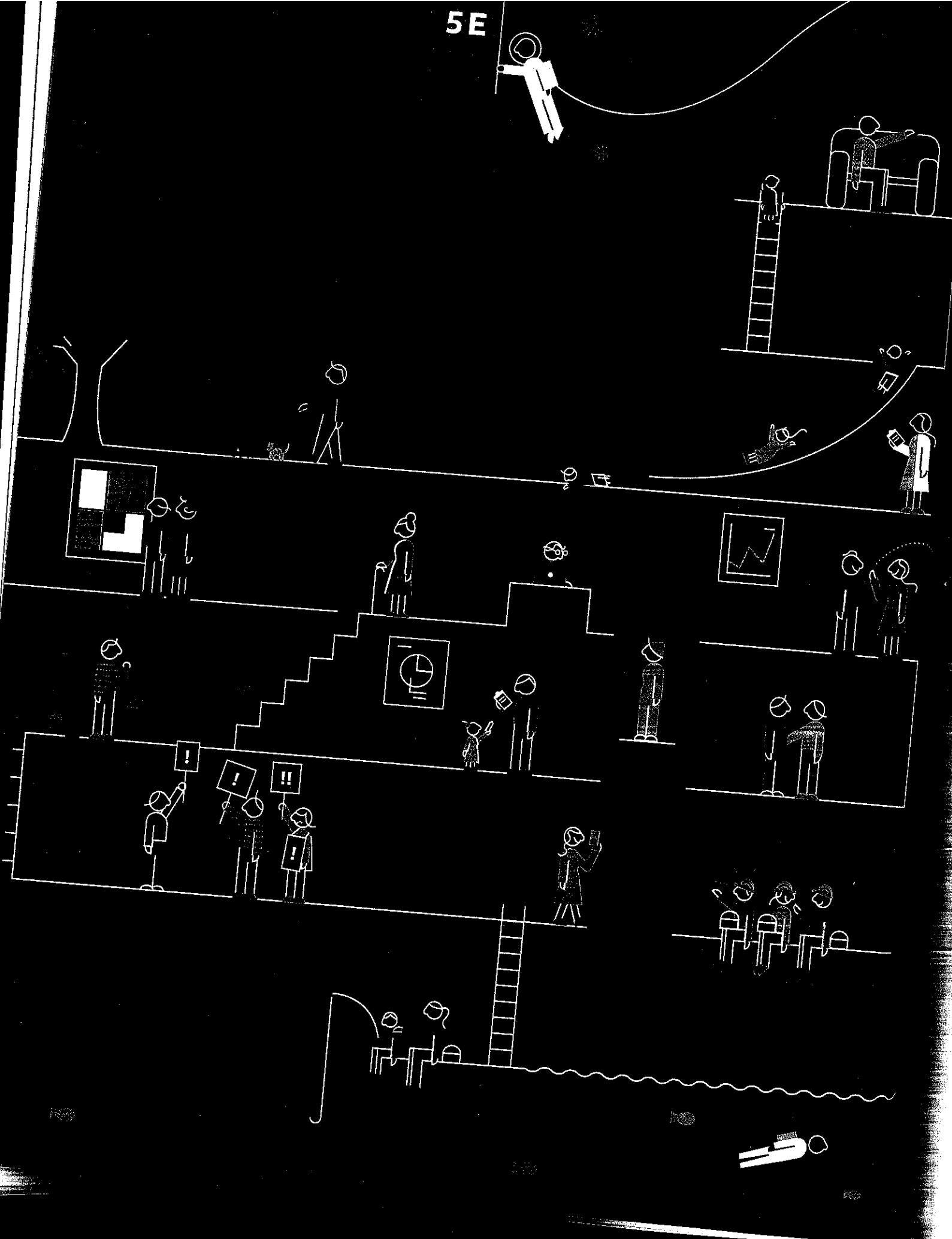


5E



FIFTH EDITION

# Social Psychology

**Thomas Gilovich**  
*Cornell University*

**Dacher Keltner**  
*University of California, Berkeley*

**Serena Chen**  
*University of California, Berkeley*

**Richard E. Nisbett**  
*University of Michigan*



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אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב  
הספרייה

## The Social Self

ON MARCH 28, 1986, IN NEW YORK CITY, Cynthia and Joseph Germanotta welcomed their first daughter, Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, into the world. It didn't take long for Cynthia and Joe to discover that Stefani was artistically gifted. Stefani was playing the piano by ear by the age of 4, and soon she was also singing, songwriting, and acting. By her early teens, Stefani had a voice teacher and took acting lessons while starring in local plays. But her creativity and talents weren't always celebrated. What was seen as gifted to some was seen as odd and eccentric, even "freakish," to many of her peers, leaving Stefani to struggle with bullying, ostracism, and deep feelings of insecurity through much of her adolescence and early adulthood.

Nonetheless, Stefani endured these challenges and, by early 2008, at the age of 22, she released her debut album, *The Fame*, and the person now known worldwide as Lady Gaga was born. Lady Gaga has achieved international fame as a singing, songwriting, and performing powerhouse. Indeed, she is one of the best-selling musical artists of all time and has won countless awards for her musical achievements, including 6 Grammy Awards and 13 MTV Video Music Awards.

Yet in the eyes of many people, and undoubtedly herself, Lady Gaga is far more than a singer and performer. She is a Golden Globe-winning actress, a practicing Christian, and a passionate advocate for LGBT rights. She is a widely photographed and lauded fashion icon. She is a rape survivor. She's someone who has battled anorexia, bulimia, and depression. She is a philanthropist, providing support for many causes, such as relief efforts after the 2010 Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. She is the founder of an influential nonprofit organization, the

### OUTLINE

The Nature of the Social Self

Origins of the Sense of Self

Self-Esteem

Motives Driving Self-Evaluation

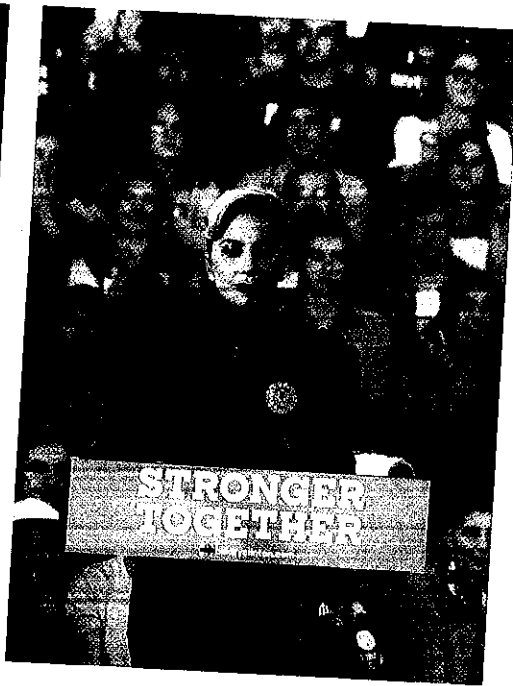
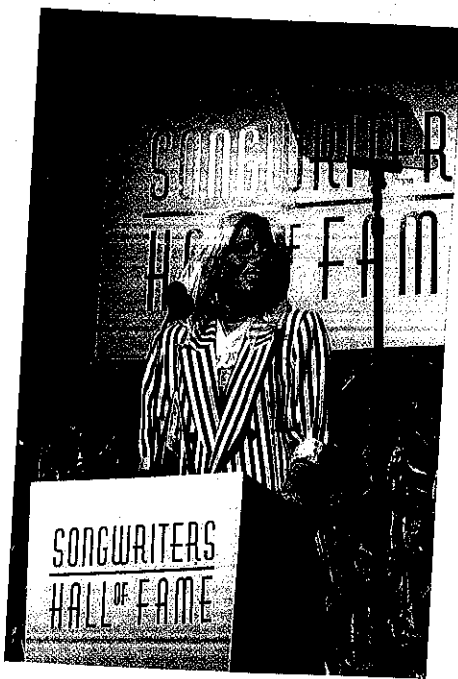
Self-Regulation: Motivating and Controlling Behavior

Self-Presentation

Why would children affiliate toward the outgroups in well-promoted diverse behaviors?

How might hand-tips shared during childhood shape one's social self in adulthood?

Do children who play sports have higher self-esteem than those who do not?



#### WHO IS LADY GAGA?

Lady Gaga—pictured here receiving an award for her musical accomplishments, showing her unique fashion sense, and campaigning for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential race—has many different selves.

Born This Way Foundation, that advocates youth empowerment and anti-bullying, among other youth-related issues. The list goes on.

Lady Gaga provides a treasure trove of examples to illustrate the concept of the self in social psychology. Revealing how profoundly social the self is, she has spoken widely and openly about the ways that the social obstacles and pain she endured as a child have shaped who she is today. Her fans see her as a symbol of self-acceptance and self-confidence—what social psychologists call self-esteem. And her many personas show how, like Lady Gaga, most of us have many sides to who we are and think of ourselves in many different ways—as a hard-working student, a loyal friend, a chocolate aficionado, an awkward dancer, a romantic, a skilled procrastinator, an aspiring writer. In this chapter, we draw a portrait of the self as it is constructed, maintained, and negotiated in the social environment. ■

## The Nature of the Social Self

In his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James introduced many concepts about the self that inspire research to this day. One of his most enduring contributions is reflected in the title of this chapter, “The Social Self.” James coined the term *the social me* to refer to what we know about ourselves from social relationships. James’s term reflects his conviction that the self is not something to be distinguished from the social world but rather is a social entity through and through. Who a person is in one social context (with soccer buddies) is often not the same as who the person is in another social environment (with a romantic partner). Recall from Chapter 1 that there are cultural differences in the self-conceptions that people hold dear. In this chapter, we explore cultural and other key social origins of the self. As James articulated over a century ago, our sense of who we are is forged in large part by our interactions with others.

“A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him. As many different social selves as there are distinct groups about whose opinions he cares.”

—WILLIAM JAMES

## The Accuracy of Self-Knowledge

Before we explore the social underpinnings of the self, it’s reasonable to ask how we figure out who we are. The Ancient Greek admonition to “know thyself” implies that a major source of self-knowledge is, well, ourselves. Indeed, our self-understanding is largely a product of construal processes—our making sense of our experiences, proclivities, preferences, attributes, and so on. Researchers like Dan McAdams (2008) even argue that people weave intricate stories about themselves. If self-knowledge is based in considerable part on our construals, what does that say about the accuracy of self-knowledge? That is, if you wanted to find out who someone really is, who would you ask?

Most of us assume that the best person to ask is in fact the person we want to know about (Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001). After all, this person has privileged access to self-relevant information, such as past experiences, not to mention current thoughts, feelings, and intentions (Epley & Dunning, 2006). Yet we’re also quick to recognize that people can sometimes possess a startling lack of self-insight. Recall the research described in Chapter 1 in which Nisbett and Wilson (1977) discovered that people can readily provide explanations for their behaviors that are not in fact accurate. Someone might say that she picked her favorite nightgown because of its texture or color, when in fact she picked it out because it was the last one she saw. Even our ability to report accurately on more important decisions—such as why we chose job candidate A over job candidate B, why we like Joe better than Jack, or how we solved a particular problem—can be wide of the mark (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Sometimes our lack of self-insight can be a self-protective measure: there are certain things many of us would rather not know about ourselves. But much of the time, we draw inaccurate conclusions about the self because we don’t have access to certain mental processes, such as those that lead us to prefer objects we looked at last (Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). Such mental processes are nonconscious, occurring outside of our awareness, leaving us to generate alternative, plausible accounts for our preferences and behaviors instead.

Given such roadblocks, how can a person gain accurate self-knowledge? Vazire and Mehl (2008) tackled this question over a series of studies. In one study, they asked participants to rate how accurate they think people are at assessing how much they themselves perform 25 different behaviors (for example, reading, singing, watching TV). They also asked participants how accurate they think people are at predicting how often *other* people they know well perform these behaviors. For every single behavior, the participants rated the accuracy of self-predictions to be greater than the accuracy of predictions about others—in other words, there was a widespread assumption that each of us is our own best expert.

In a subsequent study, however, the same researchers again had participants report on their enactment of the 25 behaviors. They also recruited “informants”—close friends, parents, and romantic partners of the participants—to report on the participants’ enactments of the behaviors. Then, over a 4-day period, with participants wearing a device that records the ambient sounds of their daily lives, Vazire and Mehl measured the actual frequency of participants’ behaviors. Contrary to the assumption that we know ourselves the best, they found that the reports of close others are as accurate as our own in anticipating our actual behavior.

