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**Self-Concept**

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**Title of entry:** Self-Concept

**Synonyms:** I; Identity; Me; Self; Self-appraisal; Self-definitions; Self-evaluation; Selfhood

**Definition:** Self-concept can be defined as the totality of a complex, organized, and yet dynamic system of learned attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgments that people hold about themselves.

**Introduction:** Cogito ergo sum (“I think, therefore I am”), yet “Who am I?” This is the fundamental question that, throughout their lives and across diverse contexts, people strive to understand. We are concerned about who we are, who we can become, and how we fit into the environment to function effectively, attain a secured sense of self, and therewith strive for personal goals and development; being confident in ourselves and our actions (Baumeister, 1998; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). May it be the social or cultural context, family life, work, or settings in which people pursue personal responsibilities or interests, people constantly reflect on their selves, their behaviors, and the related outcomes. In doing so, they evaluate the degree of alignment between the current states and their past, present, and future aspirations (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Oyserman et al., 2012). This awareness of and responsiveness towards characteristics that revolve around the self (i.e., one’s needs and motivations, but also one’s role in social relations) and the ability to grasp related beliefs marks the vital importance of the self-concept for people’s experiences, choices, behaviors, and relationships. It is foundational to how people observe, define, and value their selves across varied contexts and roles, shaping their attitudes, cognitions, emotions, and actions context-dependently.

**Main Text:*****Conceptualizing the Self-Concept***

Over the last decades, the conceptualization of the self-concept has experienced a tremendous transformation. First viewed as a unitary and stable entity, the self-concept now holds a multidimensional, multifaceted, and dynamic structure that controls and guides how people process self-relevant information in all aspects of their lives (Oyserman et al., 2012). More precisely, self-concepts harbor a person's knowledge on who or what he or she is (i.e., one's self-related beliefs) and a person's evaluation on how to feel about oneself; an evaluation in which people link valences to their self-beliefs (i.e., form positive or negative self-evaluations). Self-concepts persist over time and while for the person itself, his or her self-concept appears stable, it is malleable and fluid, construed and shaped by a person's self-views, experiences, and contexts over time. Specifically, people's life experiences and self-concepts act reciprocal (Mortimer, Finch, & Kumka, 1982). Self-concepts develop through people's unique experiences, yet are also constantly partially formed by existent social expectations and power structures in the environment, mediating the link between social contexts and individual behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

***Untying the Self-Concept***

To understand the structure of the self-concept one needs to untangle and differentiate three, at times interchangeably used, terms: The self, the self-concept, and identities (Oyserman et al., 2012). All three terms are interlaced as they represent mental concepts, are grounded in and shaped by social settings, and constitute drivers for action. Yet, they represent distinct notions, calling for independent considerations. The *self* includes the mental capacity to think of oneself as a thinking actor ("I") that reflects on oneself as an object and, in doing so, forms the content of the thoughts ("me"). The *self-concept* is constructed by the aspects that mold the "me", that is, the mental concepts that shape and define who people are, were, and will become (i.e., present, past, and future selves). More precisely, the self-concept

refers to “the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself [or herself] as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). This encompasses a person’s comprehensive self-definitions that describe what crosses a person’s mind when thinking of oneself, how a person thinks of oneself, and what a person considers to hold true about oneself (Baumeister, 1998; Oyserman et al., 2012; Stets & Burke, 2003). Lastly, the self-concept is made up of multiple (contextualized) *identities*, each being relevant for the overall self-concept and entailing a, to varying extents, positive or negative affective connotation. Identities shape people’s expectations towards and perceptions of the environment as people ascribe attributes, beliefs, values, and competencies to their identities. These then aid to navigate settings as they provide meaning and focus people’s attention on the given context. Specifically, the self-concept encompasses both a personal identity (i.e., one’s idiosyncratic features and traits) and social identities (i.e., one’s contextual social self-definitions), defining how people understand themselves in particular contexts, social relations, or roles (Gecas, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identities are dynamic in nature, temporally bound, and intertwined with one another by some form of coherence (Oyserman et al., 2012). Yet, they may differ in their single relevance to each person, resulting in psychologically more central identities to be more directive and regulatory (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This salience in identities also reflects in the likelihood that specific identities are activated more probable in certain contexts and thus link more closely to particular behaviors.

