
**SELF-CONCEPT AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Scientists and laypeople alike would agree that human relationships have an enormous impact on people’s inner lives—such as on their emotional well-being and judgments of life satisfaction. Most people would also agree that relationships can shape how people define and evaluate themselves. For example, a relationship might influence whether a person sees him or herself as patient, whether a person considers having a high-status job to be an important goal, or whether a person views him- or herself as worthy of being loved. This entry discusses how the self-concept is influenced by relationships. The self-concept refers to a wide array of people’s perceptions and feelings about themselves, including their views of their physical and personality characteristics, their goals and values, and their positive and negative evaluations of themselves. To define the self-concept and relationships, this entry will first provide some historical background and then describe three recent conceptualizations of the link between the self-concept and relationships, including examples of research spawned by each. Finally, relationship-related aspects of the self-concept will be distinguished from other aspects of the self-concept.

**Historical Background**

In psychology, the link between the self-concept and relationships is a longstanding one, traceable to the 1890s in William James’s theorizing on the self. James distinguished between the I-self, or the self as subject, whereas the me-self captures the self as object. James further delineated three components of the me-self—namely, the material me, social me, and spiritual me. A link between the self-concept and relationships can be found in the social me, which refers to aspects of the self that are associated with and experienced in relation to individuals and groups whose opinions are valued. In contemporary terms, individuals whose opinions are valued are essentially significant others, or people’s close relationship partners, such as spouses, parents, close friends, boyfriends, or siblings or other relatives.

Subsequent to James’s early writings, psychologists and other social scientists continued to theorize about the link between the self-concept and relationships. A key example is the work of symbolic interactionists, who believe that the person and society are mutually constructed in the course of social interaction. Charles Horton Cooley, a prominent early symbolic interactionist, coined the term *looking-glass self* to capture the idea that people’s views of themselves are based on their perceptions of how others see them. To illustrate, Jane’s views of herself as a singer are based on her perceptions of her family’s and friends’ responses to her singing. If her family and friends cheer her on at the local karaoke bar, encouraging her to sing another song, Jane may interpret these reactions as indicative of their favorable impressions of her singing abilities. Accordingly, she is likely to develop an image of herself as a talented singer. In the same vein, George Herbert Mead, another famous symbolic interactionist, argued that conceptions of the self emerge through perspective taking, whereby people take on the perspective of others on themselves. Finally, an important example outside of the symbolic interactionist tradition is the theorizing of Harry Stack Sullivan, who posited that encounters with significant others provide the forum for personality development and by implication, the formation of people’s conceptions of themselves.

Interest in the self-concept and relationships diminished in the mid-20th century as part of the waning of attention to the self in the wake of behaviorism. However, by the late 1900s, the self reemerged as an important topic of psychological
inquiry, and with it came renewed attention to social influences on the self-concept. In fact, tremendous advances have been made on the topic of the self-concept and relationships in the past two decades in particular. This entry turns now to a description of three recent conceptualizations of the link between the self-concept and relationships that emerged during this time.

Recent Conceptualizations

Relational Selves

Relational selves is a term used to refer to aspects of the self that come into play in the context of interactions with relationship partners. Researchers assume that relational selves are represented in people's memories in the form of self-other linkages. More specifically, this conceptualization of the link between the self-concept and relationships assumes that people possess separate schemas—that is, bundles of knowledge stored in memory—of themselves and of each of their significant others. A person's self-concept schemas and each of his or her significant-other schemas are thought to be linked by knowledge reflecting the typical patterns of interaction that the person experiences with each significant other. This is what is meant by self-other linkages. To illustrate, Jason possesses a schema that designates his self-concept as well as a schema that designates his mother. Jason's self-concept and mother schemas are linked by knowledge reflecting the interaction patterns that Jason usually experiences with his mother. For example, if Jason typically submits to the wishes of his domineering mother, the linkages that connect his self-concept schema to his mother schema will embody this interaction dynamic. In other words, the person that Jason is with his mother—or Jason's relational self with his mother—includes the trait submissiveness.

To examine the nature of people's relational selves, researchers often prime, or in other words experimentally activate, research participants' significant-other schemas. That is, they ask participants to engage in some kind of task that temporarily brings their significant others to mind. For example, researchers might ask participants to spend a few minutes visualizing a significant other. Interestingly, significant-other schemas can be brought to mind even without participants' awareness that this has happened. For instance, researchers might expose participants to the name of a significant other on a computer screen, but the exposure may occur so quickly that participants do not consciously recognize the name. Regardless of how a significant-other schema is activated, when this happens, it is assumed that the relational self associated with the significant other is also temporarily brought to mind since self-concept and significant-other schemas are connected by self-other linkages. As a result, participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflect the activated relational self. In essence, people think, feel, and behave as they typically do with their significant other.