But there’s more to the story. Interestingly, ratings made by the self and ratings made by close others *independently* predicted the self’s behavior; that is, both the

self and others have at least some accurate insight into who one is. But a closer inspection of the findings showed that there are certain aspects of a person that are uniquely known to the self and certain aspects that are uniquely known to others (Vazire, 2010; Vazire & Carlson, 2011). Because we have greater information than others do about our inner states (such as our thoughts and feelings), we are better judges of our internal traits (being optimistic or pessimistic, for instance). Other people, though, have better information for judging our external traits by observing our overt behavior (such as whether we are boisterous or outspoken).

Vazire and colleagues further point out that motivational forces might also be at play. As we will explore in depth later in this chapter, most people want to think highly of themselves, so when it comes to traits to which we attach a lot of value, such as creativity, other people tend to know us better than we know ourselves—because their judgments are less likely to be tainted by the desire to arrive at favorable assessments of the self.

### The Organization of Self-Knowledge

Regardless of its accuracy, there's no question that most of us have an enormous pool of self-knowledge. Collectively, all this self-knowledge is stored in our memories in some fashion, and it's capable of being retrieved, elaborated on, and used as a source of information and continuity as well as comfort or dismay.

Social psychologists assume that self-knowledge is stored in memory in cognitive structures known as self-schemas. Built from past experience, **self-schemas** represent people's beliefs and feelings about themselves, both in general and in particular kinds of situations (Greenwald, 1980; Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consider the domain of conscientiousness. Each of us has a self-schema, stored in memory, representing our beliefs and feelings about how conscientious (or not) we are. These beliefs and feelings are based on our experiences in situations where conscientiousness was relevant (such as studying for exams or remembering a sibling's birthday). Like the schemas we have about personality traits, other people, situations, and objects, the schemas we have about ourselves serve as more than simple storehouses of self-knowledge. They also perform an organizing function by helping us navigate, and make sense of, all the information that bombards us every day.

In one of the earliest studies of self-schemas, Hazel Markus (1977) hypothesized that if self-schemas exist, then a person who has a self-schema in a particular domain (for example, a schema about how extraverted she is) should process information in that domain more quickly, retrieve evidence consistent with the schema more rapidly, and readily reject information that contradicts the schema. To test these hypotheses, Markus first identified participants who labeled themselves as either quite dependent or quite independent. She labeled the participants who rated themselves closer to the extremes of dependence and independence as "schematic." She also identified "aschematic" participants, those who rated themselves moderately on this dimension and for whom neither dependence nor independence was important to their self-definition.

Several weeks later, the participants rated how well a series of traits presented on a computer screen described them. The

**self-schema** A cognitive structure, derived from past experience, that represents a person's beliefs and feelings about the self, both in general and in specific situations.



"I don't know anybody here but the hostess—and, of course, in a deeper sense, myself."

schematic participants judged schema-relevant traits as true or not true of themselves much more quickly than aschematic participants, suggesting that people are particularly attuned to information that maps onto an existing self-schema. Also, when asked to do so, the schematic participants were able to generate many more behaviors consistent with the schema-relevant traits, suggesting that past actions and experiences supporting the self-schema are abundant in memory and come readily to mind. Finally, the schematic participants were more likely to refute feedback from a personality test that contradicted their self-schemas, such as independent participants being told they were actually dependent. In short, regardless of their accuracy, self-schemas serve as a basic unit of organization for self-knowledge and influence our interpretations and judgments of ourselves and the social world.

### LOOKING BACK

The notion that the self is fundamentally social has long been recognized. As the immediate or broader social context shifts, so, too, may the nature of the self. Self-knowledge is derived in large part from construal processes, is limited by what people have access to, and can be distorted by motivational forces. Self-knowledge is stored in memory in cognitive structures known as self-schemas.

## Origins of the Sense of Self

What are the building blocks of self-construals? A social psychologist would posit that a sense of self comes primarily from specific ways the social situation shapes the self. The social situation can be as concrete as the presence of a close friend or a more academically successful classmate. It can also be rather abstract and diffuse, such as norms conveyed by key institutions in one's culture or by members of an important social group, such as one's gender group.

### Family and Other Socialization Agents

We learn what attitudes and behaviors are socially appropriate from parents, siblings, teachers, peers, and other "socialization agents." This process happens directly, as when parents insist that their children share, take turns, and say "thank you," and indirectly, as when teachers model appropriate behaviors. By encouraging certain behaviors and providing opportunities for particular activities, socialization agents influence the personality traits, abilities, and preferences we come to think of as our own. Imagine a woman whose Jewish parents took her to synagogue every week as a child, insisted she take Hebrew lessons, and made sure she had a Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Because of this upbringing, it's not surprising that, as an adult, being Jewish became central to this woman's sense of self. **Box 3.1** (see p. 68) provides another illustration of how family—in particular, siblings—can profoundly influence the nature of the self.

Another way that family and other socialization agents shape the self is captured by the notion that we come to know ourselves by imagining what



**UPBRINGING SHAPES THE SELF**  
Being raised in a Jewish family undoubtedly influences how the girl in the above photo, shown at her Bat Mitzvah ceremony, defines herself.

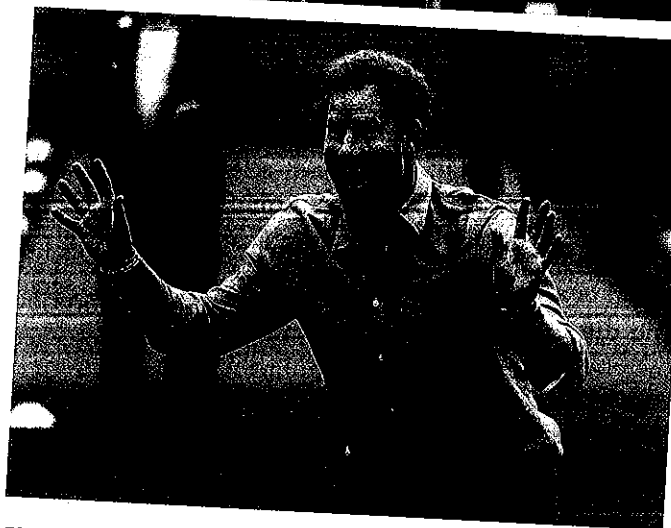
## Siblings and the Social Self

What do most U.S. presidents, English and Canadian prime ministers, Oprah Winfrey, Bette Davis, and all of the actors who have portrayed James Bond (except Daniel Craig) have in common? What do Virginia Woolf, Ben Franklin, Charles Darwin, Mohandas Gandhi, Vincent Van Gogh, and Madonna have in common? The first group are firstborns. The second are later-borns. What does birth order have to do with a person's sense of self? According to Frank Sulloway (1996, 2001), a great deal. Sulloway has looked at sibling dynamics from an evolutionary perspective and arrived at a "born-to-rebel" hypothesis. Across species, Sulloway theorizes, sibling conflict, especially when resources are scarce, is frequent, widespread, and occasionally deadly. Sand sharks devour one another before birth in the oviducts of the mother until one well-fed young shark emerges. Once a blue-footed booby drops below 80 percent of its body weight, its siblings exclude it from the nest, or worse, peck it to death. Infant hyenas are born with large canine teeth, which they often use to deadly effect on their newly born siblings. Even in humans, young siblings engage in frequent conflict, up to one squabble every 5 minutes (Dunn & Munn, 1985).

Humans have evolved adaptations, or solutions, to threats to survival, and one such adaptation involves a means of resolving sibling conflict. According to the principle of diversification, siblings develop different personality traits, abilities, and preferences within the same family so that they can peacefully occupy different niches.

Throughout most of development, older siblings are larger and more powerful and often act as surrogate parents. They are invested in the status quo, which benefits them. ("Things were fine until you came along.") In contrast, younger siblings, with the "establishment" niche already occupied by their older sibling, develop in ways that make them inclined to challenge the family status quo. In a review of 196 studies of personality and birth order, Sulloway found that older siblings tend to be more assertive and dominant and more achievement oriented and conscientious. These traits are consistent with older siblings' more assertive, powerful role in the family. In contrast, younger siblings tend to be more agreeable, and they are likely to be more open to

novel ideas and experiences. This social self emerges as younger siblings learn to coexist with their more dominant older siblings (which accounts for their elevated agreeableness) and as they find imaginative ways to carve out their own niche in the world (which accounts for their increased openness to experience).



**SIBLING DIFFERENCES** Firstborns like Prince William (top) are often more responsible and more likely to support the status quo than younger siblings like Prince Harry, who often are more mischievous, more open to novel experiences, and more likely to rebel against authority.

others think of us. The sociologist Charles H. Cooley (1902) coined the phrase "looking-glass self" to refer to the idea that other people's reactions to us—their approval or disapproval—serve as a mirror of sorts. That is, self-knowledge is derived in part from **reflected self-appraisals**, our beliefs about others' reactions to us. Throughout our lives, we experience overt or subtle reactions and appraisals from others. For example, your parents praise your accomplishments; a romantic partner makes light of your fears; a teacher assigns you a challenging

**reflected self-appraisal** A belief about what others think of one's self.

task; your peers laugh heartily at your jokes. Reactions and appraisals like these convey that you're competent, neurotic, have potential, or are funny. In short, we see ourselves partly through the eyes of those around us.

The idea that we gain self-knowledge through reflected self-appraisals might seem to suggest that we have little say in how we see ourselves. But the key concept here is that we internalize how we *think* others perceive us, not necessarily how they *actually* see us. In fact, our reflected self-appraisals often don't correlate highly with the way other people evaluate us (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979; Tice & Wallace, 2005). For example, far more people think they are shy than are actually perceived as shy by others (Zimbardo, 1990).

Figuring out how, and to what degree, reflected self-appraisals influence a person's sense of self can be tricky. For example, Amy's view of herself as a clumsy person could stem from her perception that her family and friends see her this way and convey that impression to her. But it's also possible that her view of herself as clumsy has been detected by other people who then convey that impression back to her. The way we view ourselves often affects the perceptions of other people, who then reflect those views back to us in a kind of echo chamber (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993).

### Situationism and the Social Self

In many a film depicting the social lives of teenagers, you see the teenage characters adapting who they are to the people around them. Surrounded by their studious classmates, they readily compare homework notes and share gripes about the difficult test they had to take; in the presence of the "cool kids," they convey nonchalance about their schoolwork. The chameleon-like nature of the teenagers in such films hits at a deeper and more universal truth: that our social self shifts from one situation to another. This notion that the social self changes across different contexts is consistent with the principle of *situationism*, and it's supported by abundant empirical evidence.

**ASPECTS OF THE SELF THAT ARE RELEVANT AND DISTINCTIVE IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT** Students who are rebellious and free-spirited in the dorm will shift to a more sober and conventional demeanor around parents or professors. Someone who sees herself as relaxed and outspoken when with her close friends may be shy and inhibited when interacting with a group of new acquaintances. Markus and Wurf (1987) coined the term **working self-concept** to refer to the idea that only a subset of a person's vast pool of self-knowledge is brought to mind in any given context—usually the subset that's most relevant or appropriate in the current situation. Thus, for example, notions of the self related to relationships are likely to be the mind's prime focus with a romantic partner, whereas notions of the self related to competition are likely to be at the forefront during an important sports match.

William McGuire and Alice Padawer-Singer (1978) proposed that we also tend to highlight what makes us unique or distinctive in a given situation. To test this hypothesis, they asked sixth-graders at different schools to describe themselves.

"Oh would some power the gift give us, To see ourselves as others see us."

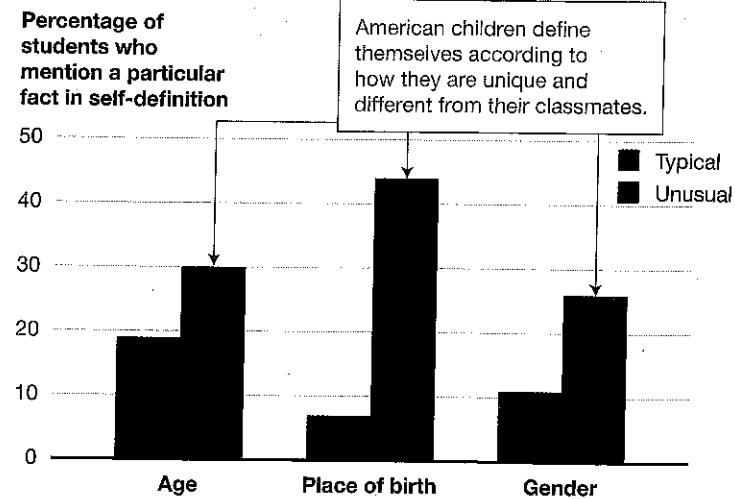
—ROBERT BURNS

**working self-concept** A subset of self-knowledge that is brought to mind in a particular context.



### CONTEXT AND SENSE OF SELF

In the HBO original series *Girls*, the character Shoshanna Shapiro, played by actress Zosia Mamet, moves to Japan for a job. Here she is depicted walking around town in her newfound home, showing clear signs that her sense of self (including her fashion sense) has shifted to fit the context.



