

Self-concept

Who are you? What makes you “you?”

You might answer with “*I’m a mother,*” or, “*I’m a therapist,*” or maybe, “*I’m a believer,*” “*I’m a good friend,*” “*I’m a brother.*“

Maybe you answer with, “*I am excellent at my job,*” “*I’m an accomplished musician,*” or “*I’m a successful athlete.*”

Other responses might fall into the category of traits: “*I’m a kind-hearted person,*” “*I’m intelligent and hard-working,*” or “*I’m laid-back and easy-going.*”

These responses come from your internal sense of who you are. This sense is developed early in life, but it goes through constant evaluation and adjustment throughout the lifespan.

In psychology, this sense of self has a specific term: self-concept.

According to Roy Baumeister (1999) self-concept is:

“The individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is.”

A similar definition comes from Rosenberg’s 1979 book on the topic; he says self-concept is:

“...the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object.”

Self-concept:

Self-concept is an individual’s perception of self and is what helps make each individual unique.

Positive and negative self-assessments in the physical, emotional, intellectual and functional dimensions change over time. It affects the ability to function and greatly influences health status.

Carl Rogers (1959) believes that the self-concept has three different components:

- The view you have of yourself (self-image)
- How much value you place on yourself (self-esteem or self-worth)
- What you wish you were really like (ideal-self)

Self-Concept vs. Self-Esteem

Self-concept is not self-esteem, although self-esteem may be a part of self-concept. Self-concept is the perception that we have of ourselves, our answer when we ask ourselves the question “Who am I?”

It is knowing about one’s own tendencies, thoughts, preferences and habits, hobbies, skills, and areas of weakness. According to Carl Rogers, founder of client-centered therapy, self-concept is an overarching construct that self-esteem is one of the components of it (McLeod, 2008).

Self-Concept vs. Self-Image

Self-image is related to self-concept but is less broad. Self-image is how an individual sees themselves, and it does not have to align with reality.

A person’s self-image is based on how they see themselves, while self-concept is a more comprehensive evaluation of the self, largely based on how a person sees themselves, values themselves, thinks about themselves, and feels about themselves.

Carl Rogers posited that self-image is a component of self-concept, along with self-esteem or self-worth and one’s “ideal self” (McLeod, 2008).

Self-Concept vs. Self-Efficacy

Self-concept is a more complex construct than self-efficacy. While self-efficacy refers to an individual’s judgments of their own abilities, self-concept is more general and includes both cognitive (thoughts about) and affective (feelings about) judgments about oneself (Bong & Clark, 1999).

Self-Concept vs. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness also influences self-concept. It is the quality or trait that involves conscious awareness of one’s own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and traits (Cherry, 2018A). To have a fully developed self-concept (and one that is based in reality), a person must have at least some level of self-awareness.

Characteristics of Self-Concept

As a brief review, self-concept is the perspective we have on who we are. Each of us has a unique self-concept, different from the self-concept of others and from their concept of us.

However, there are some characteristics that all of our self-concepts have in common.

Self-concept:

1. Displays uniquely with each person.
2. Vary from very positive to very negative.
3. Carries emotional, intellectual, and functional dimensions.
4. Changes with the context.
5. Changes over time.
6. Influence the individual's life (Delmar Learning, n.d.)

Dimensions of Self-Concept

Different dimensions may constitute different kinds of self-concept; for example, the dimensions that create “academic self-efficacy” will not have as much overlap with “social self-efficacy.”

There are some overarching dimensions that researchers understand with the self-concept puzzle. These dimensions include:

- **Self-esteem**
- Self-worth
- Self-image (physical)
- Ideal self
- Identities or roles (social)
- Personal traits and qualities (Elliot, 1984; Gecas, 1982)

The Development Stages of Self-Concept



Self-concept develops and changes throughout the lifespan, but it is most in flux during the early years.

Early childhood is a ripe time for young humans to perceive themselves in the world.

