Jonathon D. Brown

THE SELF

CHAPTER 3

The Search for Self-Knowledge

Make it thy business to know thyself, which is the most difficult lesson in the world.

—CERVANTES (*DON QUIXOTE*, PART II, CHAPTER 42)

I have a friend who thinks he's creative, sensitive, shy, and warm. Another friend of mine thinks she's independent, self-motivated, competitive, and ambitious. Where do these ideas come from? Why do people think of themselves as they do, and to what extent do these views represent what people are really like?

Chapter 3 will explore questions of this nature. In investigating these issues, we will focus on people's ideas about their personality traits and abilities. We will be particularly concerned with traits and abilities that are socially valued and desirable, such as people's ideas about how intelligent, kind, loyal, and attractive they think they are. These are all aspects of what James (1890) called the spiritual self.

We will begin by considering when and why people search for self-knowledge. We will pay particular attention here to understanding what people *want* to think about themselves. This issue is important because a desire to think of ourselves in a particular way influences the way we seek self-knowledge.

In the second section of the chapter, we will examine important sources of self-knowledge. These sources include (1) the physical world, (2) the social world, and (3) the inner (psychological) world of thoughts and feelings. We will see that each of these sources of self-knowledge yields important information about what we are like, but none is unambiguous or free of distortion.

The third section of this chapter examines how people evaluate themselves.

Here we will see that most people appraise themselves in very positive terms, and that these self-views are not always accurate or realistic. Finally, we note how biases in the way people seek self-knowledge promote these positive self-views.

BEGINNING THE SEARCH FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Cultural factors provide the first signposts on the road to self-knowledge. To a great extent, who we are—and who we think we are—are determined by the time and place we are raised and live (Baumeister, 1986). If we are raised in a traditional agrarian society, we are unlikely to think of ourselves as a budding entrepreneur. It could happen, but it is unlikely.

The role of culture is most clearly seen with respect to how it shapes our social identities. Countries that have caste systems, such as India, virtually dictate people's social identities. But cultural factors also influence our personal identities. To regard oneself as a competitive person, for example, requires that we live in a culture that supplies the term and gives us the opportunity to act competitively. One can conceive of a society that stresses cooperation and doesn't even have a concept of competitiveness. If the concept isn't part of the culture, it isn't apt to be part of the self.

Cultural *expectations* also influence people's self-views. This point was illustrated in a study by Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria (1974). These investigators interviewed the mothers and fathers of one-day-old infants. They found that the parents were more apt to use words like "beautiful," "cute," and "pretty" when describing their newborn daughters than when describing their newborn sons. Pervasive cultural expectations like these inevitably influence the way people think about themselves.

Situations That Initiate a Search for Self-Knowledge

Cultural factors represent a passive form of self-knowledge acquisition, in that people gain self-knowledge without actively seeking it. This is not the only way people acquire self-knowledge, however. Sometimes, people deliberately set out to learn what they are like.

An active search for self-knowledge is particularly apt to occur when people make important changes in life. To illustrate, Deutsch, Ruble, Fleming, Brooks-Gunn, and Stangor (1988) studied women who were planning to get pregnant or were expecting the birth of a first child. They found that these women actively sought information about motherhood and

incorporated this information into their self-concept. Moreover, doing so provided important benefits: Women who had clearly established an identity as a mother during pregnancy showed better postpartum adjustment and were more satisfied with their lives than were women who had difficulty establishing this identity (Oakley, 1980). These findings suggest that an active search for self-knowledge is especially likely (and especially beneficial) when people confront important life changes.

Motives That Guide the Search for Self-Knowledge

When people actively seek knowledge of themselves, they do not do so in a dispassionate, disinterested way. Instead, people have particular goals in mind, and these goals lead them to selectively seek, notice, and interpret information about themselves. This selectivity occurs as a result of three forces.

