What Is Self-Concept?

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Question: What Is Self-Concept?

Answer:

Self-concept is the image that we have of ourselves. How exactly does this self-image form and change over time? This image develops in a number of ways, but is particularly influenced by our interactions with important people in our lives.

Definitions

- "Self-concept is our perception or image of our abilities and our uniqueness. At first one's self-concept is very general and changeable... As we grow older, these self-perceptions become much more organized, detailed, and specific."
  (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2013)

- "A self-concept is a collection of beliefs about one's own nature, unique qualities, and typical behavior. Your self-concept is your mental picture of yourself. It is a collection of self-perceptions. For example, a self-concept might include such beliefs as 'I am easygoing' or 'I am pretty' or 'I am hardworking.'"
  (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012)

- "The *individual self* consists of attributes and personality traits that differentiate us from other individuals (for example, 'introverted'). The *relational self* is defined by our relationships with significant others (for example, 'sister'). Finally, the *collective self* reflects our membership in social groups (for example, 'British')."
(Crisp, R. J. & Turner, R. N., 2007)

Components of Self-Concept

Like many topics within psychology, a number of theorists have proposed different ways of thinking about self-concept.

According to a theory known as *social identity theory*, self-concept is composed of two key parts: personal identity and social identity. Our personal identity includes such things as personality traits and other characteristics that make each person unique. Social identity includes the groups we belong to including our community, religion, college, and other groups.

Bracken (1992) suggested that there are six specific domains related to self-concept:

- Social - the ability to interact with others

- Competance - ability to meet basic needs

- Affect - awareness of emotional states

- Physical - feelings about looks, health, physical condition, and overall appearance

- Academic - success or failure in school

- Family - how well one functions within the family unit

Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers believed that there were three different parts of self-concept:

1. **Self-image**, or how you see yourself. It is important to realize that self-image does not necessarily coincide with reality. People might have an inflated self-image and believe that they are better at things than they really are. Conversely, people are also prone to having negative self-images and perceive or exaggerate flaws or weaknesses. For example, a teenage boy might believe that he is clumsy and socially awkward when he is really quite charming and likeable. A teenage girl might believe that she is overweight, when she is really quite thin.

   Each individual's self-image is probably a mix of different aspects including your physical characteristics, personality traits, and social roles.

2. **Self-esteem**, or how much you value yourself. A number of different factors can impact self-esteem, including how we compare ourselves to others and how others respond to us. When people respond positively to our behavior, we are more likely to develop positive self-esteem.

When we compare ourselves to others and find ourselves lacking, it can have a negative impact on our self-esteem.

3. **Ideal self,** or how you wish you could be. In many cases, the way we see ourselves and how we would like to see ourselves do not quite match up.

Congruence and Incongruence

As mentioned earlier, our self-concepts are not always perfectly aligned with reality. Some students might believe that they are great at academics, but their school transcripts might tell a different story. According to Carl Rogers, the degree to which a person's self-concept matches up to reality is known as congruence and incongruence. While we all tend to distort reality to a certain degree, congruence occurs when self-concept is fairly well aligned to reality. Incongruence happens when reality does not match up to our self-concept.

Rogers believed that incongruence has its earliest roots in childhood. When parents place conditions on their affection for their children (only expressing love if children "earn it" through certain behaviors and living up to the parents' expectations), children begin to distort the memories of experiences that leave them feeling unworthy of their parents' love.

Unconditional love, on the other hand, helps to foster congruence. Children who experience such love feel no need to continually distort their memories in order to believe that other people will love and accept them as they are.