The Formation of Self-Concept During Early Childhood

There are three general stages of self-concept development during early childhood:

1. *Stage 1: 0 to 2 years-old*
 - a. Babies need consistent, loving relationships to develop a positive sense of self.
 - b. Babies form preferences that align with their innate sense of self.
 - c. Toddlers feel secure with gentle but firm limits
 - d. At age two, language skill develops and toddlers have a sense of “me.”

2. *Stage 2: 3 to 4 years-old*
 - a. Three and four-year-olds begin to see themselves as separate and unique individuals.
 - b. Their self-images tend to be descriptive rather than prescriptive or judgmental.
 - c. Preschoolers are increasingly independent and curious about what they can do.

3. *Stage 3: 5 to 6 years-old*
 - a. They are transitioning from the “me” stage to the “us” stage, where they are more aware of the needs and interests of the larger group.
 - b. Kindergarteners can use their words to communicate their wants, needs, and feelings.
 - c. Five and six-year-olds can use even more advanced language to help define themselves within the context of the group (Miller, Church, & Poole, n.d.).

Self-Concept in Middle Childhood

During middle childhood (about 7 to 11 years old), children are beginning to develop a sense of their social selves and figuring out how they fit in with everyone else. They reference social groups and make social comparisons more often, and begin to think about how others see them.

Other characteristics of their self-concept at this stage include:

- More balanced, less all-or-none descriptions
- Development of the ideal and real self
- Descriptions of the self by competencies instead of specific behaviors
- Development of a personal sense of self (Berk, 2004)

Culture begins to play a big role at this stage, but we’ll talk more about that later.

The Development of Self-Concept in Adolescence



Adolescence is where the development of one's self-concept really explodes.

This is the stage in which individuals (about age 12-18) play with their sense of self, including a time when they experiment with their identity, compare themselves with others, and develop the basis of a self-concept that may stay with them the rest of their life.

During this period, adolescents are prone to greater self-consciousness and susceptibility to the influence of their peers and chemical changes happening in the brain (Sebastian, Burnett, & Blakemore, 2008).

They enjoy greater freedom and independence, engage in increasingly competitive activities, compare themselves with their peers, and can value (even over-value) the perspective of others (Manning, 2007).

In adolescence, there are two important factors that influence self-concept and self-worth:

1. Success in areas in which the adolescent desires success
2. Approval from significant people in the adolescent's life (Manning, 2007).

When students have a healthy sense of self-worth and self-esteem, they contribute to a greater self-concept.

Self-Concept and Academic Achievement

Self-concept and academic achievement is also a positive feedback loop, as actions beget similar actions and identity to match.

In a longitudinal study, Marsh (1990) found that students with more positive academic self-concept achieved greater academic success the following year. Later studies confirmed the relationship between the two but indicated that achievement affects self-concept more than self-concept inherently influences achievement success (Muijs, 2011).

Research by Byrne (1986) offered instead that self-concept and academic self-concept can be considered two separate constructs; academic achievement may impact one's overall self-concept, but it is most directly related to academic self-concept.

Culture and Self-Concept

Unsurprisingly, culture can have a big impact on self-concept. For example, how children are treated in early childhood influences how their sense of self develops.

Many parents might be more concerned with emotions and satisfying the wants of their children, while others may be more firm and controlling of their child's behavior, worrying about their needs rather than fulfilling their desires. This is a generalization, but one that holds under scrutiny: culture influence self-concept.

Research suggests that those from more collectivist cultures produced more group self-descriptions and fewer idiocentric self-descriptions than those from individualistic cultures (Bochner, 1994).

Further research also indicated that East Asian cultures are more accepting of contradictory beliefs about the self; this indicates that one's self-concept in these cultures may be more flexible than, say, American culture (Choi & Choi, 2002).

Findings like these are fascinating, but they also reveal how and why it is difficult to measure self-concept. The next section summarizes those attempts.