**FIGURE 3.1**  
DISTINCTIVENESS AND THE SENSE OF SELF  
Source: Adapted from McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1978.

On average, children wrote 12 statements referring to their recreational activities, attitudes, friends, and school activities. As it turned out, the children defined themselves according to how they differed from their classmates (**Figure 3.1**). Thirty percent of the children who were especially young or old compared with their classmates (that is, six months from the most common age of their classmates) mentioned their age in their self-definition, whereas only 19 percent of the other children did. Forty-four percent of the children who were born outside the United States mentioned this biographical fact, whereas only 7 percent of those born in the United States mentioned that fact about themselves. Twenty-six percent of the children of the minority gender in

their class mentioned their gender as part of their self-definition compared with 11 percent of the majority gender (see also Cota & Dion, 1986). At least in the Western world, what's most central to identity is what makes a person distinct.

**MALLEABILITY AND STABILITY** Most of us would readily agree that our sense of self shifts depending on the social context. Yet we also experience a sense of continuity in the self, the feeling that we have a stable, core self. How can we reconcile what appear to be dueling notions of malleability (something that can be shaped) and stability in the self?

There are several paths of reconciliation. First, although one's working self-concept varies across situations, there are nevertheless core aspects of self-knowledge that are likely to be what a person thinks of first when thinking about the self (Markus, 1977). Thus, although Jiang Yun may see herself as painfully shy around members of the opposite sex but outgoing with her girlfriends, she sees herself as a good listener no matter whom she is around. For LGBT people, who frequently face the decision of whether or not to disclose their LGBT status, their sexual-minority identity is likely to be a core, cross-situationally noticeable aspect of the self (Cain, 1991).

Second, a person's overall pool of self-knowledge remains relatively stable over time, providing a sense of self-continuity even as different pieces of self-knowledge come to the fore in different contexts (Linville & Carlston, 1994). Thus, your belief that you're lazy may not be part of your working self-concept in a job interview, but it's nonetheless stored in memory, ready to be retrieved when you're lounging around watching TV instead of doing the laundry.

Finally, although a person's sense of self may shift depending on the context, it's likely that these shifts conform to a predictable, stable pattern (Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; English & Chen, 2007; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Take a person who sees herself as confident around her friends but as insecure around her overly critical mother. Although this person's sense of self clearly shifts according to the social context, it's not as if she's confident around her friends one day and insecure around them the next. In other words, the malleability in this individual's self is itself *stable*. Whenever she is around her friends, she sees herself as confident, whereas being around her mother reliably shifts her self-concept to include being insecure. In short, the social self is defined by two truths: it is malleable, shifting from one context to another, but it also has core components that persist across contexts.

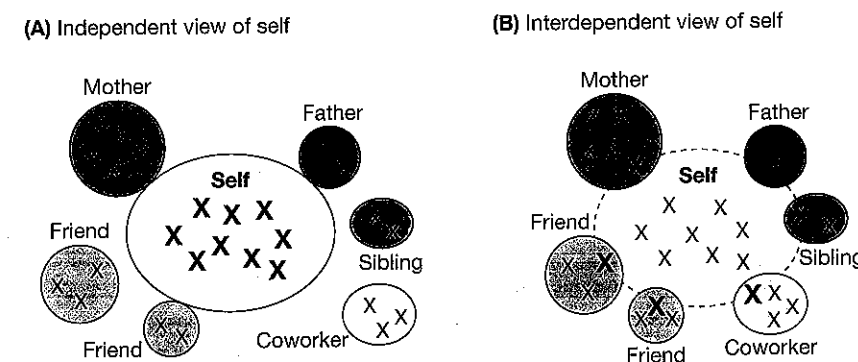
## Culture and the Social Self

The American Declaration of Independence and the *Analects* of the Chinese philosopher Confucius have shaped the lives of billions of people. Yet they reflect radically different ideas about the social self. The Declaration of Independence prioritized the rights and freedoms of the individual, and it protected those rights and liberties from infringement by others. Confucius emphasized the importance of knowing one's place in society, of honoring traditions, duties, and social roles, and of thinking of others before the self.

The differences reflected in these documents run deep in the cultures that people inhabit. In Western societies, people are concerned about their individuality, about freedom, and about self-expression. Our adages reflect this: "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." "If you've got it, flaunt it." In Asian cultures, homilies and folk wisdom encourage a different view of the self: "The empty wagon makes the most noise." "The nail that stands up is pounded down." Hazel Markus, Shinobu Kitayama, and Harry Triandis have offered far-reaching theories about how cultures vary in the social selves they encourage and how these different conceptions of the self shape the emotions we feel, the motivations that drive us, and our ways of perceiving the social world (Markus & Connor, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1994, 1995).

**INDEPENDENT AND INTERDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUALS** As discussed in Chapter 1, many Western cultures, especially those of northwestern Europe and former British colonies, such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, promote an *independent self-construal*. In these societies, the self is an autonomous entity that is distinct and separate from others (**Figure 3.2A**). It's important for people to assert their uniqueness and independence, and the focus is on internal causes of behavior. These imperatives lead to a conception of the self in terms of traits that are stable across time and social context.

In contrast, most other cultures in the world, notably those of East Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, foster *interdependent self-construals*, in which the self is fundamentally connected to other people (**Figure 3.2B**). The imperatives are to find a place within the community and to fulfill appropriate roles. There is close attention to social contexts and a recognition of the shifting demands



**FIGURE 3.2**  
VIEWS OF THE SELF  
(A) In the independent view of the self, the self is construed as a distinct, autonomous entity, separate from others and defined by distinct traits and preferences. (B) In the interdependent view of the self, the self is construed as connected to others and defined by duties, roles, and shared preferences and traits.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."  
—DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

"A person of humanity wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others."  
—CONFUCIUS

of situations on behavior. These concerns lead to a conception of the self as something embedded within social relationships, roles, and duties. This kind of self-construal is prevalent in many East Asian cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), as well as in many Eastern European cultures (De Freitas et al., 2017; Realo & Allik, 1999; Tower, Kelly, & Richards, 1997), South Asian cultures (Dhawan, Roseman, Naidu, Thapa, & Rettek, 1995; Savani, Markus, & Conner, 2008), African cultures (Ma & Schoeneman, 1997), and Latin American cultures (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000).

In short, an independent self-construal promotes an inward focus on the self, whereas an interdependent self-construal encourages an outward focus on the social situation. Research shows that this difference in focus is reflected in the stories that members of different cultures construct about themselves. Cohen and Gunz (2002) asked Canadian and Asian students (a mixture of students from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Korea, and various South and Southeast Asian countries) to tell stories about ten different situations in which they were the center of attention—for example, being embarrassed. Canadians were more likely than Asians to reproduce the scene from their original point of view, looking outward from their own perspective. Asians were more likely to imagine the scene as an observer might, describing it from a third-person perspective. We might say that Westerners tend to experience and recall events from the inside out—with themselves at the center, looking out at the world. Easterners are more likely to experience and recall events from the outside in—starting from the social world, looking back at themselves as an object of attention. Westerners play the lead in their personal narratives; non-Westerners are more likely to be just one among many cast members. **Figure 3.3** provides another illustration of how Westerners and East Asians differ in the degree of attention they pay to the social context.



**FIGURE 3.3**  
**CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTENTION TO THE SOCIAL CONTEXT**

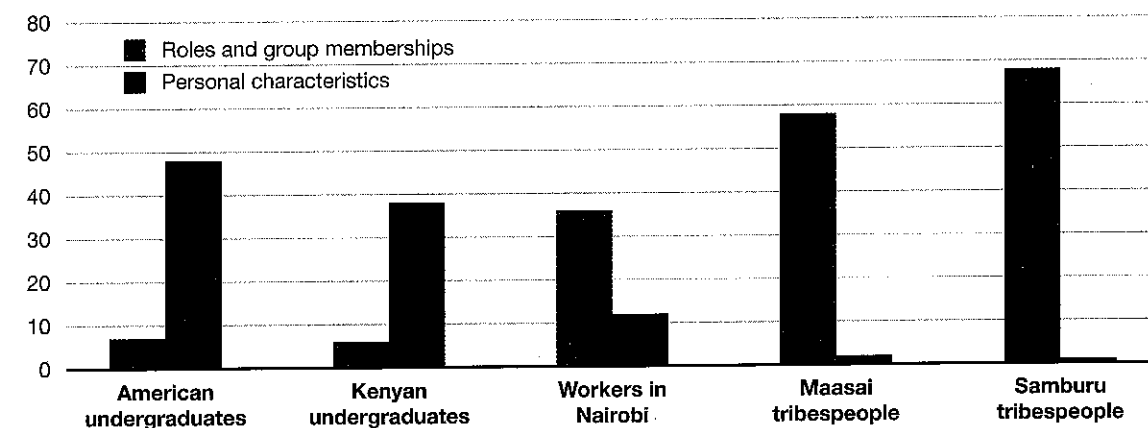
In this study, American and Japanese participants were shown a series of cartoons with either a Caucasian boy (for Americans) or an Asian boy (for Japanese) in the center, surrounded by four other people who were the same in all the pictures (Masuda et al., 2008). In some cartoons, the emotional expression of the boy (for example, happy) matched the emotional expressions on the faces of the surrounding people (happy). In other cases, as in the two pictures shown here, there was a mismatch in the emotional expressions of the boy (for example, angry) versus the others (happy). The researchers found that when judging an individual's emotions, the Japanese are more likely to take into account the emotions of others in the surrounding social context.

**WHO ARE YOU?** The common belief among Westerners that they are self-contained is shown by simply asking them to describe themselves. Kuhn and McPartland (1954) invented a simple “Who Am I?” exercise that asks people to list 20 statements that describe who they are. Americans’ self-descriptions tend to be context-free responses referring to personality traits (“I’m friendly,” “hard-working,” “shy”) and personal preferences (“I like camping”). The responses of people from interdependent cultures tend to refer to relationships with other people or groups (“I am Jan’s friend”) and are often qualified by context (“I am serious at work”; “I am fun-loving with my friends”) (Cousins, 1989; Ip & Bond, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Ma and Schoeneman (1997) gave the Who Am I? test to American university students and to four different groups living in Kenya: university students, workers in Nairobi (the capital city), and traditional Maasai and Samburu herding peoples. Kenya was for decades a colony of Great Britain, and city dwellers, especially those who are educated, have had a great deal of exposure to Western culture. Kenyan students have been exposed still more to Western culture and are being educated in a Western tradition. In contrast, traditional African tribespeople have had very little contact with Westerners.

**Figure 3.4** shows how differently these four African groups view themselves. Traditional Maasai and Samburu define themselves in terms of their family, property, and position in the community. Tribespeople are constantly made aware of their roles and status in relation to family members and other groups (Mwaniki, 1973). Kenyan students, on the other hand, are far more likely to mention personal characteristics. Kenyan students, in fact, differ only slightly from American students. Workers in Nairobi are in between the tribespeople and the students. These findings illustrate that different self-construals can emerge even among those who ostensibly live within the same “culture.” That is, culture is made up of more than just one’s country of residence. One’s occupation, educational institution, religion, race, social class—each of these can exert cultural influences of its own, shaping self-construals in more independent or

Percentage of category responses



**FIGURE 3.4**  
**SELF-CHARACTERIZATION IN FOUR AFRICAN GROUPS**

The results from this study suggest that Westernization is associated with the development of a more independent self-construal.

Source: Ma & Schoeneman, 1997.

## Culture and the Social Self in the Brain

As we saw in our discussion of reflected appraisals and the brain, when people are asked to judge themselves with respect to various trait dimensions, a certain region of the brain known as the medial prefrontal cortex is particularly active (Heatherton et al., 2006). This suggests that this part of the frontal lobe is involved in processes that represent self-knowledge. Zhu and his colleagues conducted a study using an interesting twist on this paradigm to ascertain whether many of the cultural differences in self-construal discussed in this chapter would be reflected in differences in neural activation (Zhu, Zhang, Fan, & Han, 2007). They had Chinese participants and Western Europeans rate the applicability of different traits to themselves, their mothers, and another unrelated person. For members of both cultures, considering the

applicability of the traits to themselves produced activation in the medial prefrontal cortex. But for Chinese participants, activation in this same region was also observed when participants were thinking about whether the traits characterized their mothers. For the Westerners, there was, if anything, a relative deactivation of the medial prefrontal cortex when they thought about their mothers. These findings seem to suggest that for people with interdependent self-construals, the same region of the brain represents the self and mother; they are merged within the brain. In contrast, for those with independent self-construals, the self and mother are quite distinct, all the way down to which neurons are activated in the brain.

interdependent directions. **Box 3.3** expands on the example of social class differences in self-construal, first noted in Chapter 1. Gender is yet another example of a cultural divide that has implications for self-construals.

