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# The Self-Concept: Motives and Principles

If the self-concept were solely the complex structure described in the previous chapter, it would still exercise an immense influence on our lives. But it is more than that: it is also a motivational system. Certain aspects, components, or dimensions are *desired*, serving as spurs for action as well as guides for perception.

### Self-Concept Motives

Discussions of self-concept motives generally agree that "self-seeking and self-preservation" (James, 1890) or the "maintenance or enhancement of the self" (Snygg and Combs, 1949) are central to the individual's motivational system. Although commonly joined, it should be pointed out that two separate motives are involved. The first is the self-esteem motive—the wish to think well of oneself. The second is the self-consistency motive—the wish to protect the self-concept against change or to maintain one's self-picture. Schwartz

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and Stryker (1971: 2) hold that "(1) persons seek to create and maintain stable, coherent identities; (2) persons prefer to evaluate their identities positively." Although these two motives rarely conflict, there are occasions, as we shall see, where they may work at cross-purposes. Both motives, we believe, have powerful emotional and behavioral consequences; furthermore, they are not simply passively preferred but also actively sought.

### SELF-ESTEEM

Implicitly or explicitly, there is widespread agreement with Howard Kaplan's contention that "the self-esteem motive is universally and characteristically . . . a dominant motive in the individual's motivational system" (1975: 10). As Gordon Allport (1961: 155-6) observes: "If we are to hold to the theory of multiple drives at all, we must at least admit that the ego drive (or pride or desire for approval—call it what you will) takes precedence over all other drives."

In the present discussion, self-esteem signifies a positive or negative orientation toward an object. When we characterize a person as having high self-esteem, we are not referring to feelings of superiority, in the sense of arrogance, conceit, contempt for others, overweening pride; we mean, rather, that he has self-respect, considers himself a person of worth. Appreciating his own merits, he nonetheless recognizes his faults, faults that he hopes and expects to overcome. The person with high self-esteem has *philotimo*, not *hubris*; he does not necessarily consider himself better than most others but neither does he consider himself worse. The term "low self-esteem" does not suffer from this dual connotation. It means that the individual lacks respect for himself, considers himself unworthy, inadequate, or otherwise seriously deficient as a person.

Certain depth psychologists have gone so far as to contend that self-esteem problems are at the heart of the neurotic process. Angyal (1941) states: "In the neurotic development there are always a number of unfortunate circumstances that instill in the child a self-derogatory feeling. This involves on the one hand a feeling of weakness which discourages him from the free expression of his wish for mastery, and on the other a feeling that there is something wrong with him and that, therefore, he cannot be loved. The whole complicated structure of neurosis appears to be founded on this secret feeling of worthlessness, that is, on the belief that one is inadequate to master the situations that confront him and that he is undeserving of love."

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Systematic quantitative data are entirely consistent with the psychoanalyst's clinical insights. One study (Rosenberg, 1965), based on a sample of over 5,000 high school juniors and seniors, showed that only 4 percent of those with the highest self-esteem but fully 80 percent of those with the lowest self-esteem were highly depressed, according to a scale of "depressive affect" ( $r = .3008$ ). Furthermore, only 19 percent of those with the highest self-esteem showed a relatively large number of psychophysiological indicators of anxiety (hand trembling; heart pounding; pressures or pains in the head; hands sweating; dizziness; etc.) compared to 69 percent of those with the lowest self-esteem ( $r = .4848$ ). Similarly, Kaplan and Pokorny (1969) showed "self-derogation" to be related to physical indicators of anxiety, to depressive affect, and to the use of psychiatric assistance.

The data from Bachman's (1970) study of 2,213 tenth-grade boys throughout the country are equally persuasive. In this sample, he found the following correlations between self-esteem and a number of measures of emotional disturbance: negative affective states ( $-.52$ ); "happiness" ( $+.54$ ); somatic symptoms ( $-.34$ ); and impulse to aggression<sup>2</sup> ( $-.34$ ) (1970: 122). Persons with high self-esteem are also decidedly more likely to express high satisfaction with life (Crandall, 1973). The well-known work of Beck (1967) indicates that low self-esteem is one of the distinguishing features of depression. In addition, Luck and Heiss (1972) found their measure of global self-esteem to be significantly related to submissiveness, depression, psychic anxiety, somatic anxiety, autonomic anxiety, maladjustment, and vulnerability among adult white males. Jahoda (1958) holds that a high level of self-acceptance or self-respect is an important component of "positive mental health." The fact that probably more research has been devoted to self-esteem than to all the other aspects of the self-concept combined (Wylie, 1961, 1974) is no doubt attributable to the great relevance of self-esteem for emotional disturbance (Rogers, 1951; Turner and Vanderlippe, 1958; Wylie, 1961, Chap. IV).<sup>3</sup>

One of the outstanding products of Freud's genius was his discovery of the psychoanalytic defense mechanisms. It has been convincingly argued (Murphy, 1947; Allport, 1955; Hilgard, 1949), however, that these defense mechanisms are employed largely in the service of self-esteem protection and enhancement. Examples come easily to mind. *Rationalization*<sup>3</sup> involves finding a socially acceptable or admirable explanation of our behavior that might otherwise be con-

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demned. *Compensation* represents an effort to overcome the damage inflicted on self-esteem as a consequence of failure in one area by extraordinary achievement in that or another area. *Projection* involves attributing to others certain undesirable characteristics or wishes which in fact characterize the self, but which, if recognized, would be offensive to self-esteem. A well-known manifestation of *displacement* is scapegoating, used by people who, frustrated and humiliated by those more powerful, seek to boost their own self-esteem by asserting their superiority over others. *Reaction formation* involves emphasizing feelings or characteristics which are precisely the reverse of certain undesirable characteristics of the actual self. (For example, the mother who unconsciously hates her child is effusively loving; the man with unconscious homosexual tendencies becomes a Don Juan.) *Repression* involves thrusting into the unconscious libidinal or aggressive impulses which, if recognized, would offend self-esteem (for example, wish to destroy father, copulate with mother). To a substantial extent, these mechanisms have as their objective the protection of self-esteem.