In one concrete example of research on relational selves, Mark Baldwin and his colleagues exposed psychology graduate students to the face of their graduate advisor, who was presumably a significant other, or the face of someone who was not a significant other. Both faces were shown subliminally, that is, so quickly that the students were not aware of their exposure to them. Importantly, the graduate advisor's face had a disapproving expression while the other person's facial expression was approving. The hypothesis was that exposure to their graduate advisor's disapproving face would activate the students' schema of their advisor, along with the associated relational self. As a result, the students would evaluate themselves as they typically do with their advisor—namely, negatively when their advisor shows disapproval. Indeed, students exposed to their graduate advisor's face subsequently evaluated their research ideas more harshly compared to participants exposed to the face of a nonsignificant other.

In a second research example, Susan Andersen and her colleagues activated significant-other schemas by telling participants they were going to have an interaction with a supposed other participant. This upcoming interaction partner was described in a manner somewhat similar to participants' own significant other, based on descriptions that participants had provided about their significant other in a pretest session. The descriptions of the partner were meant to activate participants' schema of their significant other without participants being aware that this was happening. The researchers hypothesized and found that after the significant other was activated, participants described and
evaluated themselves in-line with how they had characterized their relational self with the significant other earlier in the pretest session. In other words, the relational self associated with the significant other was activated. Applied to everyday social interactions, this study suggests that when people meet someone new who reminds them of a significant other, they come to see and evaluate themselves as they do in their relationship with the significant other. In turn, such changes in the self-concept have implications for the nature of people’s social interactions. For example, if Amanda is fun loving and feels good about herself when she is with her best friend, when she meets someone new who reminds her of this friend, she will tend to see herself as fun loving and to evaluate herself positively just as she does with her friend. In turn, she is likely to approach the interaction with the new person in a fun-loving and positive manner.

**Inclusion of Other in the Self**

Another recent conceptualization of the link between the self-concept and relationships also assumes that people have schemas of themselves and their significant others stored in memory. However, instead of linkages between them, this conceptualization posits that these schemas may overlap with one another. More specifically, it proposes that, to varying degrees, people may include or take on aspects of their significant others as their own. One theory that proposes this kind of conceptualization is the inclusion-of-other-in-the-self approach. Arthur Aron and his colleagues developed this approach to understand closeness in relationships. According to this approach, the closer one’s relationship is, the more one’s relationship partner has been included in the self—or in schema terms, the more self-concept and significant-other schemas overlap. Research indicates that people may include a variety of aspects of their relationship partners into their self-concepts, including their partners’ resources, perspectives, and personality attributes. As an example of the last of these, the closer Samantha’s relationship with her boyfriend is, the more her view of herself may come to include her boyfriend’s optimistic outlook and love of adventure.

To assess the degree to which people have included relationship partners in the self, researchers have used both direct and indirect measures. The most commonly used direct measure is a single-item scale composed of seven pairs of circles. In each pair, one circle designates the self-concept and the other, one’s relationship partner. The seven pairs vary in terms of how overlapping the two circles are with greater overlap meant to imply greater closeness in the relationship. Respondents are asked to choose the pair of circles that best represents their relationship.

A common indirect measure of inclusion of other in the self involves participants’ reaction times on a computer task (i.e., how quickly participants respond to stimuli presented to them on a computer). Before this task, participants are asked to rate themselves and their relationship partner on various personality traits (e.g., outgoing, helpful, assertive, polite). Based on these ratings, researchers identify traits that participants think describe or do not describe both themselves and their partner, as well as traits that participants think describe only themselves or only their partner. After a delay, participants do the computer task, which involves once again indicating whether the traits they rated earlier describe themselves. The computer records how quickly participants make their self-ratings. The logic of this task is that if relationship partners are included in the self, it should be quicker for people to respond to traits that are descriptive or non-descriptive of both themselves and their partners and slower for them to respond to traits that are descriptive of only one of them because the latter requires people to momentarily separate themselves from their partners. To illustrate, if Jack is included in Linda’s self-concept to a large degree, Linda should be quick at responding to the trait outgoing, which describes both her and Jack, but slow at responding to the trait punctual, which describes her but not Jack.

Self-Discrepancy Theory is another theory that assumes that aspects of significant others may be included in the self-concept. According to this theory, people hold beliefs about what they are actually like (actual self), as well as beliefs about what they would ideally like to be (ideal self) and what they think they ought to be (ought self). Ideal selves represent people’s hopes and wishes (e.g., Steve hopes to be a rock star), whereas ought selves represent people’s duties and obligations.
(e.g., Steve feels obligated to become a doctor). Ideal and ought beliefs can be thought of as self-guides that people are trying to meet. Research indicates that when people are made aware of discrepancies between their actual self (i.e., who they are) and their self-guides (i.e., who they hope or feel obligated to be), they experience specific emotions. Discrepancies between actual and ideal selves produce dejection-related affect (e.g., disappointment), whereas actual-ought discrepancies elicit agitation-related affect (e.g., anxiety). To illustrate, when the casting director disparages Allen’s acting ability, the discrepancy between his actual self (a poor actor) and his ideal self (a movie star) arouses disappointment but not fear.