### Gender and the Social Self

In a review of the literature on the self-concept and gender, Susan Cross and Laura Madson (1997) gathered evidence indicating that women in the United States tend to construe the self in more interdependent terms than men do—that is, in terms of connection to others. In contrast, men in the United States tend to prioritize difference and uniqueness, construing the self in more independent terms. The same gender differences are found among the Japanese (Kashima, Siegal, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992).

The evidence for these basic differences in self-construal is diverse. When women describe themselves, they are more likely than men to refer to social characteristics and relationships (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). When selecting photographs that are most revealing of who they are, women are more likely than men to choose photos that include other people, such as friends and family members (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993). In social interactions, women tend to be more empathic and better judges of other people's personalities and emotions (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Bernieri, Zuckerman, Koestner, & Rosenthal, 1994; Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Hall, 1984). Men tend to be more attuned to their own internal responses, such as increased heart rate, whereas women are more attuned to situational cues, such as other people's reactions (Pennebaker & Roberts, 1992; Roberts & Pennebaker, 1995).

Where do these gender differences in self-construal come from? Socialization processes are one influential source. Parents raise girls and boys differently. For example, parents tend to talk with their girls more than with their boys about emotions and being sensitive to others (Fivush, 1989, 1992). The friendships that people

## Social Class Shapes the Social Self

Stephens and her colleagues propose that life in different social class subcultures in the United States promotes the elaboration of distinct construals of the self (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Living in relatively higher-class environments, with their more abundant resources, safer neighborhoods, greater access to education, higher job security, and so on, affords people with the opportunity, if not the mandate, to develop selves that reflect the U.S. cultural ideal of independence. This independent self-construal emphasizes choice, freedom from constraint, the pursuit of opportunities, and self-expression. In contrast, the culture of lower-class individuals in the United States is characterized by fewer resources, less safe neighborhoods, limited access to education, and tenuous job security. In such circumstances, the Stephens team argues, it makes sense that people would develop selves that are more sensitive to the social context, to the constraints in the environment, and to their dependence on others. Among lower-class individuals, a more socially responsive, interdependent kind of self-construal is promoted. Do such class differences matter?

Because the norms and values of many U.S. institutions reflect the ideal of independence, people who hold an independent self-construal and think and behave accordingly are at an advantage—and one that serves to perpetuate social class differences. For example, in most American schools, administrators and teachers reward behavior associated with an independent self-construal, such as standing out from the pack (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). It's hardly surprising, then, that students whose social class promotes an independent self-construal have better academic achievement outcomes than those raised in a social class that encourages interdependence.

Researchers have begun to explore ways to promote the growth and development of lower-class individuals and, accordingly, help close the social class achievement gap. Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) studied a group of incoming first-generation college students (students who do not have parents with four-year degrees and who are disproportionately in the lower class) and a group of continuing-generation students (those who have at least one parent with a four-year degree). Both groups listened to one of two panels of first-generation and continuing-generation junior- and senior-year students sharing stories about their college experiences. Panelists in one condition described the ways their social class backgrounds had had both positive and negative effects, emphasizing the importance of using strategies that take into account their different social class status. Panelists in the other condition also shared stories about their college experiences but did not highlight the role of their social class.

Remarkably, the typical academic achievement gap seen between first- and continuing-generation students was eliminated among students exposed to the difference-education panel. The data suggest that the elimination of this gap occurred because the intervention increased the likelihood that first-generation students would seek out resources (such as e-mailing a professor for help) and, as a result, improved their grades. More research is of course needed, but findings like these at least raise the possibility that even relatively simple interventions can help level the playing field for individuals who tend to hold an interdependent self-construal, yet are faced with situations tailored to reward independence. Social class shapes the nature of the social self, but does not have to determine life outcomes.



**CLASS DIFFERENCES AND THE SOCIAL SELF** Higher- and lower-class individuals often inhabit very different environments, as shown by these photos of an upper-class neighborhood on the left and a lower-class neighborhood on the right.



form from the earliest ages also influence gender differences in self-construal. Starting at age 3 and continuing through the primary school years, girls and boys tend to play in gender-segregated groups that reinforce and amplify the differences in self-construal (Maccoby, 1990). Girls tend to focus on cooperative games that are oriented toward interpersonal relationships (for example, mother and child). Boys tend to emphasize competition, hierarchy, and distinctions among individuals. As adults, gender-specific roles further amplify these differences. For example, even today, Western women tend to take on most of the responsibilities for raising children, which calls on interdependent tendencies. These gendered roles are portrayed in the media as well, which tend to showcase men in positions of power and agency and women in more nurturing roles.

These aspects of socialization tend to reinforce and enhance biological differences between the sexes that make females more inclined to be nurturing and males more inclined to be competitive and aggressive. And you may recall from Chapter 1 that some cultures maximize these predispositions well beyond what is characteristic of a hunter-gatherer culture, whereas others minimize them, some to the point of near-zero temperamental differences.

### Social Comparison

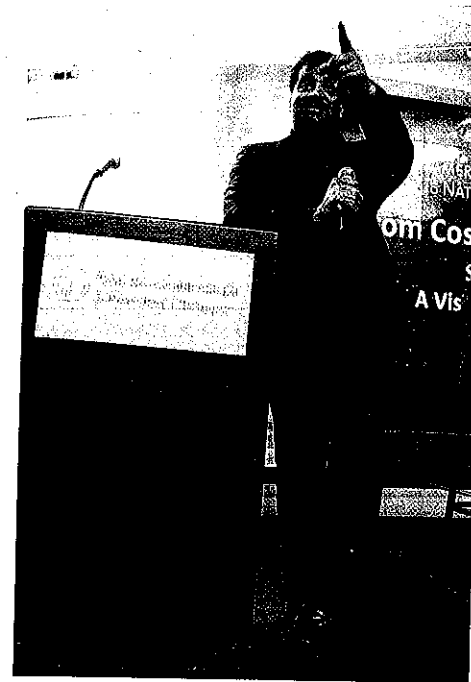
Sometimes people actively seek out information about themselves through comparison with other people. This is the central tenet of **social comparison theory**, an influential and enduring theory in social psychology put forward by Leon Festinger in the 1950s (Festinger, 1954; see also Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Wood, 1996). The theory maintains that when people have no objective standard by which to evaluate their traits or abilities, they do so largely by comparing themselves with others. Whether you are “physically strong” can be determined fairly objectively by simple tests of strength. But to be “honest” or “morally upright,” dimensions that are not so easy to quantify objectively, is to be more honest and morally upright than others.

Festinger noted, however, that there is no point in comparing yourself with Neil DeGrasse Tyson or Serena Williams, nor is it very helpful to compare yourself with total novices. To get an accurate sense of how good you are at something, you need to compare yourself with people who have roughly your level of skill. Numerous studies have shown that people are indeed especially drawn to comparisons with similar others (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990; Strickhouser & Zell, 2015; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). We like to feel good about ourselves, though, so our search for similar targets of comparison tends to be biased toward people who are slightly inferior to, or worse off than, ourselves. This is ironic because it puts us in the position of saying, “Compared with people who are slightly worse at tennis than I am, I’m pretty good!” or “Compared with people who are almost as conscientious as I am, I’m pretty darn conscientious!” These sorts of *downward* social comparisons help us define ourselves favorably, giving a boost to our self-esteem (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Helgeson & Mickelson, 1995; Lockwood, 2002).

But if we only engage in downward social comparison, we sacrifice opportunities for improvement. In fact, when our focus is on improving ourselves, we tend to forgo the self-esteem benefits of downward social comparison and engage in *upward* social comparison instead (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). For example, in one study that examined the social comparisons made by a group of ninth-graders, researchers found that students usually chose to compare their grades

**social comparison theory** The idea that people compare themselves to other people to obtain an accurate assessment of their own opinions, abilities, and internal states.

“It is not enough to succeed.  
Others must fail.”  
—GORE VIDAL



### SOCIAL COMPARISONS

It's not informative to compare your intelligence or athletic skill to someone renowned for brilliance, such as Neil DeGrasse Tyson, or celebrated for tennis-playing ability, like Serena Williams.

with those of someone who had slightly better grades than they did, presumably with the hope that one day they might get higher grades themselves (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999).

In today's social media-crazed world, we can find ourselves bombarded with social comparison “opportunities.” Pictures of your friend's happy romantic relationship pop up on your Facebook feed. Your smartphone pings to let you know that your neighbor has just shared a stunning video of her exotic vacation. A former classmate tweets that his company just landed a prestigious new account. You wouldn't be alone if such events made you wonder: Why am I not in a relationship? Is my relationship as perfect as other people's relationships? Was my last vacation really that much fun? How more or less successful am I? This self-doubt raises the question of whether exposing yourself to all of this social media is good or bad for you.

Researchers have begun to tackle this question. In one study, Verduyn and colleagues (2015) text-messaged participants five times a day over a 6-day period, prompting them to fill out a survey upon receiving each text. The survey asked participants to make a series of ratings, including their current affective well-being (how positive or negative they felt), their amount of passive use of Facebook since the last text (for example, scrolling through their news feed), their amount of active use of Facebook since the last text (for example, posting and sharing links), and finally, in an effort to measure social comparison, their current feelings of envy. The findings suggest that passive (but not active) Facebook use makes one feel less upbeat and that this is due in part to feelings of envy, presumably triggered by comparing one's own life with the images of other people's lives splashed all over one's Facebook feed. Results like these point to social media as a potentially major social influence on construals and evaluations of the self.

"I do not try to dance better than anyone else. I only try to dance better than myself."

—ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

## ← LOOKING BACK

The social self originates from a variety of sources. Socialization agents—by virtue of what they teach us, what they encourage in us, how they react to us—help define who we are. The current situation matters as well: the social self shifts from one context to another. A person's cultures (country of residence, gender, race, social class) shape the social self in profound ways, leading to defining the self in more independent terms, with an emphasis on uniqueness and autonomy, or in more interdependent terms, with an emphasis on connection to others. Finally, the social self is shaped by comparisons with other people.

## Self-Esteem

In 1987, California Governor George Deukmejian signed Assembly Bill 3659 into law. The bill allocated an annual budget of \$245,000 for a self-esteem task force, charged with two goals: understanding the effects of self-esteem on drug use, teenage pregnancy, and high school dropout rates; and elevating the self-esteem of schoolchildren. The initiative was based on the assumption that strengthening self-esteem would help cure society's ills.

Several findings would seem to support this assumption. People with low self-esteem are less satisfied with life, more hopeless, and more depressed (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), and they are less able to cope with life's challenges, such as the social and academic demands of college (Cutrona, 1982). They tend to disengage from tasks following failure (Brockner, 1979), and they are more prone to anti-social behavior and delinquency (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005). Raising self-esteem, the thinking was, just might produce healthier, more resilient children and a better society in the long run. Much of the data that the California legislators relied on was correlational in nature, which means we can't conclude that self-esteem had a *causal* effect on any of the other variables. Regardless, the topic of self-esteem has attracted considerable attention by social psychologists.

### Defining Self-Esteem

**Self-esteem** refers to the overall positive or negative evaluation people have of themselves. Researchers usually evaluate self-esteem with simple self-report measures like the scale in **Table 3.1**. As you can see from this scale, self-esteem represents how we feel about our attributes and qualities, our successes and failures, and our self in general. People with high self-esteem feel quite good about themselves. People with low self-esteem feel ambivalent about themselves; they tend to feel both good and bad about who they are. People who truly dislike themselves are rare and are typically found in specific clinical populations, such as severely depressed individuals.

*Trait self-esteem* is a person's enduring level of self-regard across time. Studies indicate that trait self-esteem is fairly stable: people who report high trait

**self-esteem** The overall positive or negative evaluation people have of themselves.

TABLE 3.1 SELF-ESTEEM SCALE

Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by using the scale below.

0 Strongly Disagree	1 Disagree	2 Agree	3 Strongly Agree
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___

To determine your score, first reverse the scoring for the five negatively worded items (1, 3, 4, 5, & 8) as follows: 0 = 3, 1 = 2, 2 = 1, 3 = 0. Then add up your scores across the 10 items. Your total score should fall between 0 and 30. Higher numbers indicate higher self-esteem.

Source: M. Rosenberg, 1965.

self-esteem at one point in time tend to report high trait self-esteem many years later; people who report low trait self-esteem at one point tend to report low trait self-esteem later (Block & Robins, 1993).