Only a motive of enormous power could explain the wide range of devices (of which the Freudian mechanisms are only a sample) marshalled by individuals of every intellectual caliber in defense of self-esteem. As Brendan Gill (1975: 4), after being shown up publicly in a mistake, expressed it:

Nevertheless, I am always so ready to take a favorable view of my powers that even when I am caught out and made a fool of, I manage to twist this circumstance about until it becomes a proof of how exceptional I am. The ingenuity we practice in order to appear admirable to ourselves would suffice to invent the telephone twice over on a rainy summer morning.

Furthermore, the individual does not simply ensconce himself behind his lines of defense but he ventures forth actively and aggressively. He does not merely protect his reputation, he also searches for fame; he does not merely strive to avoid others' negative opinions but works equally to elicit their positive opinions. This is part, though not all, of what Allport (1955) means by "proprie striving" and James means by the self as a "fighter for ends."

✓ The self-esteem motive is thus one of the most powerful in the human repertoire. Curiously, there is no agreement on why this should be so. Some writers, such as Kaplan (1975), hold that the wish for positive self-attitudes is associated with certain pleasurable and rewarding experiences of childhood. Gergen (1971) concurs, viewing

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the desire for high self-esteem as the outcome of the process of secondary reinforcement. Aspects, qualities, or characteristics of the self which have proved useful in producing pleasurable or satisfying outcomes themselves come to be valued.

But other writers, such as James, consider the self-esteem motive to be more fundamental—"direct and elementary endowments of our nature. . . . the emotions . . . of self-satisfaction and abasement are of a unique sort, each as worthy to be classed as a primitive emotional species as are, for example, rage or pain" (1890: 307). Similarly, in advancing their phenomenological view of the self, Snygg and Combs (1949) postulate that the protection and enhancement of the self are themselves prime motives, not reducible to more elementary drives. McDougal's (1932) theory of sentiments postulates "self-regard" as the master sentiment, the sentiment to which all others are subordinated. In these views, the self-esteem motive rests on its own foundations; high self-esteem is innately satisfying and pleasurable, low self-esteem the opposite. A major determinant of human thought and behavior and a prime motive in human striving, then, is the drive to protect and enhance one's self-esteem.

#### SELF-CONSISTENCY

Side by side with the self-esteem motive stands what is sometimes called the "self-consistency" motive. Various terms appear in the literature expressing this idea: protection of the self, self-preservation, maintenance of the self, and self-concept stability. Although Lecky's (1945) term "self-consistency" is not entirely a felicitous one, at times referring to the motive to maintain a stable self-concept, at other times to the logical articulation of the elements, we shall follow the current general practice of using the term in its former sense.

Self-consistency refers to the motive to act in accordance with the self-concept and to maintain it intact in the face of potentially challenging evidence. People behave in a fashion consistent with the pictures they hold of themselves and interpret any experience contradictory to this self-picture as a threat. In Lecky's words: "The individual's conception of himself is the central axiom of his whole life theory" (1945: 264-5). ". . . All of an individual's values are organized into a single system the preservation of whose integrity is essential. The nucleus of the system, around which the rest of the system revolves, is the individual's valuation of himself. The individ-

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ual sees the world from his own viewpoint, with himself as the center. Any value entering the system which is inconsistent with the individual's valuation of himself cannot be assimilated; it meets with resistance and is, unless a general reorganization occurs, to be rejected" (1945: 152-3).

Although it is reasonable to expect instability of the self-concept to be psychologically distressing, the evidence in this regard is very limited. In a study of adolescents, we found that the stability of the self-concept was strongly related to certain psychophysiological indicators of anxiety (Rosenberg, 1965: 143). Since self-concept stability is related to self-esteem, however, one cannot be certain that the associated factor of self-esteem is not responsible for the observed relationship. We have examined this question in Bachman's nationwide study of tenth-grade boys. The correlation between self-concept stability and self-esteem was .2406. It is interesting, however, that the correlation of stability to a measure of "somatic symptoms" (similar to the above psychophysiological indicators) was .1875, and the correlation of stability to a score of "negative affective states" was .3719, *even when self-esteem was controlled* through partial correlation. Instability thus appears to be associated with signs of psychological disturbance independent of self-esteem.

The power and persistence of the self-consistency motive may be quite remarkable. People who have developed self-pictures early in life frequently continue to hold to these self-views long after the actual self has changed radically. Reports are common of people who, in childhood, were either very thin or very fat but have, in the course of years, either shed or accumulated pounds. Yet the slim person continues to think of himself as fat (or as a fat person who has lost weight), whereas the double-chinned still has an image of the self as a twig. Similarly, the person who grows gruff and irritable with the passing years may still think of himself as "basically" kindly, cheerful, and well-disposed; the behavior which has become chronic is either unrecognized or is perceived as a temporary aberration from the true self.

