

SELF CONCEPT

What is self concept? How we think about or evaluate ourselves. It includes:

- * physical
- * moral
- * personal
- * family
- * social situation dimensions

Self-concept is influenced by our sense of identity. Two things have powerful effects on our self-concept:

- a) the opinions and judgements other people make of us
- b) social comparisons - perceptions of the ways in which you are similar to and different from other people.

These will, in turn, influence a very important part of our self-concept: our self-esteem.. What is self-esteem? If people perceive themselves to be intelligent, competent and well-adjusted then their self esteem is said to be high; if their self-perception is that of being unintelligent, incompetent and poorly adjusted then their self esteem is said to be low.

Gergen (1965) study on self-esteem. Showed how it is affected by the reactions of others. Asked subjects to talk about themselves as openly and honestly as possible. Half subjects treated in a positive way, half in a negative way by a clinical psychologist. Other subjects in a control condition treated neutrally. Found that self-esteem increased as talk progressed if in positive condition, decreased in negative condition and stayed the same in the control condition.

What is wrong with this study ethically?

Bergin (1962) showed that we do not believe people who widely disagree with our self-evaluations (e.g. if you think you are a really hard worker but your parents suggest that you are incredibly lazy then you'll ignore them and think they are stupid!)

Morse and Gergen (1970) showed that in uncertain or anxiety arousing situations our self-esteem may change rapidly. Subjects were waiting for a job interview in a waiting room. They were sat with another candidate (a confederate of the experimenter) in one of two conditions:

- A) Mr Clean - dressed in smart suit, carrying a briefcase opened to reveal a slide rule and books.
- B) Mr Dirty - dressed in an old T-shirt and jeans, slouched over a cheap sex novel.

Self-esteem of subjects with Mr Dirty increased whilst those with Mr Clean decreased! No mention made of how this affected subjects' performance in interview. Level of self-esteem affects performance at numerous tasks though (Coopersmith 1967) so could expect Mr Dirty subjects to perform better than Mr Clean.

Even though self-esteem might fluctuate, there are times when we continue to believe good things about ourselves even when evidence to the contrary exists. This is known as the *perseverance effect*. Ross et al (1975) showed that people who believed they had socially desirable characteristics continued in this belief even when the experimenters tried to get them to believe the opposite. Does the same thing happen with bad things if we have low self-esteem? Maybe not, perhaps with very low self-esteem all we believe about ourselves might be bad.

Where does the self-concept come from? Cooley suggested that feedback from others is crucial.

How accurate are we in our person perception? Are some people more accurate than others? Evidence for this is mixed and inconclusive. Question of accuracy in person perception has been researched, despite two major problems:

1. Different aspects of social environment cause different people to attend to different things so it might be a waste of time to talk about accuracy in social perception.
2. To know that one person is more accurate than another means that we have to develop objective criteria: who decides what is accurate?

All this research probably goes back to Charles Darwin, who said that facial expressions are innate and had evolved from facial movements that once served specific functions for that species (e.g. expression of disgust evolved from the expression used when vomiting!).

This claim led to the hypothesis that people should be accurate in recognising emotional expression in other people - since everybody should exhibit the same expressions for the same emotions. Early studies didn't find this (review by Ekman et al 1972) because too many expressions were used. Ekman et al (1969) & Izard (1972) found strong and consistent evidence that people perceive emotional expression accurately but only for a very limited number of emotions and only if those emotions are unambiguously displayed. Ekman restricts his studies to 6 emotions.

Ekman's Six universal Emotions:

- * happiness
- * sorrow
- * anger
- * disgust
- * fear
- * surprise

Ekman & Friesen (1975) showed these pictures to people from different cultures (e.g. US, Brazil, Japan, Argentina) and found high levels of agreement.

All well and good for perception of emotion, what about perception of personality traits? Not so good. One of the most common ways that social psychologists have assessed this is to compare personality test filled in by one person with one filled in on their behalf by another person. Another method has been to compare ratings with those of a clinical psychologist. Vernon (1933) tried out another method by asking 48 male students to fill out personality and intelligence questionnaires. They were asked to rate themselves, friends and strangers on these. No consistent results to speak of. Some people rated themselves most accurately, others friends, others strangers.

Cronbach (1955) criticises this and other such studies saying that such an approach throws greater light on how subjects perceive people to be rather than who they really are. Who the hell knows who people "really are" anyway? Is all this research into accuracy of personality perception pointless? Probably!

Perhaps we need to look at all of this in a slightly different way and look at how people work out what is going on in a social situation by attributing causes.