*State self-esteem* refers to the dynamic, changeable self-evaluations a person experiences as momentary feelings about the self (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Much as your working self-concept changes from one context to the next, so, too, can your state self-esteem. When people experience a setback, their self-esteem is likely to take a dive—especially among those who have low self-esteem to begin with (Brown & Dutton, 1995). For example, when college students watch their beloved college football team lose, their feelings of personal competence often drop (Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). And children of average intelligence have lower self-esteem when they're in a classroom with academically talented children rather than with children who have lower academic abilities (Marsh & Parker, 1984). Self-esteem also shifts during different stages of development. As males move from early adolescence (age 14) to early adulthood (age 23), their self-esteem tends to rise. During the same period, females' self-esteem tends to fall (Block & Robins, 1993).

Success and failure in different domains do not affect everyone equally. Some people attach more importance to doing well in some domains (such as popularity, academics, physical appearance, or moral virtue) than others. According to Jennifer Crocker's **contingencies of self-worth** model, people's self-esteem rises

"Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained."

—MARIE CURIE

**contingencies of self-worth** A perspective maintaining that people's self-esteem is contingent on the successes and failures in domains on which they have based their self-worth.



### ELEVATING SELF-ESTEEM

People in the self-esteem movement feel it is important for all children to have high self-esteem so that they will be happy and healthy. They have encouraged teachers to make every child a VIP for a day and coaches to give medals or trophies to every child who plays on a team, whether the team wins or loses.

**sociometer hypothesis** The idea that self-esteem is an internal, subjective index or marker of the extent to which a person is included or looked on favorably by others.

*“Who so would be a man must be a nonconformist. Hitch your wagon to a star. Insist on your self; never imitate. The individual is the world.”*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

*“Men resemble the times more than they resemble their fathers.”*

—ARAB PROVERB

and falls with successes and failures in the domains in which they have staked their self-worth. In other words, self-esteem goes up when you do well in areas that matter to you, but drops when you stumble in these areas. In a test of this prediction, researchers studied the self-esteem of University of Michigan students who had applied to graduate school (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). They asked students to fill out a self-esteem questionnaire every day that they received an acceptance or rejection response from a graduate school. Not surprisingly, students had higher self-esteem on days when they received an acceptance and lower self-esteem on days when they received a rejection. But these effects were much larger for those students whose self-esteem was highly dependent on academic competence. These findings suggest that it's probably wise for people to stake their self-worth in a wide range of areas—perhaps on academic achievement, but also on the strength of their friendships and family relationships, their ability to play a particular sport or musical instrument, their concern for the feelings of others, and so on—rather than put all their eggs in one basket. Indeed, studies suggest that to the extent we derive our self-worth from multiple domains that are distinct from one another, the more likely we are to avoid feeling devastated by a setback in any one domain (Linville, 1987; Showers, 1992).

### Social Acceptance and Self-Esteem

Several of the domains that define people's self-worth (for example, social approval) are highly social in nature. In his **sociometer hypothesis**, Mark Leary maintains that self-esteem is primarily a readout of our likely standing with others; that is, self-esteem is an internal, subjective index of how well we are regarded by others and hence how likely we are to be included or excluded by them (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Throughout most of evolutionary history, Leary reasons, we couldn't go it alone; therefore, we needed a way to quickly assess how we were doing socially. Our feelings of state self-esteem constitute just such an assessment.

Leary notes that those things that make us feel good about ourselves—feeling likable, competent, physically attractive, and morally upright—are precisely those things that make others accept us (or reject us if we fall short). High self-esteem indicates that we are thriving in our relationships; low self-esteem suggests that we are having interpersonal difficulties. In this sense, low self-esteem is not something to be avoided at all costs; rather, it provides useful information about when we need to attend to and shore up our social bonds.

### Culture and Self-Esteem

Many East Asian languages have no word or phrase for self-esteem. The Japanese have a term now, but like the Japanese rendering for *baseball*—namely, *beisoboru*—the word for *self-esteem* is simply borrowed from English: *serufu esutiimu*. The fact that it was Westerners who invented the term *self-esteem* reflects a long-standing concern in the West with the value of the individual. During the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century, Western Europeans began to prioritize individuality, freedom, and rights—ideas that would weave their way into the U.S. Constitution (Baumeister, 1987; Seligman, 1988; Twenge, 2002).

Today, the emphasis on self-esteem in the West is higher than ever. Bookstores are filled with books about the importance of having a strong sense of self-worth. Modern American parents want to raise independent and confident children—not the obedient children of 50 years ago (Remley, 1988).

Independent cultures foster higher levels of self-esteem than interdependent cultures. Compared with the world's more interdependent peoples—from Japan to Malaysia to India to Kenya—Westerners report higher self-esteem and a more pronounced concern with evaluating the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). It's not that people who define the self in more interdependent terms feel bad about themselves. Rather, they're more concerned with other ways of feeling good about themselves—for example, they're motivated toward self-improvement and commitment to collective goals (Crocker & Park, 2004; Heine, 2005; Norenzayan & Heine, 2004). Interestingly, as people from interdependent cultures are increasingly exposed to the West, the independent emphasis on self-worth rubs off on them and their self-esteem rises. As shown in **Figure 3.5**, as Asians become more immersed in Canadian life, they become more like Canadians in general with respect to self-esteem (Heine & Lehman, 2003).

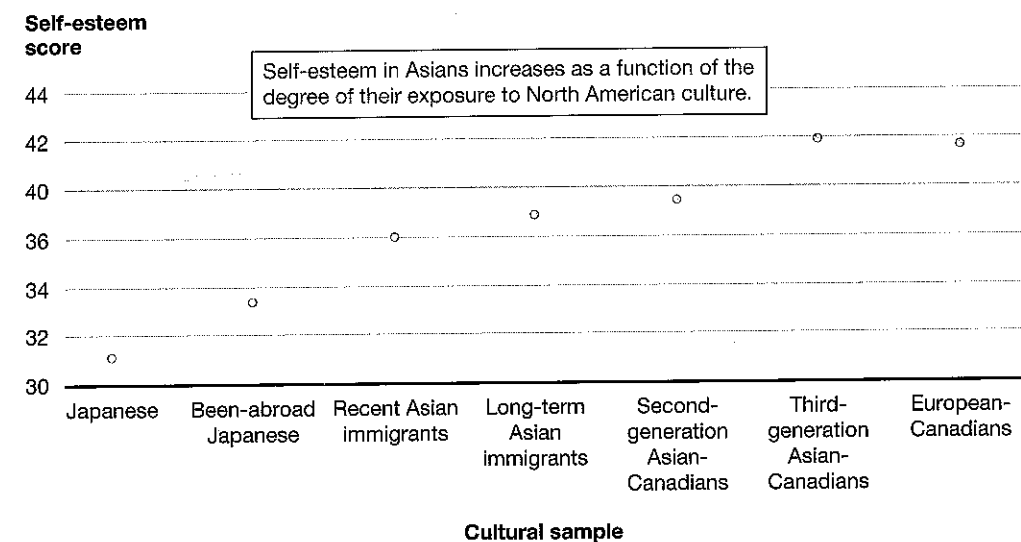
What is it about independent and interdependent cultures that creates these differences? A situationist hypothesis would be that people from Western cultures create social interactions that enhance self-esteem. Consistent with this notion, studies have found that situations described by Japanese as common daily experiences are seen as less conducive to high self-esteem—by both Japanese and Americans—than daily situations in the United States (Kitayama,



*“So, when he says, ‘What a good boy am I,’ Jack is really reinforcing his self-esteem.”*

*“Independence is happiness.”*  
—SUSAN B. ANTHONY

*“America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy.”*  
—JOHN UPDIKE



**FIGURE 3.5**  
**CULTURAL CHANGE AND SHIFTS IN SELF-ESTEEM**

The graph represents a number of groups. Japanese are those who live in Japan. Been-abroad Japanese are those who have spent time in a Western culture. Recent Asian immigrants are those who moved to Canada within the last seven years (prior to the study). Long-term Asian immigrants have lived in Canada for more than seven years. Second-generation Asian-Canadians were born in Canada but their parents were born in Asia. Third-generation Asian-Canadians were born in Canada, and their parents were born in Canada, but their grandparents were born in Asia. European-Canadians are Canadians whose ancestors were Europeans.

SOURCE: Adapted from Heine & Lehman, 2003.



#### CULTURE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Japanese students are encouraged to focus on how they can improve more so than how to feel good about themselves, an emphasis that may help explain cultural differences in levels of self-esteem.



#### MOTIVATIONS BEHIND SELF-EVALUATION

Everyone spends some time evaluating their abilities and skills, but different motives can drive these evaluations. Whereas the man scrutinizing himself in the mirror seems to be taking a self-critical stance toward himself, others evaluate the self through rose-colored glasses.

**self-enhancement** The desire to maintain, increase, or protect one's positive self-views.

Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). For example, Japanese people are more often encouraged to engage in “assisted” self-criticism than Americans are. Japanese math teachers and sushi chefs critique themselves in sessions with their peers—not the sort of activities that tend to build self-esteem, however beneficial they might be to skill development. Situations Americans reported as typical, by contrast, are seen by both Americans and Japanese to be more esteem enhancing. For example, Americans are more often praised for their achievements than Japanese people are.

Cultural differences in the emphasis on promoting self-esteem versus improving the self can have important consequences for how people respond to failures and setbacks. Steven Heine and his colleagues asked Canadian and Japanese students to take a so-called creativity test and then gave them false performance feedback (Heine et al., 2001). Some were told they had performed well, while others were told they had performed badly. The experimenters then gave the participants the opportunity to work on a similar task. The Canadians worked longer on the second task if they had succeeded at the first; the Japanese worked longer if they had failed. The Canadians thus avoided being reminded of failure, and the Japanese used the occasion to improve.

### ← LOOKING BACK

Self-esteem refers to the positive or negative evaluation people have of themselves. Trait self-esteem is fairly stable, whereas state self-esteem fluctuates across different situations. People have different contingencies of self-worth, domains in which they invest their self-esteem. These lead to rises or declines in self-esteem when they succeed or fail, respectively, in these domains. According to the sociometer hypothesis, self-esteem is a gauge of a person's standing with others and thus a useful potential warning about the possibility of rejection. People who construe the self in more interdependent terms are less concerned with feeling positively about their attributes than are modern Westerners, who define the self in more independent terms. Defining the self in interdependent terms is also associated with being more likely to seek opportunities for self-improvement.

## Motives Driving Self-Evaluation

Implicit in our discussion of self-esteem is the fact that people are motivated to view themselves positively. This motive, known as self-enhancement, influences many processes related to self-evaluation, including how people respond to negative feedback about their own personality and what kinds of information they seek out. Another important motivating factor in evaluating oneself is self-verification.

### Self-Enhancement

Suppose you just found out that your romantic interest in a coworker is not reciprocated, or you recently received a less than stellar performance appraisal at work. Naturally, you're going to feel bad about yourself and will probably try to find ways to feel better. In other words, there will be a need for **self-enhancement**,

the desire to maintain, increase, or protect positive views of the self (Leary, 2007; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). To satisfy this very powerful motive, people use various strategies.

**SELF-SERVING CONSTRUALS** As we've already discussed, most people—or at least most Westerners—tend to view themselves positively. In fact, when asked to indicate how they compare with others on various dimensions, people exhibit a pronounced **better-than-average effect**; they think they are above average in popularity, kindness, fairness, leadership, and so on (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). And it will probably not surprise you to learn that most people think they are above-average drivers. A majority of drivers interviewed *while hospitalized for being in an automobile accident* rated their driving skill as closer to “expert” than to “poor” (Preston & Harris, 1965; Svenson, 1981).

Why are people so upbeat about themselves? Part of the answer has to do with how people interpret what it means to be kind, fair, athletic, or even a good driver. That is, self-serving interpretations of these kinds of traits are one means of pursuing self-enhancement. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling once stated:

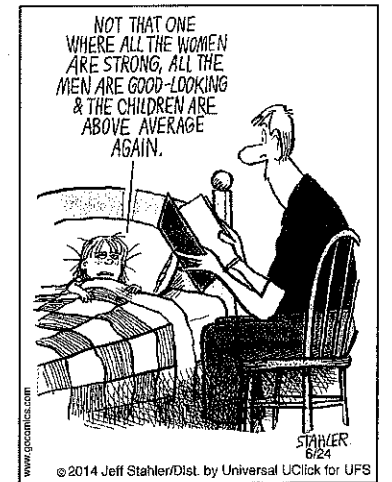
Everybody ranks himself high in qualities he values; careful drivers give weight to care, skillful drivers give weight to skill, and those who think that, whatever else they are not, at least they are polite, give weight to courtesy, and come out high on their own scale. This is the way that every child has the best dog on the block. (Schelling, 1978, p. 64)

David Dunning and his colleagues have shown that people form just these sorts of self-serving interpretations, or construals, of what it means to be, say, artistic, athletic, or agreeable and that such construals are an important part of the better-than-average effect. They have found, for example, that people are more likely to think they are significantly above average in ambiguous traits that are easy to construe in multiple ways (artistic, sympathetic) than in unambiguous ones that are not (tall, punctual). Also, when people are given precise instructions about how they should interpret what it means to be, for instance, artistic or athletic, the better-than-average effect shrinks in size (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989).