The reasons for expecting the self-consistency motive to be important are compelling. If we view the self-concept as an attitude toward an object, then one reason may be found in Allport's (1954: 44) discussion of the function of attitudes. "Without guiding attitudes the individual is confused and baffled. Some kind of preparation is essential before he can make a satisfactory observation, pass suit-

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able judgment, or make any but the most primitive reflex type of response. Attitudes determine for each individual what he will see and hear, what he will think and what he will do. To borrow a phrase from William James, they 'engender meaning upon the world'; they are our methods of finding our way about in an ambiguous universe."

The general need to maintain stable attitudes is amplified enormously with respect to self-attitudes, for without some picture of what he is like, the individual is virtually immobilized. Insofar as he is an actor in any situation, he must operate on at least some implicit assumption of what kind of person he is and how others see him. If he considers himself weak, he will not undertake to lift a heavy object; if musically untalented, he will avoid musical training; if unattractive, he will not ask for a date; if unintelligent, he will not apply for graduate education; and so on. The important point is that the individual's decisions are based not on what he actually is but on what he thinks he is. These assumptions may be true or false, but they are decisive.

The self-concept is thus the individual's fundamental frame of reference, the foundation on which almost all his actions are predicated. It is small wonder that he is so eager to define his self-concept and, having reached a conclusion, struggles so ardently to defend and protect it against change. What psychoanalysts interpret as pathological resistance Lecky interprets as a healthy effort to maintain one's integrity, to be true to one's self-picture.

Self-esteem and self-consistency—enhancing and maintaining the self-concept—are thus two prime but distinct motives guiding human behavior. These twin motives ordinarily enjoy harmonious relations with one another; self-seeking and self-preservation are usually served by the same actions. But what if these motives clash; which emerges victorious? According to Lecky, the motive of consistency may override the self-enhancement drive. Taking the case of an intelligent student who is a poor speller, Lecky argues that in almost every case further tutoring fails, despite the student's ability. The reason is that in the past the individual has incorporated into his self-concept the idea that he is an incompetent speller and resists any evidence that would force him to alter that view.

That this may occur in particular cases, however, does not indicate whether the pattern is a general one. Recently, investigators have attempted to bring systematic evidence to bear on the question: which motive—self-esteem or self-consistency—is the more powerful?

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Stephen Jones (1973) has summarized 16 studies which, in one way or another, examined this issue. According to Jones, self-esteem theory implies that we will like those people who think well of us and dislike those whose opinion of us is negative. Self-consistency theory holds that we will like those who see us as we see ourselves and dislike those whose view of us is different from our own.

The matter is complicated because these competing motives cannot be tested among those with high self-esteem. If our self-esteem is high, then our liking for someone who thinks well of us, and our disliking of someone who thinks ill of us, may be due to our wish to maintain *either* self-esteem or self-consistency. It is only if we have *low* self-esteem that the two motives yield different predictions. Self-esteem theory would hold that we like those who think well of us and dislike those who think ill of us, whereas self-consistency theory predicts that we like those who think ill of us (in agreement with our own view) and dislike those who think well of us (in contradiction to our own view).

Which theory do the data support? According to Jones (1973: 192): "... The evidence, in general, tends to favor self-esteem theory over self-consistency theory. Of the 16 investigations reviewed, 10 support self-esteem theory and . . . there are serious problems of interpretation or replication with the experimental studies often cited as support for self-consistency theory."

These data, of course, do not settle the issue, as Jones himself observes. The individual with low self-esteem may agree that the other person is indeed right to hold him in low regard, but it is rather extreme to expect him to *like* the other person *because* the other denigrates him, or to *hate* the other person *because* he thinks well of him. People who tell us derogatory things about ourselves, even if we agree they are true, are rarely thanked for their frankness.

A study by Fitch sheds further light on the matter. According to him (1970: 311): "Two partially contradictory hypotheses may be derived from self theory. The first is that persons are motivated to perceive events in a way which *enhances* chronic self-esteem. The second is that persons are motivated to perceive events in a way which is *consistent* with chronic self-esteem." Subjects were first classified as having high or low self-esteem, were given a "test," were randomly informed that they had succeeded or failed, and were then asked what accounted for their performance. Following attribution theory, these explanations could be attributed either to internal

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causes (their own ability and effort) or to external causes (idiosyncracies of the test, or physical or mental conditions). Those with high self-esteem who had "succeeded" explained their success in terms of personal merit, whereas those who had "failed" attributed this performance to external or accidental factors.<sup>4</sup> Both interpretations protected self-esteem and maintained self-consistency. But what about those who initially started with low self-esteem? In this group, both those who "succeeded" and those who "failed" were about equally likely to attribute their performance to internal factors. In other words, the low self-esteem subject who "fails" is apparently more likely than the high self-esteem subject to believe that he deserves to fail. Overall, the self-esteem and self-consistency motives appear to have about equal strength in this study.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that people with low self-esteem, or those holding negative attitudes toward specific self-concept components, may nevertheless adamantly refuse to accept information that will improve their self-esteem. One reason, suggested by Epstein (1973), is that people may *retain* low self-esteem in order to *protect* self-esteem. This is the well-known "failure of nerve." In a sense, a person who expects nothing from himself cannot fail, since his weak performance meets his meager expectations. In Thomas Carlyle's words, "Make thy claim of wages a zero, then hast thou the world under thy feet" (quoted in James, 1890). The low self-esteem person may be reluctant to believe that he is more intelligent, attractive, or masterful than he currently assumes because, acting on these assumptions, he might find his hopes dashed, his aspirations frustrated. As we shall indicate in chapter 11, research consistently shows that people establish their aspiration levels in a fashion designed to maximize self-esteem. Thus, the low self-esteem person who maintains self-consistency by setting low aspirations and expecting to perform poorly is at the same time protecting his self-esteem by avoiding failure.

