as inflated narcissism or a sense of entitlement?

PERSONAL REFLECTION [TH]

Like most small children, I wondered about lots of weird things. For example, could Superman really go backward in time by flying around Earth *really* fast? If I dug a hole all the way through the Earth and jumped in feet-first, would I come out on the other side head-first? I also worried about all those other people who hadn’t been as “lucky” as I was to have been born into a particular faith. Things didn’t look so good for them. And that made me wonder: What if I had been born in a different part of the world? Would I still be

me? Those questions bugged me then and still do today. If I had decided to hitch-hike directly back home instead of impulsively taking a detour to see a friend, then I would not have met my future wife and started a family. I would still be me, but I would have been a very different me. And our children . . . well, they just wouldn’t be. But now, here they are—and *their* children are wrestling with the same questions about the self that psychological science is slowly starting to answer.

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