People also take advantage of another type of ambiguity that allows them to think highly of themselves: the ambiguity concerning which behaviors or characteristics “count” in determining what someone is like. People tend to judge *other* people—how kind, outgoing, or athletic they are—by the way they are on average, and yet they define *themselves* in terms of how they behave when they're at their best. If people (unknowingly) juggle the standards for what constitutes “talented,” “considerate,” or “agreeable,” it should come as no surprise that they think of themselves as above average (Williams & Gilovich, 2012; Williams, Gilovich, & Dunning, 2012).

**SELF-AFFIRMATION** Affirmations are another strategy people can use to maintain a positive view of themselves (Steele, 1988). **Self-affirmation theory** focuses on people's efforts to maintain an overall sense of self-worth when they're confronted with feedback or events that threaten a valued self-image, such as getting a poor test grade or learning that they're at risk for a certain illness. Under these circumstances, people can maintain an overall sense of self-worth by affirming themselves in a domain unrelated to the threatened domain. For instance, if you learn

**better-than-average effect** The finding that most people think they are above average on various personality trait and ability dimensions.



#### THE BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE EFFECT

The humor of the above cartoon lies in the fact that most people are inclined to see themselves (and people connected to them) as above average, rather than mediocre.

**self-affirmation theory** The idea that people can maintain an overall sense of self-worth following psychologically threatening information by affirming a valued aspect of themselves unrelated to the threat.

of threatening health information, you can restore the blow to your self-esteem by reminding yourself of, say, your artistic abilities or your close friendships.

There is much empirical evidence that self-affirmation is effective (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Moreover, self-affirmations have been shown to do more than simply help people maintain a general sense of self-worth. Self-affirmations also help minimize a wide range of defensive, and potentially harmful, behaviors people exhibit when faced with threat, such as the tendency to attribute responsibility to themselves when they succeed but to deny responsibility when they fail (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). (For more discussion, see Chapter 5.) Another defensive maneuver people show in response to a threat to self-esteem is putting down members of stereotyped groups (Fein & Spencer, 1997). This behavior is less likely to occur if people affirm a valued aspect of themselves prior to evaluating stereotyped group members. In the domain of health awareness, studies have shown that after affirming the self, people are more receptive to troubling, but potentially useful, health information, resulting in a greater likelihood of actually engaging in healthy behaviors (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000).

**SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND WELL-BEING** In light of the fact that people tend to employ various strategies to view themselves in a positive light, we may wonder whether having a truly honest and accurate understanding of oneself instead might be better for a person's mental health and happiness.

In a provocative line of work, Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown challenged this position. They argue that self-knowledge often includes positive illusions about the self—that we are funnier, smarter, or warmer than we really are—and that such illusions, far from being detrimental, actually enhance well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). Dozens of studies, carried out with Europeans and North Americans, have shown that people who are well adjusted are more prone to various illusions about the self compared with those who suffer from low self-esteem and unhappiness.

In a laboratory context, Taylor and her colleagues examined whether positive illusions about the self have good or bad biological consequences in stressful situations (Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Participants who were more likely to hold positive illusions about themselves (high self-enhancers) and participants who were less likely to hold positive illusions about themselves (low self-enhancers) faced several stress-inducing tasks (such as counting backward by sevens from 9,095), during which their biological responses to stress were recorded. The results showed a healthier set of coping responses among high self-enhancers compared with low self-enhancers. For instance, high self-enhancers exhibited lower baseline levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) and less arousal of their autonomic nervous system during the stressful tasks.

Other researchers have questioned the notion that positive illusions consistently promote good adjustment and health, arguing instead that accurate rather than false self-beliefs foster well-being and other positive outcomes (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin & Griffo, 2008). They cite research showing that people who rate themselves more favorably than others do (that is, people who self-enhance) are seen by others as narcissistic (John & Robins, 1994). Other studies demonstrate that people who hold relatively accurate views of themselves, in that their ratings of themselves are similar to others' ratings of them, are judged by others more positively than are people who self-enhance (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Taylor and Brown's thesis about the benefits of positive illusions comes from cross-cultural research. This work demonstrates that East Asians are less likely than Westerners to approve of positive illusions about the self (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). In one study, Japanese college students were less likely than American students to assume they were better than average in important abilities, such as academic talent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such cross-cultural evidence suggests that positive illusions do not automatically enhance well-being. They often do so for Westerners because a positive view of the self is a cherished cultural value in the West. In contrast, personal well-being for East Asians appears to be more closely tied to interdependent values, such as fulfilling social roles and expectations. This finding is consistent with an interdependent self-construal (Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998).

So are self-enhancing tendencies adaptive or not? Do they benefit the individual? At present, the answer appears to be: it depends. For example, Robins and Beer (2001) showed that students who entered college with self-enhancing beliefs about their academic ability reported higher average levels of self-esteem and well-being over a four-year period relative to their non-enhancing peers. However, self-enhancement tendencies were associated with a downward trajectory over the four-year period for both self-esteem and well-being. In essence, although self-enhancement was linked to greater self-esteem and well-being in the short term, the advantages linked to self-enhancement eroded over time. The safest conclusion to draw at this point is that self-enhancement provides a number of benefits, but it can be taken too far and exact significant costs.

### Self-Verification

Although a wealth of evidence indicates that self-enhancement is a powerful motive that drives our pursuit of self-evaluation, we don't always want to see ourselves through rose-colored glasses. The truth, at least our version of it, also matters. According to **self-verification theory**, sometimes we strive for stable, subjectively accurate beliefs about ourselves rather than invariably favorable ones (Swann, 1990). Stable and accurate self-views make us more predictable to ourselves and others, which helps interactions with others go more smoothly. More concretely, we strive to get others to confirm or verify our preexisting beliefs about ourselves. For example, if you see yourself as extraverted, self-verification theory would predict that you will seek to get others to see you as extraverted as well. This holds true even for negative self-views: if you truly believe you are, say, socially awkward, getting others to see this subjective truth bolsters your feelings of coherence and predictability.

People engage in a number of self-verification strategies. They selectively attend to and recall information that is consistent with (and therefore verifies) their views of themselves. People with negative self-views, for example, spend more time studying negative rather than positive feedback about themselves; they remember negative feedback better; and they prefer to interact with others who are likely to provide negative rather than positive feedback (Swann & Read, 1981; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992).

People also choose to enter into relationships that maintain consistent views of the self. These sorts of preferences guarantee that their personal lives will probably confirm their self-views. In a study of intimate bonds, romantic partners

**self-verification theory** The theory that people sometimes strive for stable, subjectively accurate beliefs about themselves because such self-views give them a sense of coherence and predictability.

*"We accept the love we think we deserve."*

—STEPHEN CHBOSKY, *THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER*



## Not So Fast: Critical Thinking about Assuming a Single Explanation

BOX 3.4

Consider what the following decisions have in common: applying only to highly selective law schools; ignoring the physical therapy your doctor prescribed; pursuing a career in art instead of accounting; asking one of the most popular girls on campus out on a date. Each decision involves an assessment of your traits and abilities and a decidedly favorable assessment. We've learned how strong the desire for self-enhancement tends to be (especially among members of Western cultures) and how adept people are at satisfying that desire. But while it is tempting to assume that the desire for self-enhancement alone accounts for people's inflated self-assessments, other, nonmotivational factors may in fact be at play.

One example of a cognitive barrier to accurate self-assessment is the simple fact that sometimes people don't have access to all the information required to appraise their traits and abilities accurately. Of course, we don't have access to nonconscious processes, but we may also lack basic knowledge related to the trait or ability in question. Kruger, Dunning, and their colleagues offer a particularly clear example of this deficiency, what they call the double curse of incompetence

(Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). The curse is that incompetent people—that is, those who tend to perform well below their peers in a given domain—are deficient not only in the skills needed to perform better, but also in the very knowledge necessary for accurately recognizing their incompetence. We all know of students who walk out of an exam room certain they've aced the test, only to find out a few days later that they bombed it. The skills and knowledge that would have led to a better test score are pretty much the same skills and knowledge required for having a more accurate prediction of how they did on the test in the first place.

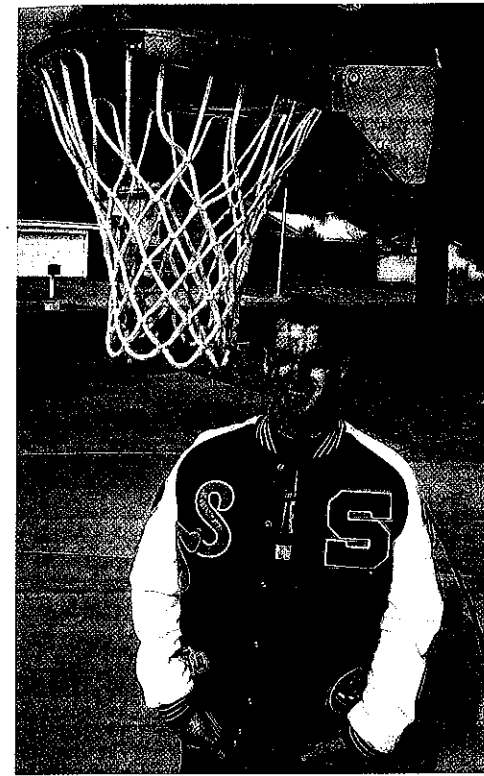
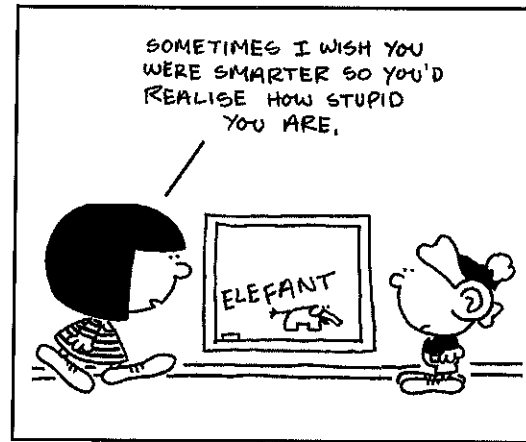
So before concluding that someone's overly flattering self-assessment is a clear sign of a hefty appetite for self-enhancement, it's important to consider other, less motivational sources of flawed self-appraisal. We mentioned just one of these sources—lacking the skills and knowledge needed to make more accurate self-assessments in the first place—but

other possibilities exist. For example, in an effort to be polite, other people tend to provide us with overly positive estimates of our abilities and traits. To the extent that's true, we can scarcely be blamed for overestimating our abilities and the attractiveness of our personality.

The broader lesson here is that a certain explanation for our own and other people's behaviors can jump out as obvious and in fact may sometimes be correct. However, we should also consider the possibility that the behavior in question may have additional, less obvious causes.

who viewed each other in a congruent fashion—that is, whose perceptions of each other were in agreement with their self-views—reported more commitment to the relationship, even when one partner viewed the other in a negative light (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

Can both self-enhancement and self-verification motives be at play? Sure. Self-enhancement seems to be most relevant to our emotional responses to feedback about ourselves, whereas self-verification determines our more cognitive assessment of how valid that feedback is (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). To test this hypothesis, the Swann team gave participants with negative or positive self-beliefs negative or positive feedback. In terms of participants' evaluations of the accuracy and competence of the feedback—that is, the quality of the information—self-verification prevailed. Those with negative self-beliefs



### IDENTITY CUES AND SELF-VERIFICATION

We create self-confirming social environments through the clothes we wear, hairstyles, jewelry, tattoos, and other identity cues. Left: A high school student wears his varsity jacket off the field, signaling his identity as an athlete. Right: Girls signal their youth and trendiness by donning Harajuku-inspired fashion while hanging out in the Harajuku district of Tokyo.

found the negative feedback most accurate, whereas participants with positive beliefs rated the positive feedback as most accurate. All participants, however, felt good about the positive feedback and disliked the negative feedback. Our quest to verify our sense of ourselves, then, guides our assessment of the validity of self-relevant information, while our desire to think favorably about ourselves guides our emotional reactions to the same information.

## LOOKING BACK

Self-evaluative activities such as seeking out evaluative feedback about ourselves can be driven by different motives, such as self-enhancement and self-verification. Self-enhancement strategies include self-serving construals and self-affirmations. When self-verification is our priority, we seek out appraisals and relationship partners that confirm our preexisting self-views, and we display cues that increase the likelihood that others will see us as we see ourselves.