Paradoxically, then, the incorporation of negative components into the self-concept may actually enhance self-esteem. For example, if someone is assigned a negative label, it may serve the interests of self-esteem to accept rather than to reject it. The Hammersmith and Weinberg (1973) study of male homosexuals demonstrates this point. The subjects were asked whether they accepted or rejected the homosexual condition, that is, whether they wished they were not homosexual and whether they sought to overcome their homosexual-

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ity. The data clearly showed that those respondents who accepted their homosexuality had higher self-esteem (in fact, self-esteem equal to that of heterosexuals) than those who rejected it. Although we cannot generalize about those conditions under which the principle holds, it is plain that at least in some situations the acceptance of the negative label may protect and enhance self-esteem.

But self-esteem aside, people are motivated to hold to their self-pictures, for they are lost without them. The question of whether self-esteem or self-consistency is the more powerful motive may thus not be a very meaningful one, since this may depend on whether we are speaking of the self as a whole or in terms of its specific components, whether the particular component is central or peripheral to the self-concept, and so on. But it is relevant to note that when writers speak of the maintenance and enhancement of the self (or self-seeking and self-preservation), they are speaking of two extremely powerful motives, both playing major roles in human thought, feeling, and behavior.

### Self-Concept Formation: Four Principles

Throughout this work, four principles will be advanced in an effort to explain the diverse phenomena to be considered. These principles, we believe, underly most of the theoretical reasoning employed in the literature to understand the bearing of interpersonal and social structural processes on the self-concept. Not all principles, of course, have equal relevance to all phenomena; in some cases, certain principles are suitably invoked to cover given empirical facts, while in other cases, different principles apply. Although these principles may lead to faulty empirical predictions, either because they are misapplied or are applied without refinement, we suggest that the following four principles bring an impressive level of coherence to a diversity of empirical data: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, self-attribution, and psychological centrality.

#### REFLECTED APPRAISALS

According to Harry Stack Sullivan (1947: 10): "The self may be said to be made up of reflected appraisals. If these were chiefly

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derogatory, as in the case of an unwanted child who was never loved . . . then the self-dynamism will itself be chiefly derogatory." Although we shall see that the self-concept is made up of more than reflected appraisals, their significance for the self-concept can scarcely be overestimated. Reduced to essentials, this principle holds that people, as social animals, are deeply influenced by the attitudes of others toward the self and that, in the course of time, they come to view themselves as they are viewed by others. This principle is fundamental to any understanding of the relationship of social structure and social interaction to the self-concept. Furthermore, it is empirically true and directly relevant to our present concerns.

Straightforward, and almost trivial, as the idea appears, it sometimes combines related ideas which are more usefully distinguished. Specifically, these are the principles of (1) direct reflections, (2) perceived selves, and (3) the generalized other. The first refers to how particular others view us, the second to how we believe they view us, and the third to the attitudes of the community as a whole; these are internalized in the "me" and serve as a perspective for viewing the self.

The principle of direct reflections, holding that the self-concept is largely shaped by the responses of others, was set forth felicitously by Thorstein Veblen (1934: 30):

Those members of the community who fall short of this, somewhat indefinite, normal degree of prowess or of property suffer in the esteem of their fellow man; and consequently they suffer also in their own esteem, since the usual basis of self-respect is the respect by one's neighbors. Only individuals with an aberrant temperament can in the long run retain their self-esteem in the face of the disesteem of their fellows.

In general, a reasonably good level of correspondence between others' views of us and our own is completely indispensable for adjustment to society. In situations where a gross and fundamental discrepancy exists, the person is considered simply psychotic. There is nothing wrong with believing one is Napoleon or Alexander the Great if the rest of society believes equally that one is. But, even in less extreme cases, any substantial discordance between our self-view and the view others hold of us may generate considerable difficulty. Our claims for deference, based on our assumed exalted faculties, will scarcely be honored by others if they do not share our own high regard for ourselves. Our behavior, predicated on our irresistible charm, will be deemed ludicrous by those who find our charm all too easy to resist. The difficulties that arise as a consequence of

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discordant definitions of the self are familiar. For example, when the adolescent sees himself as a mature, responsible young adult while the parent continues to see him as an irresponsible child ("eat your carrots, they're good for you"), tempers are sure to flare.

Because it is so essential to know what we are like if we are to have any firm basis for action, and because it is so difficult to arrive at this knowledge, other people's judgments of us matter enormously; indeed, there is probably no more critical and significant source of information about ourselves than other people's views of us. We need *consensual validation* of our self-concepts. But the matter is still more fundamental, for the very sense of self arises through the process of adopting the attitudes of others toward the self.

The most subtle and sophisticated exposition of this viewpoint is to be found in the work of George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead pointed out that the fundamental social process of communication requires the individual to "take the role of the other." His "self" emerges as he comes to respond to himself from the standpoint of others. "The individual experiences himself as such not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (Mead, 1934: 138).

If the process of communication obliges the individual to "become an object of himself . . . by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself," it is reasonable to think that others' *evaluations* will affect the individual's *self-evaluation*. Mead's (1934: 68) conclusion that "We are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us" should suggest a general correspondence between others' attitudes toward us and our attitudes toward ourselves.

