



CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter examines the role of self-concept and how self-perception is influenced through relationships with others. When we attempt to define or centralize how we think about the self, we often look to reference groups for guidance, with varying results. The chapter covers the nature of self-concept, the challenges of trying to measure self-concept across cultures, tips for accepting and moving beyond self, and the impact of self-conception on functioning in different contexts.

Nature of Our Self-Concept

Self-concept is defined as the relatively constant thoughts and feelings about who we are and how we differ from other people. Self-concept develops only as we interact with others and engage in self-evaluation. Four views of the self are presented—self-image, looking-glass self, ideal self and real self—and the chapter explains that these four views may come into conflict with one another, causing problems with self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Self-Image: The Role of Internal Voice

Self-image, our view of ourselves, is influenced by an internal voice. This internal voice may present views of the self that are realistic or unrealistic, but we hold fast to the beliefs our internal voice present, even if they are harmful. Beliefs about the self also make their way into life scripts—narratives that we create to guide us through life—which can have a positive or negative effect on self-image. Life scripts come from both direct and second-hand experience and, at their most basic level, they help us to know how to think and behave in unfamiliar situations or environments.

In order to ensure the accuracy of life scripts, people often engage in social comparison. As noted in the text, we are most likely to compare ourselves against those who are closely related to us or similar in age, race, gender, and background. Social comparison can be either good or bad for the ego, depending on whether one looks upward or downward. Upward and downward comparisons can result in either the assimilation or contrast effect.

Looking-Glass Self: The Role of External Voices

Another contributing factor to self-image comes from the looking-glass self—how we imagine others see us. Introduced by Charles Cooley in 1902, the theory of the looking-glass self refers to the power of significant others to influence self-concept. The significant others who contribute to perceptions of self may be family, friends, fellow students, health care providers, business acquaintances, or members of organizations with which we identify.

Ideal Self: The Role of the Media

The vision of the ideal self is influenced through comparison with role models. People tend to use the most readily available sources as a standard of comparison and use them as benchmarks for personal comparisons. For this reason, the media play a significant role in how we develop our self-concept. Realistic depictions of people increase self-esteem, while unrealistic and idealized images can have a negative impact on self-concept. If a gap develops between the real self and the ideal self, we may experience body-image disturbance.

The depictions of women in the media have shifted over time and studies confirm that the body sizes of women in the media have decreased since 1900. Media depictions, including those of celebrities, focus on thinness as beauty. The media set equally high standards on a youthful appearance, assuming that the physical effects of aging are socially undesirable and capable of being reversed. Researchers are also concerned about the impact of media images on men. Whereas thinness is held as a beauty standard for women, males tend to worry about degree of muscle bulk and development of the upper body.

Generalizing across genders and cultures can be hazardous, however, because tools used to measure self-esteem can have built-in biases. But there are also cross-cultural differences in how people think about health and beauty. Even within Western culture, there are differences between mainstream and minority groups.

Real Self: Challenges in Discovering the Inner Self

Our personalities are multifaceted, so it is unlikely that one will ever know all of its parts. The text questions our ability to escape the boundaries of self-perception, looking-glass self, and idealized self; however, people with high self-esteem are better able to access and feel comfortable displaying the “real self.”

Challenges in Measuring Self-Concept Across Cultures

Measuring self-concept across cultures indicates that there are cultural differences in how we think about self-concept. Generalizing across genders and cultures can be hazardous, however, because tools used to measure self-esteem can have built-in biases. Cultural variations exist in areas such as self-enhancement and self-criticism, and North Americans are more likely to display the self-serving bias, where success is credited to internal qualities and failure is blamed on external factors. People living in individualistic cultures regard the importance of the individual versus the community differently than those living in collectivistic cultures.

Tips for Accepting and Moving Beyond Self in Communication

The text provides readers with tips to confirm and reinforce a positive self-image.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter the student should learn to do the following:

1. Learn about the four faces of self-concept

2. Understand the role of internal voice in self-concept
3. Learn how external voices influence self-concept
4. Understand the challenges of measure self-concept across cultures

GLOSSARY TERMS

Assimilation effect: Heightened self-esteem following a favourable social comparison. (p. 41)

Body-image disturbance: Reduced levels of satisfaction with our bodies and a downward spiral in how we see our physical selves. (p. 52)

Collectivism: Focus on group needs and goals. (p. 60)

Contrast effect: Feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-esteem following an unfavourable social comparison. (p. 41)

Cyberbullying: Malicious communications in the form of text messages, emails, or postings on social and personal websites. (p. 47)

Face work: Politeness strategies aimed at making other people feel better about themselves. (p. 61)

Global self-esteem: Self-esteem that shows in many aspects of our lives. (p. 37)

Ideal self: The person we would like to be. (p. 37)

Individualism: Focus on individual needs and goals. (p. 60)

Life scripts: Storylines that we create to guide us through life. (p. 38)

Looking-glass self: How we think others see us. (p. 37)

Myth of perfection: The false notion that a state of perfection exists and is attainable. (p. 55)

Real self: The person we actually are. (p. 37)

Reference group: A group whose opinions we value and in which we hold or aspire to membership. (p. 38)

Self-concept: Relatively constant thoughts and feelings about who we are and how we differ from other people. (p. 37)

Self-criticism: The tendency to pay more attention to information that supports a negative view of the self. (p. 60)

Self-efficacy: Our perceived ability to accomplish something or to make a difference. (p. 37)

Self-enhancement: The tendency to pay more attention to information that supports a positive view of the self. (p. 60)

Self-esteem: Our perception of our overall value. (p. 37)

Self-fulfilling prophecy: A prediction or belief that leads to its own fulfillment. (p. 39)

Self-image: Our views of ourselves. (p. 37)

Self-serving bias: The tendency to credit our successes to internal or personal factors and our failures to external or situational factors. (p. 60)

Significant others: People whose opinions matter to us and influence how we perceive ourselves. (p. 42)

Social comparison theory: The theory that holds that we look to others for a standard of comparison. (p. 40)

LECTURE OUTLINE

1. What is self-concept?
 - Definition of self-concept
2. Four views of the self
 - Self-image
 - Looking-glass self
 - Ideal self
 - Real self
3. Measuring Self-Concept Across Cultures
 - Cultural variations in self-concept
 - Bias in measuring self-concept
4. Accepting and Moving Beyond Self in Communication
 - Ways to confirm and reinforce positive self-image

DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

1. Have the class view two commercials—one produced in an individualistic culture (such as North America) and one produced in a collectivist culture (such as Japan). Discuss and reflect upon how each commercial presents messages about self-esteem.
2. Have the class view two commercials or print ads—one directed towards an audience of men and one directed towards an audience of women—dealing with products such as beauty/grooming aids, hair removal products, cosmetics, or diet services. Have the class discuss or debate the standards of beauty and the difference ways bodies are presented in the commercials or ads.
3. Using Figure 2.1 on page 43 as a guide, have each student individually prepare a list of how significant others perceive them. Have students compare their responses, and discuss the ways that self-image varies from one individual to the next.