### ***Functioning of the Self-Concept***

Deeply rooted in three essential features of human life, the self-concept is grounded in the human’s reflective consciousness, interpersonal relations and interactions, and the human capacity for executive functioning that enables agentic and decisive behaviors (Baumeister, 1998). To function effectively, a person’s fundamental motives and the powerful human drive to hold and guard positive self-views are of vital importance (Gecas, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2003). By harboring multiple self-motives and also representations on one’s past, present, and

future selves, people continuously strive for feelings of authenticity (i.e., coherence between one's behavior and perceptions), self-worth (i.e., valuing oneself), and self-efficacy (i.e., feeling capable; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000). The diverse motives relate to different features of the self-concept, linking, for instance, more to a person's membership in groups (e.g., motive for self-worth) or relating more to the actual enactment of the self (e.g., motive for self-efficacy). The self-concept then links to manifold outcomes such as people's well-being, adaptive functioning, or academic performance (Oyserman et al., 2012; Sheldon et al., 1997).

### *Intraindividual Differences in the Self-Concept*

Intraindividual differences in the self-concept exist due to different dynamic motivational forces within people. Self-concepts and the related multiple identities people hold vary as the self-concept is a) context-specific and b) malleable (Oyserman et al., 2012). When defining their selves in particular situations, people can draw on various perspectives (e.g., individualistic "me" or collectivistic "us"), relying in differing degrees on their distinctive personal traits or their social roles and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, each situation may differ in the aspects of a person's self-concept that are highlighted more explicitly (i.e., one's personal identity or social identities), in turn, directing the person's attention more towards the prevailing self-definitions in that situation. Further, the diverse roles that people occupy in their lives shape their contextualized identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). These role identities are reflexive self-definitions arising from people's memberships in social groups. They are formed by the evaluative processes of others' responses towards oneself and one's actions, subsequently giving meaning to a person's self-definitions by validating one's social status and consequently, either nurturing positive or inducing negative self-evaluations (Callero, 1985; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The vast influence of social relations on role identities also shows in a person's commitment to each specific role, which depends largely on the related judgements of significant others.

Moreover, people are driven to act according to their identity standards (i.e., the meanings and norms they attach to each role) and thus aspire a congruence between their self-beliefs, the roles they hold in different contexts, and their enacted behaviors (Burke & Stets, 1999). When specific identities are activated, people undergo self-verification processes to assess this congruence, which, in turn, increases their sense of control. In this regard, research highlighted that variations in the degree of felt authenticity in each role - a degree that may differ across roles - relates to within-person variations in people's Big Five personality traits (Sheldon et al., 1997). The more able people are to genuinely express their selves within a given role, the more agreeable, conscientious, extraverted, open to experience, and the less neurotic they are in that role.

Yet, incongruences may occur in the form of instabilities between a person's self-concept and actions, other people's judgements and reactions, or additional situational influences. In such cases, people first seek to shield their selves from change by modifying the situation through goal-focused self-regulation (Baumeister, 1998; Oyserman et al., 2012). However, when alterations in self-views seem inevitable (e.g., due to life and peripheral circumstances), people adjust their self-concepts (Rosenberg, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2003).

### ***Interindividual Differences in Self-Concept***

As self-concepts are dynamically and actively build, yet also passively shaped by social relations and contexts, they naturally vary between people. Each person differs from others in his or her life, career, and social experiences, knowledge, interests, desires, exposures to external forces (e.g., political and commercial), and cultural influences (Elliott, 2001). The wholeness of these underlying experiences shape people's unique life story and subsequently, their self-definitions and aspirations (Mortimer et al., 1982). Besides this sheer variety of influences, the self-concept further depends on numerous factors such as a person's age, gender, personality, ethnicity, historical context, (predominant) self-motives, group memberships, and roles (Baumeister, 1998; Oyserman et al., 2012; Rosenberg, 1979). In fact,

the self-concept entails a developmental component, becoming more defined and stable with increasing age (Coleman, 1996). Yet, people's evaluations of events and their accumulated experiences continue to shape the self-concept throughout their lives (Mortimer et al., 1982). Also, while formerly, gender differences in self-concept related to conventional gender ideals (i.e., interrelatedness as feminine versus interdependence as masculine), these differences gradually decreased in response to prominent societal changes (Cross & Madson, 1997). Research further pointed to differences in personality to influence people's self-concept. For instance, the extent to which people are able to clearly and consistently define their selves links, amongst others, to low neuroticism, high conscientiousness and agreeableness, and to other factors such as how self-aware they are (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley, & Lehman, 1996).

**Conclusion:** To sum it up, each person's self-concept is unique, illustrating the distinctiveness of every individual. By regulating behaviors and shaping perceptions of the environment, people's self-concepts control and guide the processing of self-relevant information that enable people to define themselves across contexts and to enact certain behaviors that foster the pursuit of their goals. Self-concepts aid people in defining themselves via specific roles, focusing their attention on the given context and allowing the navigation in and adaption to environments. To function effectively, people seek to fulfill their self-related motives and strive for self-verification that upholds positive self-views and evaluates the alignment between one's self-beliefs and behaviors.

**Cross-References:** Related chapters to be added later selected from the table of contents (i.e., identity)

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