Lest there be any misunderstanding on this point, the principle of direct reflections suggested here is an *inference* from Mead's theory; to say that we see ourselves from others' viewpoints is not the same as saying that our self-views correspond precisely to the views others hold of us. Nevertheless, the principle appears to us to be implicit in his work and, as a matter of fact, has received strong and consistent empirical confirmation over nearly a quarter of a century (Miyamoto and Dornbusch, 1956; Reeder, Donohue, and Biblarz, 1960; Backman and Secord, 1962; Backman, Secord and Pierce, 1963; Brookover, Thomas, and Paterson, 1964; Videbeck, 1960; Manis,

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1955; Sherwood, 1965, 1967; Deutsch and Solomon, 1959; Quarantelli and Cooper, 1966; and many more). Because this literature is large, a brief description of the first empirical test of Mead's hypothesis—that of Miyamoto and Dornbusch—may serve as representative of the remainder.

In their 1956 study, Miyamoto and Dornbusch collected data from 195 subjects divided into 10 groups ranging in size from 8 to 48 persons. Four measures were used: (1) Self-conception. Each subject rated himself on a 5-point scale with regard to four characteristics—intelligence, self-confidence, physical attractiveness, and likeableness. (2) Actual responses of others. On the same 5-point scale, each person rated every other member of his own group in terms of these 4 characteristics. (3) Perceived responses of others. Each person predicted how every other member of his group would rate him on these four scales. (4) Generalized other. Each subject was asked how he perceived most persons as viewing him in terms of these four characteristics.

The specific test of the principle of direct reflection was whether those who rated themselves favorably were more likely to be rated favorably by others. This question was examined in each of the 10 groups for each of the 4 characteristics. Of the 40 possible tests, it turned out, the hypothesis was supported in 35 cases, not supported in 4 cases, and tied in one. These data clearly show that the individual tends to see himself as he is actually seen by others. Subsequent research in the succeeding two decades has consistently supported this finding.<sup>5</sup>

The second idea frequently subsumed under the reflected appraisals principle is that of the "perceived self." Although Cooley's (1912) famous term "the looking-glass self" is frequently interpreted to refer to direct reflections, Cooley himself stressed that this term was not entirely apt. The "looking-glass self," he held, involves "the imagination of our appearance to the other person and the imagination of his judgment of that appearance," as well as some self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. Thus "the thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another mind" (Cooley, 1912: 152). It is thus not others' attitudes toward us but our perception of their attitudes that is critical for self-concept formation.

Empirical data strongly and unequivocally support this view. The

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evidence clearly demonstrates that the relationship between the self-concept and the "perceived self" is a strong one—in fact, considerably stronger than the relationship between the self-concept and the "social self" (what others actually do think of us) (Miyamoto and Dornbusch, 1956; Reeder, Donohue, and Biblarz, 1960; Sherwood, 1965). As one example, Reeder, Donohue, and Biblarz (1960) conducted a study of 54 military personnel who had been divided into 9 groups of from 5–9 members each. Subjects were asked to rate themselves; to rank every member of the group; and to indicate how he thought every other group member would rate him in terms of leadership. (The same questions were asked with regard to rank as a "good worker" in the group.) The results show a very close correspondence between how the individual believed other soldiers rated him as a leader and worker and his own self-rating. Of the 54 soldiers, fully 46 believed the group rated them as they rated themselves; only 8 anticipated discrepancies. With regard to "worker" characteristics, the correspondence was lower (38 out of 54) but still substantial. The point is that both of these relationships were appreciably stronger than the relationship between the self-concept and the social self (what others actually thought of the individual).

Similarly, in the Miyamoto and Dornbusch (1956) study cited above, the investigators examined the relationship of the *perceived* responses of others and the individual's self-evaluation. In this case, the prediction was that "the mean of the perceived responses of others will be higher for those persons with a high self-rating than for those with a low self-rating." Testing this hypothesis for 4 characteristics in 10 groups, the hypothesis was supported 40 out of 40 times. Again, the relationship between the perceived self and the self-concept was stronger than the relationship between the social self and the self-concept.

The third sense in which the attitude of others is said to affect the self-concept is that of Mead's "me," based largely on the generalized other. The self, Mead stressed, arises out of social experience, particularly social interaction. The process of communication obliges the individual to adopt the attitude of the other toward the self and to see himself from their standpoint or perspective. In the well-known example of the baseball game, Mead points out that the individual cannot play the role of third baseman without having internalized the attitudes of all the others engaged in this interaction—the catcher, the pitcher, the second baseman—toward third

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basemen. Hence, he must incorporate into himself the attitudes of all the others participating in this organized social interaction if he is to play his own role effectively. Indeed, the very universality of thought is "the result of the given individual taking the attitudes of others toward himself, and of his finally crystallizing all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the 'generalized other'" (1934: 90). The individual condemning himself for an immoral act, for example (usually based on the action of the "I"—the spontaneous and unpredictable aspect of the self), does so as a consequence of having internalized in the "me" the universal attitudes of condemnation toward certain behavior. The individual's self-concept is shaped here by the attitudes of others, not as a direct reflection of these attitudes, but by applying to the self the attitudes of the society as a whole.

All three concepts—direct reflections, perceived self, and the generalized other—are concerned with the role of other people's attitudes in shaping self-concepts. Though conceptually distinct, each of these processes may, in its own way, produce the same result. Take the example of someone who has cheated on an examination. If those who know he has done so treat him with contempt, he might experience low self-esteem as a result of direct reflections. If, on the other hand, he *infers* that they feel contempt for him (perhaps they appear to avoid him or refuse to meet his eye) when in fact they have no knowledge of his peccadilloes, his resulting low self-esteem would be the product of the perceived self.<sup>7</sup> Finally, if he condemns himself (with consequent self-esteem reduction) because he has internalized the value system of particular others (perhaps his mother or father) or of the society as a whole, then, even though others are not directly involved, his self-attitudes would still be governed by other people's perspectives or standpoints. All three processes are expressions of the principle of reflected appraisals and testify to the importance of others' attitudes toward us in determining our self-concepts.

