

Social Psychology

Lecture 2: The Self in a Social World

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In our introductory lesson, we delved into the definition, history, perspectives and pioneers of Social Psychology. We now shift our focus to the most critical player in the social equation: the Self. To understand how we interact with the world, we must first deconstruct the individual at the center of it all.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. define self-concept and explain where it comes from.
2. explain why we incorrectly estimate our behavior and our feelings.
3. define what self-esteem really is, how it helps us bounce back from tough times, and what happens when we have way too much or way too little of it.
4. compare and contrast self-efficacy, self-control, and self-esteem and explain how they uniquely influence human behavior.
5. portray through role playing the different ways on how we present ourselves to others

No topic in psychology today is more heavily researched than the self. In 2013, the word “self” appeared in 27,729 book and article summaries in PsycINFO, which is 25 times more than it appeared in 1970 (Myers & Twenge, 2021). Psychology, in general, has realized that it is difficult to understand human behavior without first understanding the individual's self-concept. Thus, the “self” has become the starting point for nearly every modern study, especially in Social Psychology.

Have you ever walked into a room and felt like others were paying more attention to you than to anyone else? In Developmental Psychology, this phenomenon is most likely linked to the concept of *imaginary audience* proposed by David Elkind (Santrock, 2016). According to Elkind, imaginary audience occurs due to egocentrism experienced

during adolescent years. But as we grow older and become more experienced, this heightened self-consciousness declines, allowing for a more grounded sense of self. This overestimation of how others are looking at us is termed the Spotlight Effect in Social Psychology.

Spotlight Effect is the belief that others are paying more attention to one's appearance and behavior than they really are.

- **What causes this phenomenon?** Egocentric Bias. Because we are the only people who live inside our own heads, we use our own internal feelings as a "starting point" for guessing what others think.
- **Why is this just an illusion?** In reality, most people are distracted, busy, or thinking about themselves.

Our self-consciousness extends far beyond physical appearance. We also tend to feel like our emotions are on display, as if our feelings are leaking out for everyone to see. The concept aligns with the lyrics of a popular children's song, which go, *'If you're happy and you know it then your face will surely show it.'* In Social Psychology, this phenomenon is called Illusion of Transparency.

Illusion of Transparency – is the illusion that our concealed emotions leak out and can be easily read by others.

- **What does empirical evidence suggest?** While the song tells us our emotions are obvious, Social Psychology tells us that we are actually much better at hiding them than we think. Even when we are "happy and we know it," our faces often don't show it as clearly as we assume.

The spotlight effect and illusion of transparency are just two of the many examples of the interplay between our sense of self and our social worlds. Our ideas and feelings about ourselves affect how we respond to others, and others in turn help shape our sense of self. Now that we understand why the "self" is the sun at the center of the psychological universe, let's explore the different layers that make up our self.

A. SELF-CONCEPT

- A person's answer to the question "Who Am I?"
- The sum total of an individual's beliefs about his or her own personal attributes.
- It has 2 elements:
 1. **Self-schemas** – belief about self that guide and organize the processing of self-relevant information.
 - **Self-reference effect** – The tendency to process efficiently and remember well information related to oneself.
 - **Cocktail party effect** – The tendency of people to pick a personally relevant stimulus out of a complex and noisy environment.
 2. **Possible selves** – images of what we dream of or dread becoming in the future.

The "Self" doesn't develop in a vacuum. We don't just wake up and know who we are; we define our "Self" by using others as a benchmark for our own abilities and status.

- **Social Comparison** – evaluating one's abilities and opinions by comparing oneself with others.

B. SELF-KNOWLEDGE

How well do we know ourselves? Benjamin Franklin (1750) once said "There are three things extremely hard, Steel, a Diamond, and to know one's self." Knowing one's self is not something we can accomplish overnight. Understanding who we really are is a lifelong journey. Franklin (1970) suggests that true self-knowledge is the rarest "gem" because it requires us to confront the parts of ourselves we'd rather ignore. Sometimes, we are biased of our own perspectives that we require the honest reflection of others to reveal the parts of ourselves we cannot see.