## Self-Regulation: Motivating and Controlling Behavior

**Self-regulation** refers to the processes by which people initiate, alter, and control their behavior in pursuit of their goals—whether the goal is doing well in school, being a good friend, or getting in better shape (Carver & Scheier, 1982;

**self-regulation** Processes by which people initiate, alter, and control their behavior in the pursuit of goals, including the ability to resist short-term rewards that thwart the attainment of long-term goals.

Higgins, 1999; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Given that successful goal pursuit often requires resisting temptations, self-regulation also involves the ability to prioritize long-term goals (getting into graduate school) by forgoing short-term immediate rewards (a weeknight out on the town). Let's take a look at what social psychologists have discovered about self-regulation.

### Self-Discrepancy Theory

One influential perspective on self-regulation is captured in a theory proposed by Tory Higgins (1987). According to **self-discrepancy theory**, people hold beliefs about not only what they *are actually* like, but also what they would *ideally* like to be and what they think they *ought* to be. Your **actual self** is the self you believe you are; your **ideal self** represents your hopes and wishes; and your **ought self** represents your duties and obligations.

According to self-discrepancy theory, ideal and ought beliefs serve as self-guides, motivating people to regulate their behavior in order to close the gap between their actual self and their ideal and ought standards. When people feel that they're failing to live up to these standards—in other words, when they perceive a discrepancy between their actual self and either their ideal or ought self—there are predictable emotional consequences. Specifically, discrepancies between the actual and the ideal self produce dejection-related emotions, and discrepancies between the actual and the ought self give rise to agitation-related emotions. Here are two examples. When the judges disparage Sameer's singing ability at an *American Idol* audition, the discrepancy between his actual self (a poor singer) and his ideal self (a rock star) arouses dejection-related emotions, such as disappointment and shame. When Mina loses patience with her ailing grandmother (actual self), she may feel agitation-related emotions, such as guilt and anxiety, if her ought self includes being a patient and loving granddaughter.

Ideal and ought standards are associated with two fundamentally different approaches to goal pursuit. When people regulate their behavior with respect to ideal self standards, they have a **promotion focus**, or a focus on attaining positive outcomes (Higgins, 1996). By contrast, when people regulate their behavior with respect to ought self standards, they have a **prevention focus**, a focus on avoiding negative outcomes. So, imagine you have the chance to hang out with someone you've had a crush on for a while. A promotion focus would nudge you to focus on what you can do to get the person to reciprocate your feelings, whereas a prevention focus would have you thinking about what you can do to avoid looking like a fool.

Lots of evidence supports Higgins's account of how ideal and ought selves can have different emotional, motivational, and behavioral consequences. When people are subtly prompted to think about how they might approximate their ideal self—for example, by reading personality trait terms that capture their ideal self—they generally exhibit elevated cheerful emotions (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Shah & Higgins, 2001) and heightened sensitivity to positive outcomes (Brendl, Higgins, & Lemm, 1995). But if they think they will never become their ideal self, they experience dejection-related emotions, such as depression and shame, and show reduced physiological arousal. In contrast, associations to a person's ought self, and any deviation from it, activates agitated emotions (such as guilt or panic), elevated physiological arousal, avoidant behavior, and sensitivity to negative outcomes (Strauman & Higgins, 1987).

**self-discrepancy theory** A theory that behavior is motivated by standards reflecting ideal and ought selves. Falling short of these standards produces specific emotions: dejection-related emotions in the case of actual-ideal discrepancies and agitation-related emotions in the case of actual-ought discrepancies.

**actual self** The self that people believe they are.

**ideal self** The self that embodies people's wishes and aspirations.

**ought self** The self that is concerned with the duties, obligations, and external demands people feel they are compelled to honor.

**promotion focus** Self-regulation of behavior with respect to ideal self standards; a focus on attaining positive outcomes through approach-related behaviors.

**prevention focus** Self-regulation of behavior with respect to ought self standards; a focus on avoiding negative outcomes through avoidance-related behaviors.

As you might expect, Westerners are more likely to have a promotion focus. They are more interested in attaining personal goals and more likely to feel that their own efforts are sufficient to achieve them. East Asians are more likely to exhibit a prevention focus. They are more concerned with the possible negative consequences of their actions for their relations with others (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; Uskul, Sherman, & Fitzgibbon, 2009).

### Shifts in Construals and Perspectives

When people pursue a goal with a promotion versus prevention focus, the goal itself is construed in two fundamentally different ways—obtaining a positive outcome or avoiding a negative one. Shifts in one's construal, or perspective, are central to a number of other theories on self-regulation. Many of these theories focus on how people control the impulse to engage in behaviors that undermine their goals. How do you resist the impulse to go out with your friends the night before a big exam? How about stopping yourself from having another scoop of ice cream when you're trying to lose weight?

In the early 1970s, Walter Mischel and colleagues studied such questions in a well-known program of research involving, of all things, marshmallows (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1972; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). In the classic marshmallow paradigm, preschool children were left in a room with a tempting marshmallow and given one of two options: they could have the one marshmallow (small reward) immediately simply by ringing a bell to summon the experimenter, or they could have two marshmallows (large reward) if they waited for the experimenter to return 15 minutes later. So, go for the small reward now, or control yourself so as to get a bigger reward later? Sound familiar? Go out with your friends to have a fun night now, or resist so you can do better on your exam tomorrow?

It turns out that one way to exert self-control in such situations is to shift how you construe the tempting reward—whether it be a marshmallow, ice cream, or night out on the town. This cognitive strategy is what enabled some of the children in Mischel's studies to resist the small, immediate reward in the service of the larger one later. Rather than construe the object before them as a marshmallow in all its sweet and mouth-watering delight, some of the children viewed the marshmallow in “cooler,” less arousing terms, visualizing it as a decidedly non-mouth-watering cotton ball or cloud (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999; Mischel & Ayduk, 2004). If you're trying to resist a temptation in the here and now (going out with your friends), it helps to focus less on its arousing, inviting features (great music, laughter) and more on its unappealing facets (spending money, losing much-needed sleep).

Construals of a situation can vary in other ways as well. Yaacov Trope and colleagues (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010) have argued that events, goals, behaviors, and so forth, can also vary in how high level or low level they are. High-level construals focus on abstract, global, and essential features, whereas low-level construals emphasize salient, incidental, and concrete details. In other words, high-level construals involve seeing the “forest,” whereas low-level construals put the spotlight on the “trees.” It's higher-level construals that tend to facilitate self-control. The idea is that higher-level construals, compared with lower-level ones, increase people's appreciation of the



#### SELF-CONTROL AND CONSTRUALS

If the young girl views the marshmallow in “cooler” terms, such as in terms of something that resembles a cloud or cotton ball, rather than construing the marshmallow in “hotter” terms, such as in terms of its yummy, mouth-watering qualities, she'll have a better shot at resisting gobbling up the marshmallow while she waits for the researcher to return so that she can get two marshmallows instead.

consequences that their choices and behaviors have for their long-term goals. In other words, high-level construals place the emphasis on people's larger goals and values. For example, in a high-level construal (when you're focusing on the forest, not the trees), you think about what that extra scoop of ice cream means for your dieting and health goals, whereas in a low-level construal (when your focus is on the trees), you're focused on the pleasing taste and smooth texture of that ice cream (Fujita, 2011; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006).

### Automatic Self-Control Strategies

Exercising self-control may sound like a conscious, deliberate endeavor. But there's quite a lot of evidence that self-regulation efforts can operate automatically, without our even realizing it.

Researchers have distinguished between goal intentions, which simply specify a goal one wants to achieve (I intend to be kinder to my roommate), from **implementation intentions**, which specify how one will behave to achieve a goal under particular circumstances. Implementation intentions follow an *if-then* format—for example, "If my roommate makes a snarky remark, then I'll just ignore it." So the "if" refers to some kind of cue, and the "then" refers to a behavior that will follow the cue to achieve the larger goal (in this case, being kinder to a roommate) (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). There's no question that to achieve a goal we must form an intention, but research shows that forming multiple, smaller *implementation intentions* related to the same goal increases our likelihood of goal attainment. In the typical study of implementation intentions, participants are randomly assigned to either form an implementation intention or not. Take, for example, a group of students who all share the goal of completing a paper. Those who are randomly assigned to the implementation intention condition are asked to form an implementation intention by indicating a specific point in time ("Saturday afternoon") and specific place ("in my dorm room") when they will engage in the goal-directed behavior ("work on my paper"). Students in the other group are not asked to form an implementation intention but simply have the general goal of completing the paper. When level of goal completion (completing the paper) is then assessed, students who formed an implementation intention show higher rates of goal completion. Such if-then implementation intentions help you reach your goals by putting you on the lookout for whatever cue is specified ("if it's Saturday afternoon") and making you likely to automatically enact the goal-directed behavior ("then I will work on my paper") (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2016).

The effectiveness of implementation intentions has been documented across a wide range of goals and domains—doing well in school, being healthy, succeeding at work. Stern and West (2014) recently tested whether the formation of implementation intentions might even make stressful social interactions more pleasant, such as ones involving people of different races. What they found was that forming implementation intentions for such interactions—intentions that specify an anxiety-reducing behavior when feeling uncomfortable—increased the likelihood of a successful interaction. The lesson here seems to be that the next time you anticipate an anxiety-provoking interaction (your next interview), you might form an if-then plan for this interaction that specifies what you will do (perhaps remind yourself of your amazing credentials) whenever your heart starts to race.

**implementation intention** An "if-then" plan to engage in a goal-directed behavior ("then") whenever a particular cue ("if") is encountered.

Let's take one more example. Suppose you're trying to eat a healthier diet (long-term goal), but you're faced with a plate of freshly baked cookies (temptation). Surely the alluring properties of the cookies will put thoughts about eating healthily on the back burner, right? Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2003) showed that quite the opposite can happen: the cookies may actually make you think more about your goal to eat healthily. The idea is that temptations (unhealthy foods) may become linked in memory to your goal (eating well), so that when temptations are brought to mind, so, too, are thoughts of healthy eating. And the connection between the two can occur automatically. What's more, the Fishbach team found that bringing goals to mind first has the effect of *diminishing* thoughts about temptations. Thus, being faced with temptations reminds us of our goals, and thinking about our goals puts temptations out of mind. But before deciding you can abandon all deliberate efforts to resist temptations, note that the effects found in this research apply mainly to people for whom the goal is very important and who have had substantial past success resisting goal-interfering temptations.

### ← LOOKING BACK

Self-regulation refers to how people go about initiating, changing, and controlling their behavior in pursuit of goals. Goal-directed actions can be motivated by standards in the form of ideal and ought selves. Such actions can be either promotion focused or prevention focused. People tend to experience dejection-related emotions when they fall short of their ideal standards, and they experience agitation-related emotions when they fail to meet their ought standards. Self-regulation can be facilitated by "cooler" and higher-level construals of tempting, short-term rewards. People may have unintentional self-control strategies, such as implementation intentions and automatic behavioral tendencies to approach goals and avoid temptations.

## Self-Presentation

Alexi Santana entered Princeton University as a member of the class of 1993. His academic performance was impressive, he excelled in track, and he was admitted to one of Princeton's most exclusive eating clubs. He dazzled his dormmates with tales of being raised on a sheep farm in the wild canyons of southern Utah and with his unusual habits, such as preferring to sleep on the floor and routinely arising at dawn.

The only trouble was that Alexi Santana was actually James Hogue, a 34-year-old drifter and former track star from Kansas City. Hogue had been convicted and served time for various crimes, including check forging and bicycle theft. He had gotten into Princeton thanks to a fraudulent application and had earned the admiration of his peers based on a completely fabricated identity. In the documentary film *Con Man*, Jessie Moss showed that Hogue had had a pattern of assuming false identities.





### SELF-PRESENTATION

James Hogue attended Princeton University on an academic scholarship under the assumed name of Alexi Santana. He constructed a false identity for himself as a self-educated 18-year-old from Utah. Hogue was arrested for forgery, wrongful impersonation, and falsifying records at Princeton.

**self-presentation** Presenting the person we would like others to believe we are.

**face** The public image of oneself that we want others to believe.

**self-monitoring** The tendency to monitor one's behavior to fit the current situation.



### SELF-MONITORING

This couple is probably engaging in a considerable degree of self-monitoring, altering their behavior to fit the specific demands of first-date situations like this one.

Hogue's story (or is it Santana's?) is an extreme version of a basic truth: our social self is often a dramatic performance in which we try to project a public self consistent with our hopes and aspirations. This public self is one that we actively create in our social interactions and that is shaped by the perceptions of other people and the perceptions we want others to have of us (Baumeister, 1982; Mead, 1934; Schlenker, 1980; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). The public self is concerned with **self-presentation**—presenting the person we would like others to believe we are. Another term for this concept is *impression management*, which refers to how we attempt to control the particular impressions other people form about us.

