Self-concept

The way in which one perceives oneself.

Self-concept—the way in which one perceives oneself—can be divided into categories, such as personal self-concept (facts or one’s own opinions about oneself, such as “I have brown eyes” or “I am attractive”); social self-concept (one’s perceptions about how one is regarded by others: “people think I have a great sense of humor”); and self-ideals (what or how one would like to be: “I want to be a lawyer” or “I wish I were thinner”).

While a number of philosophers and psychologists have addressed the idea that behavior is influenced by the way people see themselves, investigation into the importance of self-concept is most closely associated with the writings and therapeutic practices of Carl Rogers. The self—and one’s awareness of it—lie at the heart of Rogers’ client-centered therapy and the philosophy behind it. According to Rogers, one’s self-concept influences how one regards both oneself and one’s environment. The self-concept of a mentally healthy person is consistent with his or her thoughts, experiences, and behavior. However, people may maintain a self-concept that is at odds with their true feelings to win the approval of others and “fit in,” either socially or professionally. This involves repressing their true feelings and impulses, which eventually causes them to become alienated from themselves, distorting their own experience of the world and limiting their potential for self-actualization, or fulfillment. The gulf between a person’s self-concept and his or her actual experiences (which Rogers called incongruence) is a chronic source of anxiety and can even result in mental disorders. According to Rogers, a strong self-concept is flexible and allows a person to confront new experiences and ideas without feeling threatened.

Social psychologists have pointed out that self-concept also plays an important role in social perception—the process by which we form impressions of others. Attribution—how we explain the causes of our own and other people’s behavior—is particularly influenced by our own self-concept. Social learning theory is also concerned with the ways in which we view ourselves, especially in terms of our perceived impact on our environment. In the first major theory of social learning, Julian B. Rotter claimed that the expected outcome of an action and the value we place on that outcome determine much of our behavior. For example, people whose positive self-concept leads them to believe they will succeed at a task are likely to behave in ways that ultimately lead to success, while those who expect failure are much more likely to bring it about through their own actions. In a general

Further Reading


theory of personality he developed subsequently with two colleagues, Rotter designated variables based on the ways that individuals habitually think about their experiences. One of the most important was I-E, which distinguished “internals,” who think of themselves as controlling events, from “externals,” who view events as largely outside their control. Internal-external orientation has been found to affect a variety of behaviors and attitudes.

Further Reading

Self-conscious emotions
Emotions such as guilt, pride, shame, and hubris.

Succeeding or failing to meet the standards, rules, and goals of one’s group or society determines how well an individual forms relationships with other members of the group. Living up to one’s own internalized set of standards—or failing to live up to them—is the basis of complex emotions. The so-called self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, pride, shame, and hubris, require a fairly sophisticated level of intellectual development. To feel them, individuals must have a sense of self as well as a set of standards. They must also have notions of what constitutes success and failure, and the capacity to evaluate their own behavior.

Self-conscious emotions are difficult to study. For one thing, there are no clear elicitors of these emotions. Joy registers predictably on a person’s face at the approach of a friend, and caution appears at the approach of a stranger. But what situation is guaranteed to elicit pride or shame, guilt or embarrassment? These emotions are so dependent on a person’s own experience, expectations, and culture, that it is difficult to design uniform experiments.

Some psychoanalysts, notably Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson, argued that there must be some universal elicitors of shame, such as failure at toilet training or exposure of the backside. But the idea of an automatic noncognitive elicitor does not make much sense. Cognitive processes are likely to be the elicitors of these complex emotions. It is the way people think or what they think about that becomes the elicitor of pride, shame, guilt, or embarrassment. There may be a one-to-one correspondence between certain thoughts and certain emotions; however, in the case of self-conscious emotions, the elicitor is a cognitive event. This does not mean that the earlier primary emotions are elicited by noncognitive events. Cognitive factors may play a role in eliciting any emotion, but the nature of the cognitive events is much less articulated and differentiated in the primary than in the self-conscious emotions.

Those who study self-conscious emotions have begun to determine the role of the self in such emotions, and in particular the age at which the notion of self emerges in childhood.

Recently, models of these emotions are beginning to emerge. These models provide testable distinctions between often-confused emotions, such as guilt and shame. Moreover, nonverbal tools for studying these emotions in children are being developed. As a result, models exist to explain when and how self-conscious emotions develop.

The self-conscious emotions depend on the development of a number of cognitive skills. First, individuals must absorb a set of standards, rules, and goals. Second, they must have a sense of self. And finally, they must be able to evaluate the self with regard to those standards, rules, and goals and then make a determination of success or failure.

As a first step in self-evaluation, a person has to decide whether a particular event is the result of his or her own action. If, for example, an object breaks while you are using it, you might blame yourself for breaking it, or you might decide the object was faulty. If you place the blame on yourself, you are making an internal attribution. If you decide the object was defective, then you are making an external attribution. If you don’t blame yourself, chances are you will give the matter no more thought. But if you do blame yourself, you are likely to go on to the next step of evaluation. Whether a person is inclined to make an internal or an external attribution depends on the situation and on the individual’s own characteristics. Some people are likely to blame themselves no matter what happens.

Psychologists still do not entirely understand how people decide what constitutes success and failure after they have assumed responsibility for an event. This aspect of self-evaluation is particularly important because the same standards, rules, and goals can result in radically different feelings, depending on whether success or failure is attributed to oneself. Sometimes people assess their actions in ways that do not conform to the evaluation that others might give them. Many factors are involved in producing inaccurate or unique evaluations. These include early failures in the self system, leading to narcissistic disorders, harsh socialization experiences, and high levels of reward for success or punishment for