The most common errors in behavior prediction is underestimating how long it will take to complete a task (Planning fallacy) and predicting our own feelings (Affective forecasting).

1. Predicting Our Behavior

- **Planning fallacy** – the tendency to underestimate how long it will take to complete a task.

- **Research on Planning Fallacy:** Canadian undergraduates predicted that they would spend \$94 over the next week but actually spent \$122. Considering that they had spent \$126 in the week before the study, their guess should have been more accurate. When they came back a week later, they still predicted they would spend only \$85 in the coming week (Peetz & Buehler, 2009).
- **How can you improve your self-predictions?** Be more realistic about how long tasks took in the past and estimate how long each step in the task/project will take.

2. Predicting Our Feelings

- **Affective forecasting** – the process of predicting how one would feel in response to future emotional events.
- Studies of “affective forecasting” reveal that people have greatest difficulty predicting the intensity and the duration of their future emotions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).
- **Research on Affective Forecasting:** Asked how they would feel if asked sexually harassing questions on a job interview, most women said they would feel angry. When actually asked such questions, however, women more often experienced fear (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).
- **Impact bias** – overestimating the enduring impact of emotion-causing events.
- **Immune neglect** – the human tendency to neglect the speed and the strength of the “psychological immune system” which enables emotional recovery and resilience after bad things happen.
- The correlation between predicted feelings and actual feelings was .28 (Mathieu & Gosling, 2012).

C. SELF-ESTEEM

- A person’s overall self-evaluation or sense of self-worth.
- People low in self-esteem are:
 - more vulnerable to anxiety, loneliness, and eating disorders.
 - When feeling bad or threatened, those low in self-esteem often take a negative view of everything.

- experience more problems in life—they make less money, abuse drugs, and are more likely to be depressed
- High self-esteem, on the other hand, fosters:
 - Initiative
 - Resilience
 - pleasant feeling

What happens when your self-esteem is threatened?

- High self-esteem people usually react to a self-esteem threat by compensating for it (blaming someone else or trying harder next time).
- Low self-esteem people are more likely to blame themselves or give up.

The “Dark Side” of Self-Esteem

- Low self-esteem predicts increased risk of depression, drug abuse, and some forms of delinquency.
- A variety of societal offenders tend to have higher-than-average self-esteem. Someone with a big ego, which then is threatened and deflated by social rejection, is potentially aggressive.
- High self-esteem becomes especially problematic if it crosses over into *narcissism* → having an inflated sense of self.

D. SELF-CONTROL

- is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior in the face of temptations and impulses
- Effortful self-control depletes our limited willpower reserves.
- It operates similarly with muscular strength.

Downside of Self-control

- Seen when athletes become so self-focused under pressure that they stiffen up and “choke”.

E. SELF-EFFICACY

- A sense that one is competent and effective.
- Research on Self-efficacy:
 - o Self-efficacy predicts worker productivity (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).
 - o Self-efficacy is one of the strongest predictors of students' GPAs in college (Richardson et al., 2012).
 - o Children and adults with strong feelings of self-efficacy are more persistent, less anxious, and less depressed. They also live healthier lives and are more academically successful.
- Self-efficacy feedback led to better performance than self-esteem feedback.
 - o "You're special!", "You're really smart" → intended to build **self-esteem**
 - o "I know you can do it!", "You tried really hard" → intended to build **self-efficacy**

F. LOCUS OF CONTROL

- The extent to which people perceive outcomes as internally controlled by their own efforts and actions or as externally controlled by chance or outside forces.
- Types:
 - **Internal locus of control** – the belief that one controls one's own destiny.
 - **External locus of control** – the belief that chance or outside forces determines one's fate.