#### SOCIAL COMPARISONS

The principle of social comparison is fundamental to self-concept formation and is a major component of what has come to be known as social evaluation theory. As described by Pettigrew (1967: 243): "The basic tenet of social evaluation theory is that human beings learn about themselves by comparing themselves to others. A second

tenet is that the process of social evaluation leads to positive, neutral, or negative self-ratings which are relative to the standards set by the individuals employed for comparison."

Our present interest centers on the fact that people judge and evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to certain individuals, groups, or social categories. This is not to suggest that they may not also compare themselves with other standards. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) note that people may evaluate themselves in light of their own past performance; James (1890) holds that the mature individual may compare himself with the standards set by the internalized "ideal judge;" and obviously people may compare themselves with many other standards such as the idealized image, the committed image, and the moral image. In the present discussion, however, we restrict our focus to the individual's comparison of himself with what Pettigrew (1967) calls "referent individuals" and "reference groups."

Two types of social comparison may usefully be distinguished. One marks individuals as superior or inferior to one another in terms of some criterion of excellence, merit, or virtue. Smarter or duller, weaker or stronger, handsomer or homelier are comparative terms requiring a relative judgment both of others and of the self. Without undergoing the slightest physical transformation, we are metamorphosed from the weakest to the strongest person simply by shifting our basis for comparison.

The other type of social comparison is normative, and refers primarily to deviance or conformity. Here the issue is not whether one is *better* or *worse* but whether one is the *same* or *different*.<sup>8</sup> For example, the adolescent excoriated in the home for nonconformity to certain rules or values is applauded by his peers for the identical behavior. Conformity or deviance do not inhere in the behavior as such but in its relation to the norms of the particular environment. As we shall indicate in chapter 4, both types of social comparison—superiority-inferiority and conformity-deviance—have significant self-esteem consequences.

The social comparison principle is one of unquestionable power, making meaningful psychological sense of a range of disparate phenomena. But its great strength, which lies in its generality, is also its great weakness, which is its excessive flexibility and lack of specificity. One reason that the social comparison principle "works" so well is that it is always easy for the *investigator* to think of some plausible group with which the individual is presumably comparing himself,

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Bem gives the example of an individual who, asked whether he likes brown bread, replies "I guess I do, I'm always eating it." This individual is basing his statement on the same information as his wife when she, asked the same question about him, replies, "I guess he does, he's always eating it." Similarly, the individual who, after devouring three sandwiches and two pieces of pie, comments "I guess I was hungrier than I thought" is describing his inner state on the basis of his observation of his own behavior rather than on physiological experiences.

The more widely recognized "attribution theory" has tended to subsume Bem's self-perception theory as a special case. According to Kelley (1967: 193): "Attribution refers to the process of inferring or perceiving the dispositional properties of entities in the environment." Founded on Heider's (1958) views on phenomenal causality, it is primarily concerned with how the naive individual thinks in terms of causes. Specifically, how do people ordinarily explain what they observe? Some explanations may be external (the cause lies in some aspect of the environment), while others are internal (the cause is to be found in motives, intentions, or dispositions of the actor). The central point is that one of the "entities in the environment" to which attributions are made is the self. If he were to focus on self-attribution, the attribution theorist would be interested in understanding the bases on which people draw conclusions about *their own* motives or underlying characteristics and how they go about verifying their tentative conclusions.<sup>10</sup> The attribution theorist would agree with the self-perception theorist that the individual's observation of his overt behavior represents a major basis for drawing conclusions about his inner motives, states, or traits, although it is unlikely that he would insist as rigidly as the behaviorist on excluding internal stimuli as sources of information.

In focusing on such subtle and elusive phenomena as physiological states, motives, wishes, and intentions, it is easy to overlook the more obvious and indisputable cases of self-attribution. The individual certainly does draw conclusions about his dispositions—especially, but not exclusively, abilities or other types of competence—in part on the basis of observing his own behavior or its outcomes. An example is the child who consistently does well on spelling tests and consequently concludes that he is a good speller; this conclusion is reached not primarily by consulting his inner experience but by observing his behavior or its outcomes. The person who tries skiing

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for the first time and finds his efforts crowned with success changes his view of his skiing ability. Similarly, the individual whose every effort to do house repairs results in disaster concludes that he lacks mechanical aptitude. The person who achieves success in business, the theater, or the academy concludes, by reflecting on his achievements, that he possesses certain underlying talents.

This theory is certainly compelling and important. Nor is it necessarily inconsistent with any other theories. It is the "I"—the spontaneous, unpredictable part of the self—which, at the moment of action in the baseball game, leaps and spears the sharply hit line drive, and the "me" which, internalizing the general views toward such behavior, judges the catch to be brilliant. Whatever the ultimate theoretical resolution of the question of how we draw conclusions about certain internal states, there can be little doubt that we draw conclusions about ourselves largely by observing our behavior and its outcomes.