Where do people’s ideal and ought self-guides come from? Children are exposed to parents and other significant others who convey ideal and ought self-guides directly or indirectly through their reactions. Oftentimes, children come to take on their parents’ ideals and oughts as their own. However, as people mature, they develop independent standpoints on their self-guides. Thus, people know what significant others hope they become and what significant others think it is their duty to be, but they may not necessarily share these ideals and oughts. Introjected self-guides are significant-other self-guides that people do not themselves endorse. In contrast, identified self-guides are significant-other self-guides that people do endorse. These latter guides are essentially included in people’s own self-concepts, and thus, in this sense, they exemplify a link between the self-concept and relationships.

Cross-Cultural Differences

A third conceptualization of the link between the self-concept and relationships assumes that significant others and relationships are more self-defining for some people than for others. In other words, it assumes that there are personality or individual differences in the degree to which the self-concept and relationships are linked. One well-known example of this kind of conceptualization comes from theorizing on cross-cultural differences in the nature of the self-concept. Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama argue that the traditions, institutions, and practices of Western cultures promote an independent self-construal, a view of the self as a unique, separate, and autonomous entity. For example, children in the United States are encouraged to express their individual preferences from an early age, and to stand out among their peers. This is less true in East-Asian cultures, where children are taught to be attentive to others’ preferences and adjust to their peers. The traditions, institutions, and practices of these cultures are thought to foster an interdependent self-construal, a view of the self as interconnected with others, such as one’s relationship partners. Thus, from this theoretical perspective, there is a stronger link between the self-concept and relationships for people from East Asian relative to Western cultures.

Research examining this conceptualization has typically compared the responses of people from Western cultures (e.g., United States) to those from East-Asian cultures (e.g., Japan). Consistent with the idea that relationships play a bigger role in the East-Asian self-concept, people from East-Asian cultures tend to refer to their relationship partners more when describing themselves (“I am Amy’s best friend”) than do Westerners. More indirect evidence of cross-cultural differences in the self-concept has also been found. For example, East Asians tend to take into account the social context more in their explanations than do Westerners. To illustrate, to explain a coworker’s silence at a company meeting, East Asians, who presumably hold an interdependent self-construal, would be especially likely to notice and make reference to social considerations such as the coworker’s concern over offending others by being too vocal.

Distinguishing Relationship-Related Versus Other Aspects of the Self-Concept

Finally, it may be useful to distinguish aspects of the self-concept that are linked to relationships from those that are not. The self-concept is complex and multifaceted. Indeed, many psychologists consider the self-concept to be composed of three core components: the personal component, the relational component, and the collective component. This entry has focused on the relational component—those parts of the self-concept that are influenced by relationships. The personal component, by contrast, refers to those parts of the
self-concept that reflect who people are as unique, separate, and autonomous individuals. Finally, the collective component of the self-concept embodies those aspects of the self-concept that are derived from the social groups to which people belong—for example, one’s ethnic or racial group. In the course of everyday life, different components of the self-concept are activated, thereby shaping people’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. In other words, who people are at any given moment depends in part on the particular component of the self-concept that is active in the immediate situation.

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See also Attachment Theory; Perspective Taking; Self-Esteem; Effects on Relationships; Self-Expansion Model; Symbolic Interaction Theories; Transference

Further Readings


SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure is a process of revealing oneself to others. It is described as what individuals voluntarily say about themselves to others, including their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Self-disclosure may involve personal information about facts or feelings; it may be about the past, the future, or the present; it may be related or unrelated to the listener. Self-disclosure is key to the development and maintenance of relationships whether it focuses on issues associated with the self, the listener, the relationship, or all three. It can be viewed as a personality trait related to other traits or as an interpersonal process; either way, the extent to which people engage in self-disclosure affects and is affected by social interaction.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

One of the first researchers to examine self-disclosure was Sidney Jourard. Jourard, who was a psychotherapist, described self-disclosure and claimed that it was positively associated with individuals’ health and well-being. He argued that being able to share feelings, thoughts, and experiences with another person often serves as a relief to individuals and may elicit support and validation from listeners.

The importance of self-disclosure to the development of interpersonal relationships was initially highlighted by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor. In fact, Altman and Taylor’s Social Penetration Theory describes self-disclosure as inextricably tied to relational development. The theory suggests that increases in relational intimacy are a result of individuals sharing increasingly personal information about themselves with each other. When people first meet and do not know each other well, they tend to exchange information that is impersonal and talk about a limited range of topics.