

# The Self

## What Is The Self?

'Self' & 'Self Concept' are used interchangeably to refer to what we know about ourselves. Our sex, age, height, personality, and our likes & dislikes are all part of our self concept. The development of a sense of self is one of the most critical processes of the child's early life.

## Definitions

**Murphy (1947):** "The self is the individual as known to the individual"

**Burns (1980):** "The set of attitudes a person holds towards himself"

## Components Of The Self Concept:

- Self Image
- Self Esteem
- Ideal Self

**Self Image** - Refers to the way in which we would describe ourselves, the kind of person we think we are. One way of investigating the self image is to ask people to answer the question 'Who am I?' twenty times (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954)

This typically produces two main categories of answers: social roles & personality traits. Social roles are usually quite objective aspects of our self image (e.g. student, son, daughter, brother, sister). They are 'facts' & can be verified by others. Personality traits are more a matter of opinion as what we think we are like might be different from how others see us.

**Self Esteem** - Is essentially evaluative: refers to the extent to which we like & accept or

approve of ourselves. Coopersmith (1967) defined it as: "A personal judgement of worthiness, that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds towards himself"

**Ideal Self** - Refers to the kind of person we would like to be. Generally, the greater the • gap between our self image & our ideal self, the lower our self esteem.

### The Development Of Self Concept

Lewis (1990) considers that the development of self involves two main steps, the first involved a sense of separateness, the second involves an increasing sense of self awareness.

During the first couple of years babies have to learn that they are separate from all the other people & objects around them. Maccoby suggests that the evidence by which the infant reaches this conclusion comes from two sources:

1. **Physical sensations:** the child becomes aware. For example, that if he falls over, it hurts but if someone else suffers the same fate, he himself feels no pain.

2. **An awareness of control:** he learns that his actions have certain consequences, if he touches a mobile, it moves.

### The Categorical Self

For a full sense of self, the child must define himself in terms of his own qualities. This process is referred to as the 'categorical self' because it takes the form of placing oneself in an ever increasing number of categories. Some of the first categories the child identifies are size, age & gender. The self concept changes as the child develops. Very young children think only of themselves in terms of physical characteristics; gradually they incorporate moods & preferences, finally they include interpersonal traits, morals, & life philosophies.

**Lewis & Brooks-Gunn (1979)** distinguish the existential self - being different & separate from others - from the categorical self - knowing our age, sex, personality, likes & dislikes etc.

**Lewis & Brooks carried out a series of studies on the emergence of self in infants.**

**Lewis & Brooks (1978)** used the 'rouge' test to try to determine just when a child has developed self awareness. They secretly applied a dot of rouge to

babies' noses & then placed them in front of a mirror. The test of self recognition & therefore self awareness is whether they touch their own nose or the nose in the mirror.

It was found that babies between 9 & 12 months never touched their own noses, but by 21 months, about 75% of children did so. Self awareness therefore appears to begin about half way through a child's second year.

**Lewis & Brooks-Gunn (1979)** found that when confronted with pictures of themselves, one year old babies generally call themselves 'baby'. Shortly before they reach two, most children can start to use their own names and by two & a half can use personal pronouns. By the age of three, almost all children can refer to themselves in pictures using both their names & the correct personal pronoun.

### Increasing Self Awareness

**Bannister & Agnew (1977)** also demonstrated children's increasing self awareness with age. Groups of school age children were asked a variety of questions about themselves & their home & their school lives. The answers were tape-recorded & then re-recorded in different voices to disguise the identity of the original speakers.

Months later, the same children were asked to listen to the recordings & identify which statements were their own & which were not, & to give reasons for their choices.

Findings indicated that the children's ability to recognise their own statements increased with age. It was also found that the children's explanations for their choices, decisions reflected a growing knowledge of & confidence in their own feelings & beliefs - e.g. five year olds tended to rely on memory whereas nine year olds referred to personal beliefs.

### Factors Influencing The Development Of The Self Concept

**Argyle (1969, 1983)** Four major factors which influence the development of the self concept:

- The reaction of others
- Comparison with others
- Social roles
- Identification

### Reaction Of Others

**Guthrie( 1938)** provides a clear example of how the reactions of others are unattractive incorporated into our view of self. He describes how a group of male students decided to treat a dull , unattractive female student as if she were an extremely popular & attractive girl, taking it in turns to ask her out. Within a`period the girl responded to this positive feedback by becoming more confident & fun-loving and therefore more attractive. Before the year was over, she had developed an easy manner & a confident assumption that she was popular" (Guthrie, 1938). Children of pre-school age are extremely concerned with how adults view them, & few things are more relevant than how significant others react to them (i.e. parents, older brothers/sisters, & other people the child values. If a child is constantly told "You're clumsy" or "You're stupid" they will come to believe it, it will become part of their self image. The opinions are assimilated into their self concept & they then form part of their self attributions, in that they then use these terms to describe themselves.

Argyle uses the term introjection to describe the process by which we incorporate the opinions, attitudes & reactions of others into our self concept.

A great deal of research has been performed in connection with self esteem & the reaction of others & a study by Coopersmith (1967) is one of the most important.

Coopersmith conducted a longitudinal study of hundreds of boys, following their progress from ten years old through to early adulthood. All were from middle class families & there were no significant differences between them in terms of intelligence & physical attractiveness. Based on a variety of measures of self esteem the boys were categorised as being either high, medium or low in self esteem:

- Boys high in self esteem were confident, academically successful & popular
- Boys low in self esteem were, according to Coopersmith: "A sad little group", fearful, isolated, self conscious, underachievers & sensitive to criticism.

### **How did Coopersmith account for their differences in self esteem?**

He gave the boys' mothers a questionnaire to complete, gave them in-depth interviews, & the boys were also asked about their parents' child rearing methods. He found significant differences between the two sets of parents:

The parents of boys high in self esteem similarly valued themselves highly, were firm but fair in their discipline techniques, &, above all, had a positive & accepting attitude towards their sons.

The parents of the boys low in self esteem were inconsistent in the treatment of their children, made little attempt to consult them & left them confused as to what was expected of them. (Page 614 Gross)

Coopersmith followed the boys into adulthood & found that the high self esteem boys consistently out-performed the low self esteem boys & proved more successful educationally & vocationally.

We must be careful not to infer from Coopersmith's results that certain kinds of child-rearing methods actually produce different levels of self esteem in the child. Coopersmith's data are only correlational (i.e. he found a relationship between two variables) we cannot be sure that one is the cause of the other.

Also, also his subjects were all white, middle-class boys - not a representative sample of the American population as a whole: what about working-class,

black & female children.

### Comparison With Others

One way in which we come to form a picture of what we are like is to see how we compare with others. There are certain parts of our self image which only take on any significance through this process. For example, 'tall' and 'fat' are not absolute characteristics (like, for example, 'brown eyed'), & we are only tall or fat in comparison with others who are shorter or thinner than ourselves.

**Rosenburg (1965)** studied large numbers of adolescents & found that those with the highest self esteem tended to be of higher social class, to have done better at school & to have been leaders in their clubs, all of which represent the basis for a favourable comparison between self & others.

**Social Roles Kuhn (1960)** asked seven year olds & undergraduate students to give twenty different answers to the question, 'Who am I?'. The seven year olds gave an average of 5 answers relating to roles, while the undergraduates gave a more sophisticated response.