Perhaps the most consistent empirical support for the self-attribution principle is the finding that youngsters who do well in school are more likely to hold high "academic self-concepts" (think they are good students or that they are smart) (Purkey, 1970). In a study of New York State high school juniors and seniors (to be described later), the relation (contingency coefficient) between school marks and regarding oneself as a "good student in school" was .52. Bachman's (1970: 242) nationwide study of tenth grade boys found the correlation of self-concept of school ability to school marks to be  $r = .4817$ . Brookover *et al.* (1964) reported an association of  $r = .57$  between school marks and academic self-concept for both males and females. How good a student the child thinks he is obviously depends largely on how well he has done in school.

In our view, the radical behaviorist position of self-perception theory, holding that people are basically applying descriptive statements, learned from earlier experience, to observed behavior and its associated stimulus conditions is too strictly divorced from phenomenal reality to advance self-concept understanding. To deny that we feel, and to know that we feel (either directly or upon reflection) anger, jealousy, euphoria, or excruciating boredom even as we maintain a bland and unexpressive countenance is to substitute theoretical purity for human experience. But it is undeniably the case that people do draw conclusions about how smart, kind, generous, or musically talented they are in considerable part on the basis of observ-

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ing their own actions and its outcomes. It is this process we shall have in mind in speaking of "self-attribution."

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL CENTRALITY

As noted in the earlier discussion of psychological centrality, this principle holds that the self-concept is not a *collection* but an *organization* of parts, pieces, and components and that these are hierarchically organized and interrelated in complex ways. Not only are certain dispositions—intelligence, morality, honesty, courtesy—differentially central to our concerns, but so are certain social identity elements (such as black, Protestant, father, machinist) and ego-extensions. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on this topic but, where such research is available, it provides clear and consistent evidence of the relevance of this principle for the self-concept.

Four points are worth noting in this regard. The first is that one cannot appreciate the significance of a specific self-concept component for global self-esteem if one fails to recognize the importance or centrality of that component to the individual. Empirical confirmation of this point appears in a study of high school juniors and seniors (Rosenberg, 1965). As an example, these students were asked how "likeable" they thought they were. As we would anticipate, those who considered themselves likeable were more likely to have high global self-esteem than those who believed they were not. But the strength of this relationship depended upon the importance attached to being likeable. Among those who *cared about* being likeable, the relationship of the self-estimate to global self-esteem was very strong, whereas among those to whom *this quality mattered little*, the relationship was much weaker.

The significance of self-values is particularly striking with regard to *negative* self-assessments. These adolescents were asked to judge themselves in terms of 16 traits or qualities. We will consider just those pupils who ranked themselves low in regard to these qualities, that is, they did *not* consider themselves likeable, or dependable, or intelligent, or conscientious, etc. How many of these people had low global self-esteem? The answer is that it *depended on how important each of these qualities was to the individual*. With regard to 15 of these 16 qualities, those who cared about the quality had lower self-esteem than those who considered the quality unimportant. Yet these people ranked themselves *the same way* with respect to the qualities in question.

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In sum, to know that someone considers himself deficient with regard to a particular quality is plainly an inadequate indication of what he thinks of himself. We must also know how much he values this quality. If a particular component is vital to one's feeling of worth, then negative attitudes concerning it may be personally devastating, but if the component is trivial or insignificant, then the individual may blithely acknowledge inadequacy in that regard with scarcely a twinge of discomfort.

The second point is that the self-concept is less competitive than it might at first appear. This may sound like a strange message, first, because we have placed such a heavy emphasis on the importance of social comparison for self-assessment (involving the explicit assessment of the self in relation to others) and, second, because the competitiveness of American society is notorious (Murphy, 1974; Williams, 1951). What the principle of psychological centrality calls to attention, however, is that, to the extent that individuals focus their sense of worth on *different* self-components, the success of one person is not necessarily achieved at the expense of another.<sup>11</sup> It is thus entirely possible for each person to judge himself favorably by virtue of selecting his own criteria for judgment. Take four boys. One is a good scholar, the second a good athlete, the third very handsome, and the fourth a good musician. So long as each focuses on the quality at which he excels, each is superior to the rest. At the same time each may blithely acknowledge the superiority of the others with regard to qualities to which he himself is relatively indifferent. It is thus possible for each to emerge with a high level of self-respect and, indeed, mutual respect.

Much has been made of the high level of competition prevailing in capitalist societies characterized by a refined division of labor, and it is not our intent to dispute this claim. At the same time, the division of labor is such that each individual is encouraged to develop his own special area of expertise. Except insofar as the universal medium of money renders different realms of endeavor comparable, it is possible for people to accept and admire the skills of others in every realm of endeavor except their own with little offense to their self-esteem. This fact, too, makes noncompetitive societies less noncompetitive than they might at first seem. Every society has its own standards of excellence and judges its members accordingly. If the male skills valued in a society are farming, or spear throwing, or magic, then men will be assessed in those terms, with the brilliance of one casting a shadow on the other.

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Furthermore, since complex societies allow achievement in diverse activities, and since they afford considerable (though not complete) leeway in the selection of self-values, one would expect their members to regard most highly those qualities at which they believe they excel. And the empirical data strikingly support this expectation. In the Rosenberg (1965) study of adolescents, with regard to every one of the 16 qualities under consideration, subjects who evaluated themselves favorably considered that characteristic more important personally than those rating themselves unfavorably. Thus, the individual strives to excel at that which he values and to value that at which he excels. Different characteristics become cardinal in different people's self-concepts, with the self-satisfaction felt by one person not necessarily diminishing the self-satisfaction of another. For a number of reasons, unfortunately, there are limits to the application of this principle (see chapter 11), so that some people do end up with low self-esteem. Nevertheless, because of psychological centrality, it is possible for more people to have high than low self-esteem.