When someone is met with repeated failure, their locus of control often shifts outward. This leads an individual to succumb to **Learned Helplessness**, which is the hopelessness and resignation learned when a human or an animal perceives no control over repeated bad events. While learned helplessness is the byproduct of an external locus of control where autonomy has been stripped away, self-determination, however, thrives on an internal locus of control and the fulfillment of autonomy. **Self-determination** is bolstered by experiences of successfully exercising control and improving one's situation.

G. SELF-SERVING BIAS

- Any cognitive or perceptual process that is distorted by the need to maintain and enhance self esteem.
- It is the tendency to perceive oneself favorably.
- Can take the form of:
 - a. **Self-Serving Attributions** – the tendency to attribute positive outcomes to oneself and negative outcomes to other factors.

“I got the A in history because I studied hard. I got the D in sociology because the exams were unfair.”
 - b. **False consensus effect** – the tendency to overestimate the commonality of one’s opinions and one’s undesirable or unsuccessful behaviors.

“I know most people agree with me that global warming threatens our future.”
 - c. **False uniqueness effect** – the tendency to underestimate the commonality of one’s abilities and one’s desirable or successful behaviors.

“I’m the best in this sport.”
 - d. **Self-congratulatory comparisons** – comparing oneself favorably to others.

“I do more for my parents than my sister does.”
 - e. **Illusory optimism** – an unrealistic optimism about future life events. It increases our vulnerability because we believe ourselves immune to misfortune, thus not taking sensible precautions.

“Even though 50% of marriages fail, I know mine will be enduring joy.”

Why people engage in self-serving bias?

- Self-serving bias occurs because of errors in how we process and remember information about ourselves. Self-serving bias can be adaptive in that it allows us to savor the good things that happen in our lives. When bad things happen, however, self-serving bias can have the maladaptive effect of causing us to blame others or feel cheated out of something we “deserved.”

H. COMPARISON TO OTHERS

According to **social comparison theory** (Festinger, 1954), we compare ourselves to others in different situations because there is no given standard against which to

measure our abilities and opinions. However, while other people can serve as a useful frame of reference, we are not always objective in our comparisons.

1. Downward Social Comparison

- The process of comparing yourself to someone who is less capable or worse than you are

2. BIRGing

- “basking in reflected glory”
- A strategy by which we reinforce our positive self-concepts by identifying ourselves with successful others

3. CORFing

- “cutting off reflective failure”
- A strategy by which we try to disassociate ourselves from others who have failed or behaved poorly.

4. Self-Handicapping

- Protecting one’s self-image with behaviors that create a handy excuse for later failure.
- A process that involves setting up an obstacle before engaging in a task as a way to give ourselves a ready-made excuse in case we don’t perform well.

I. SELF PRESENTATION

- Commonly known as “Impression Management”.
- Impression Management refers to behavior designed to control what others think of us.
- Self-Presentation Strategies include:
 1. **Self-promotion** – attempts to convey positive information about self either through one’s behavior or by telling others about positive assets and accomplishments. People who use it want to be respected for their intelligence and competence.
 2. **Exemplification** – designed to elicit perceptions of integrity and moral worthiness at the same time it arouses guilt and emulation in others. People

who use it want others to perceive them as really devoted in doing their social role.

3. **Modesty** – to underrepresent one’s positive traits, contributions or accomplishments. This can be extremely effective in increasing one’s likability, even while it preserves high levels of perceived competence and honesty.
4. **Intimidation** – uses tactic of arousing fear and gaining power by convincing others that they are dangerous. Intimidators attempt to appear powerful and often uses threats of punishment. They subject people into doing something they normally wouldn’t do.
5. **Supplication** – people advertise their weakness or their dependence upon others in order to elicit help or sympathy.
6. **Ingratiation** – saying positive things to someone in order to get them to like you. Aside from the desire to be liked, other motives are concealed on the part of the self-presenter.

In summary, the “Self” is not a static or final product, but a continuous work in progress. It is a dynamic construct, constantly being shaped and refined by the diverse social and environmental forces we encounter throughout our lives. To master the self is to understand that while we cannot control every social force, we are the final authorities on what those forces mean to us.

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