Sociologist Erving Goffman inspired the study of self-presentation with his keen observations about how we stake out our identity in the public realm (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Goffman relied on naturalistic observations of how people behave in public settings. He observed patients in mental institutions, noting how they seemed to ignore many rules of self-presentation, such as making unflattering comments about others and failing to observe common social courtesies. Goffman wrote an entire chapter on what he called response cries, like "Oops!" that we resort to after committing social gaffes and feel deeply embarrassed. These linguistic acts help reestablish social order when we have violated the rules of self-presentation and show how committed we are to preserving the self we want others to accept.

Such observations led Goffman to form what has been called a dramaturgic perspective on the social self. Social interaction can be thought of as a drama of self-presentation, in which we attempt to create and maintain an impression of ourselves in the minds of others (Baumeister, 1982; Brown, 1998; Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Critical to this drama, in Goffman's terms, is **face**, the public image of ourselves that we want others to have. For instance, one person may want to be seen as a gifted, temperamental artist; another might want to give the impression of being an object of romantic interest to many people. Social interactions are the stage on which we play out these kinds of claims, regardless of how true they may be. Much like a play, the social drama of self-presentation is highly collaborative. We depend on others to honor our desired social identities, and others likewise depend on us to honor their face claims.

Goffman's insights have shaped the study of the social self in several ways. For example, the concept of self-monitoring derives in part from Goffman's work (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974, 1979). **Self-monitoring** refers to the tendency to monitor one's behavior to fit the demands of the current situation. High self-monitors carefully scrutinize situations and, like actors, shift their self-presentation and behavior according to the people and situation. In contrast, low self-monitors are more likely to behave according to their own traits and preferences, regardless of the social context.



(A)



(B)

### PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FACES

People may present themselves differently in private versus public. (A) Here Rihanna is shown in her more private life, out for a coffee run with no carefully constructed public face, but (B) she does present a public face on the red carpet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Gala in 2014.

This suggests admirable candor and honesty. However, one study showed that patients in a psychiatric hospital scored low on a self-monitoring scale, suggesting that effective social functioning requires participation in some degree of strategic self-presentation (Snyder, 1974).

### Self-Handicapping

One of the complexities of strategic self-presentation is that people often don't live up to the public self they're trying to portray. For example, your claim about being the next great American writer will eventually be put to the test when you submit your prose for publication; your claim about being a great triathlete will eventually face the truth of the stopwatch. The obvious drawback of the public self is that we might not live up to it, and we risk embarrassing ourselves when that happens. To protect the self in these circumstances, we engage in various self-protective behaviors.

**Self-handicapping** is the tendency to engage in self-defeating behavior to protect the self in public and prevent others from making unwanted inferences based on poor performance (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Deppe & Harackiewicz, 1996; Hendrix & Hirt, 2009; Hirt, McCrea, & Kimble, 2000; Jones & Berglas, 1978). Think of how often people engage in self-destructive behaviors when their public selves are on the line. Students sometimes irrationally put too little effort into studying for an exam. A person may act too casually at a job interview or say shockingly inappropriate things on a first date. Why do we engage in such self-defeating behaviors? In Goffman's view, these actions provide an explanation for possible failure, thereby protecting the desired public self if failure does occur. If you don't do as well as expected on an exam, there's no threat to your claim about your academic talents if you have the excuse of not having prepared for the exam in the first place. Of course, some "self-handicap" claims are bogus. Classrooms are filled with students who act as though they haven't studied hard when

**self-handicapping** The tendency to engage in self-defeating behavior in order to have an excuse ready should one perform poorly or fail.

## Dying to Present a Favorable Self

You might assume that self-presentation is always a good thing. Erving Goffman himself wrote about how people's strategic self-presentation and their honoring of other people's public claims are essential ingredients of harmonious communities. But self-presentational concerns can sometimes be dangerous to our health (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). Many practices that promote health are awkward or embarrassing and pose problems for our public identity. As a consequence, we avoid them. We sacrifice physical health to maintain a public identity defined by composure and aplomb. In one study, for example, 30–65 percent of respondents reported embarrassment when buying condoms (Hanna, 1989). Embarrassment could deter sexually active teenagers from buying condoms, thus increasing their risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Similarly, the

fear of embarrassment at times prevents obese individuals from pursuing physical exercise programs or taking needed medications (Bain, Wilson, & Chaikind, 1989).

In other instances, we engage in risky behavior to enhance our public image and identity. Concerns about others' impressions of us and concerns about our physical appearance are good predictors of excessive sunbathing, which increases the likelihood of skin cancer (Leary & Jones, 1993). Moreover, adolescents typically cite social approval as one of the most important reasons for starting to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes (Farber, Khavari, & Douglass, 1980). And the same need for an enhanced public image motivates many cosmetic surgeries, which carry with them a variety of health risks.

in fact they did. The phenomenon is so common that students at Dartmouth College have given the people who do it a name: "sneaky bookers."

In one of the first experiments testing self-handicapping, male participants were led to believe that they were either going to succeed or going to have difficulty on a test they were scheduled to take (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Participants were given the chance to ingest one of two drugs: the first would enhance their test performance, and the second would impair it. Participants who felt they were likely to fail the test preferred the performance-inhibiting drug, even though it was likely to diminish their chances of success. Apparently, people would sometimes rather fail and have a ready excuse for it than go for success and have no excuse for failure.

### Presenting the Self Online

As of late 2016, Facebook reported over 1.23 billion daily active users. When you add to the tally all the other possible forms of social media, that's a whole lot of social life happening online. What does self-presentation in the online social world look like? Given that most of the information on social networking sites, such as Facebook, is provided by the users themselves, there is ample opportunity for people to manage others' impressions of them. Do people tend to present themselves authentically online, posting accurate information about who they are, what they've accomplished, their beliefs, and their likes and dislikes? Or do people take advantage of the opportunity that social networking sites offer to convey especially positive self-images?

Self-presentation researchers have begun to tackle these questions. In one study, researchers had observers rate the personality traits (including extraversion, neuroticism, and openness) of 236 American and German users of online social networking sites—Facebook in the United States and similar sites called StudiVZ and SchuelerVZ in Germany—based on the information provided on



**Brian Cox**

@ProfBrianCox

Ultra-naïve positivist-ish, although science can't explain the existence of antipositivists

#### SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES AND THE SELF

Public presentation of the self often occurs online, such as in the social media profile pictured above.

their profile pages (Back et al., 2010). Observers' ratings were compared with an accuracy criterion made up of an average of users' own ratings of their personality and the ratings of four well-acquainted friends. Users were also asked to provide ratings reflecting who they would ideally like to be. Would you expect observer ratings to correlate more highly with the users' own and friends' ratings, thus suggesting that people present themselves relatively accurately online, or with users' ideal self ratings, suggesting instead that people try to present themselves in an ideal light online? You may be surprised to learn that the findings supported the former view: that online, people tend to present their offline selves fairly accurately, a conclusion bolstered by other studies as well (Waggoner, Smith, & Collins, 2009).

Why would people present themselves accurately online when it seems so easy, not to mention tempting, to paint a positive image of the self online? Recall that although self-enhancement motives are robust (particularly among members of Western cultures), other self-evaluative motives may prevail at times. In particular, online self-presentations may be driven as much or more by self-verification motives, the desire to be known by others as they truly are (Swann, 1990), and crafting accurate online profiles of the self would serve that need. A less flattering explanation is that overly favorable online presentations of the self often need to withstand offline scrutiny. You can probably relate to having offline interactions with people who have read your profile, making it difficult (or at least awkward) to post blatantly inaccurate statements about yourself online. But perhaps surprisingly, research suggests that while we may present our personality and other attributes (such as our occupation) fairly accurately online, we are less likely to do so when it comes to our physical attributes, such as height, weight, and age (Toma & Hancock, 2010). This may be because of the vital role that physical appearance plays in attraction (see Chapter 10).

### ← LOOKING BACK

Self-presentation involves people's efforts to get others to form particular impressions of them. These strategies are more characteristic of high self-monitors, people who change their behavior based on the situation in which they find themselves. Low self-monitors attend more to their own preferences and dispositions, with little regard for the situation or what others think. People may engage in self-defeating behaviors, or self-handicapping, to have an excuse available should they fail or perform poorly. Self-presentation is also relevant in online social networking, where it appears that people are more inclined to provide accurate information about some aspects of themselves, such as their personality traits, and less accurate information about other aspects of themselves, such as their physical features.

## Chapter Review

### SUMMARY

#### The Nature of the Social Self

- The self is fundamentally social, and it shifts according to changes in the social situation.
- *Self-schemas*, organizing structures that help guide the construal of social information, represent a person's beliefs and feelings about the self, both in general and in specific situations.

#### Origins of the Sense of Self

- Socialization by family members and other important people is one of the foundations of the social self. *Reflected self-appraisals* are beliefs about what others think of one's social self.
- The social self is shaped by the current situation in many ways, and different selves are evoked in different situations.
- The social self is profoundly shaped by whether people live in independent or interdependent cultures.
- Women generally emphasize their relationships and define themselves in an interdependent way; men generally emphasize their uniqueness and construe themselves in an independent way.
- People rely on *social comparisons* to learn about their own abilities, attitudes, and personal traits.

#### Self-Esteem

- Trait self-esteem is a stable part of one's identity, whereas state self-esteem changes according to different contextual factors.

- Self-esteem is defined by particular domains of importance, or *contingencies of self-worth*, and by being accepted by others.
- Self-esteem is more important, and is higher, in Western cultures than in East Asian cultures.

#### Motives Driving Self-Evaluation

- The motives for self-evaluation include the desire for *self-enhancement* and *self-verification*.
- The motivation to think well of oneself guides the maintenance of relationships that let people make favorable social comparisons and that provide the opportunity to bask in the successes of relationship partners.
- Having a stable set of self-beliefs gives people a sense of coherence and predictability.

#### Self-Regulation: Motivating and Controlling Behavior

- *Self-discrepancy theory* investigates how people compare their *actual self* to both their *ideal self* and their *ought self* and the emotional consequences of such comparisons.
- When people regulate their behavior with respect to ideal self standards, they have a *promotion focus* for attaining positive outcomes. When people regulate their behavior with respect to ought self standards, they have a *prevention focus* for avoiding negative outcomes.
- Self-control can be facilitated by construals that focus on "cooler" features of a tempting stimulus and by higher-level, abstract construals of the situation.
- Self-control strategies can be implemented automatically, such as when behavior unfolds automatically as specified in an implementation intention or when long-term goals automatically spring to mind when people face temptations that can thwart these goals.

#### Self-Presentation

- *Self-presentation* is related to the public self; people present themselves the way they want others to see them. *Face* refers to the image people want others to have about them. *Self-monitoring* ensures that a person's behavior fits the demands of the social context.
- People protect their public self through *self-handicapping*, behavior that can excuse a poor performance or a failure.
- Self-presentation happens online, just as it does in face-to-face interactions. Different motives can guide online self-presentation, including the desire for others to see the self accurately.

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to research on the accuracy of self-knowledge, for what qualities are we the best judges of ourselves? For what qualities are others superior judges of us? How does motivation contribute to this asymmetry?
2. Josie is a 13-year-old girl who thinks she's a funny person, and her friends and family generally think Josie is funny too. How would Cooley's notion of the "looking-glass self" explain how Josie's sense of herself as funny developed? Bearing in mind that Josie is an adolescent, what does research suggest is likely occurring in her brain when she thinks about her self-views?
3. How might a female undergraduate's working self-concept regarding her gender shift during a day on campus as she attends her advanced math class (in which she is the only female), has a low-key lunch with a friend, and attends her gender studies class? Will her frequently shifting self-concept undermine her sense of having a coherent self?
4. How do people's daily experiences in their contingent versus noncontingent domains affect their state self-esteem? Over time, how might these experiences translate to trait self-esteem?
5. Do people from Eastern cultures generally feel worse about themselves than people from Western cultures? How do researchers interpret self-reported self-esteem differences between cultures?
6. Should people be more likely to display the better-than-average effect for their own intelligence before or after learning how intelligence is measured in scientific research? How do construals contribute to this process?
7. If you're fairly sure you are scatterbrained, but a friend tells you that you're organized and focused, what will your cognitive reaction likely be? What will your emotional reaction likely be? Which motive—self-enhancement or self-verification—drives which set of reactions?
8. Suppose two friends both have an actual self that is relatively happy and a potential self that is extremely happy (happier than their actual self). If this discrepancy in happiness leads one friend to experience agitation and the other friend to experience dejection, what does this tell you? What theory would this evidence support?

The answer guidelines for the think about it questions can be found at the back of the book . . . 

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