Finally, it is important to consider psychological centrality in relation to self-concept change. There is considerable inconsistency in the literature concerning the difficulty of changing the self-concept. Some experimental psychologists and sociologists (e.g., Videbeck, 1960; Maehr, *et al.*, 1962; Webster and Sobieszek, 1974) appear to experience no difficulty whatever in changing the self-concept: some simple experimental stimulus brings about a transformation in how their subjects view themselves. On the other hand, many depth psychologists and psychiatrists report that the most intense and probing analytic efforts, carried out over an extended period of time, are futile to change the self-concept. This fact leaves us with the question: is it easy or hard to produce change in the self-concept?

The answer, of course, lies in whether the self-concept component under consideration is central to the individual's feeling of worth or is simply a peripheral and unstructured self-component. Consider the experimental study of Videbeck (1960) which has served as a springboard for a good deal of further research (for example, Maehr, *et al.*, 1962; Webster and Sobieszek, 1974). In this investigation, 30 subjects from introductory speech classes were asked to read six poems. A researcher introduced as a visiting "speech expert" arbitrarily rated half the subjects favorably and the other half unfavorably in terms of emotional tone, voice control, conveying meaning, and other skills. Those receiving approval raised their self-evaluations on

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these skills whereas those receiving disapproval lowered them. But since speech evaluations probably mattered little to these subjects,<sup>12</sup> it was not difficult to produce self-concept change under these circumstances.

Thus, if we are to deal with the thorny problem of self-concept change, it is clearly essential to take account of psychological centrality. An experimenter can easily convince us that we are poor connoisseurs of white burgundy, but can he as easily convince us that we are fascists or latent homosexuals? Will an intellectual as easily accept another's judgment of him as stupid as the other's judgment of him as lacking in neatness? Whether it is difficult or easy to change a self-concept component thus depends in large part on *how critical it is to the individual's system of self-values*. The person who has staked himself solidly on certain statuses or dispositions may resist, with all the resources at his disposal, any efforts to change these elements, for his very concept of self and feeling of self-worth rest on these foundations.

The four principles enunciated above are, we believe, essential to the understanding of self-concept formation and will be invoked consistently throughout this work to account for the observed empirical data. The first two principles—reflected appraisals and social comparisons—are more conspicuously social in the sense that the individual, either directly or indirectly, sees himself from the point of view of other people or compares himself to referent others or reference groups. The latter two—self-attribution and psychological centrality—appear more purely psychological but are heavily influenced by social factors. The individual may assess himself by observing his behavior or its outcomes, but such assessments can only be made in terms of the standards, criteria, or frames of reference provided by the culture. And, as far as psychological centrality is concerned, self-values are heavily influenced by the value system of a society, and by the system of social rewards and punishments which thrusts certain qualities into the center of concern while relegating others to the periphery. All four principles bear upon the way we see, wish to see, and present ourselves.

It is worth saying a word about the somewhat vague term "principle." In speaking of a principle, we have in mind a generalization, not a law. The principle, then, represents a mode of conceptualization that makes sense of empirical data but, being general and lacking refinement, does not hold under all conditions. Frequently, then, the principle will not explain the empirical data so much as serve as

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a springboard for explanation. If a sound principle is invoked to account for a phenomenon but fails to do so, it is not because the principle is wrong but because it is in need of refinement and specification. Much of part II of this work (chapters 3-7) focuses on the application of one or another of these principles to selected empirical issues, and on the specification of the conditions under which the principles hold.

### NOTES

1. Witness the opening lines of Edgar Allen Poe's (1938: 274) classic horror story "The Cask of Amontillado." "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge."

2. Self-esteem, it should be noted, does not show a linear progression with severity of mental illness, as ordinarily conceived. Both Wylie (1961: 216) and Kaplan (1975: 171) report that the self-esteem of psychotics is as high as, or higher than, the self-esteem of neurotics.

3. Some of the Freudian defense mechanisms were not actually developed by Freud; the term "rationalization" was introduced by Ernest Jones.

4. This pattern, called the "egotistical pattern," has appeared repeatedly in the literature, although there are exceptions. Illustrations of the egotistical pattern can be found in Johnson, Feigenbaum, and Weiby (1964); Streufert and Streufert (1969); Eagly (1967); and Snyder *et al.* (1976). See Miller and Ross (1975) for a general discussion of this literature.

5. It should be pointed out that the fact that there is a consistent association between the individual's view of himself and others' views of him does not prove that he sees himself that way because of others' views; in principle, it is possible that he and other people independently draw the same conclusions about his self on the basis of the same objective evidence. But at least it can be said without fear of contradiction that the data are clearly consistent with the conclusion that the opinions other people hold of us importantly shape our self-definitions.

6. Since the entire area is rife with terminological inconsistency, it is necessary to be explicit about our own usage. The term "self-concept," of course, refers to the individual's idea of himself, and "perceived self" to his view of what others think of him, but there is no generally accepted term to designate what other people *actually* think of the individual. Miyamoto and Dornbusch (1976) use the term "actual self," Sherwood (1965) "objective public esteem," and Rosenberg (1973a), "accorded self." Unfortunately, the first is misleading, the second, awkward, and the third, unfamiliar. Hence, despite some occasional confusion of meaning, we have opted for James' (1890) term "social self." "A man's social self," according to James (1890: 293) "is the recognition which he gets from his mates. . . . Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. . . . But as the individuals who carry the image fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. . . . A man's *fame*, good or bad, and his honor or dishonor, are names for one of his social selves." In speaking of the social self, then, we are referring to something external to the individual—the actual attitudes of particular people or groups of people toward him.