The Self-Enhancement Motive

The first of these forces is known as the self-enhancement motive. In Chapter 2, we noted that William James (1890) identified a class of self-relevant emotional states. Feeling proud or pleased with ourselves (on the positive side) and feeling humiliated or ashamed of ourselves (on the negative side) are examples of what James had in mind. The self-enhancement motive refers to the fact that people are motivated to experience these positive emotional states and to avoid experiencing these negative emotional states. People are motivated to *feel* good about themselves, to maximize their feelings of self-worth.

This emphasis on feelings differs a bit from how other theorists have defined self-enhancement needs. Other theorists have taken the term to mean that people are motivated to *think* of themselves in highly favorable terms (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, 1990). It is certainly the case that in many situations and in many cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself as highly capable or somehow *better* than one's peers. But this is not invariably so. In some situations and in some cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself as ordinary or average, or even *worse* than others (parents, for example, may take pride in thinking their children are smarter and more talented than they

themselves are). These sorts of differences mask an underlying similarity. In both cases, thoughts about the self serve to enhance feelings of self-worth. The universal need (which McDougall [1923] called the “master sentiment”) is not a need to *think* of oneself in any specific way but a need to maximize feelings of self-worth. This is what we mean when we speak of a self-enhancement motive.

That being said, it is the case that in many cultures, particularly contemporary Western societies (e.g., United States, Canada, and Western Europe), feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself in favorable terms—as exceptionally kind, likable, intelligent, and attractive, for example. In this case, self-enhancement needs lead people to seek information about themselves in such a way that they are apt to conclude that they possess these qualities.

The Accuracy Motive

Accuracy needs also influence the manner in which people seek knowledge of themselves. Sometimes people want to know the truth about themselves, without regard to whether they learn something good or bad (Trope, 1986). Three considerations are thought to underlie this need (Brown, 1991). First, sometimes people simply want to reduce uncertainty; they want to know what they are like for the sheer intrinsic pleasure of knowing what they are like.

People may also believe that they have a moral obligation to know what they are really like. This admonition is prominent in theological and philosophical thought. The existentialist philosophers, for example, held that people have an ethical obligation to uncover their true nature. People who evade self-understanding were considered to be weak, cowardly, and living a depraved or purposeless existence.

Finally, we seek accurate information about ourselves because knowing what we are really like can sometimes help us achieve other goals. One of these goals is survival. Let’s imagine, just as an example, that I think of myself as incredibly fleet of foot when I am actually slower than a snail. If all I’m doing is running around a track by myself, my inaccurate beliefs about myself are probably doing me no harm. But if I intend to taunt a wild beast to see if I can outrun it when it gets mad and turns on me, it probably would be

helpful for me to know how fast I really am; otherwise, I will die! The point here is that accurate self-knowledge is sometimes adaptive; sometimes, it is important for us to know what we are really like (Festinger, 1954).

Accurate self-knowledge can also be instrumental to maximizing feelings of self-worth (Sedikides & Strube, in press). Success is one of the things that makes people feel good about themselves. Knowing what you are really like can sometimes makes success more likely. For example, a person who is "all thumbs in the wood shop" is apt to experience repeated failure as a carpenter. It might be good for this person to know that his talents in this domain are somewhat limited, before he decides whether or not to pursue a career in woodworking. This is another reason why it is important to emphasize that self-enhancement refers to emotion—the desire to maximize feelings of self-worth, not the desire to think of oneself as good at everything. Self-enhancement needs can sometimes be met by knowing what we can't do well.

The Consistency Motive

A final force to consider is known as the consistency motive. In Chapter 1 we saw that our ideas about ourselves serve several important functions: They influence the way we process information, they guide our behavior, and they serve as end-states toward which our future behavior is oriented. Many theorists believe these functions give rise to a motive to protect the self-concept against change (e.g., Epstein, 1980; Lecky, 1945; Rosenberg, 1979; Swann, 1990). This motive leads people to seek and embrace information that is consistent with what they think they are like, and to avoid and reject information that is inconsistent with what they think they are like. Prescott Lecky (1945) was an early proponent of this position.

> According to self-consistency, the mind is a unit, an organized system of ideas. All of the ideas which belong to the system must seem to be consistent with one another. The center or nucleus of the mind is the individual's idea or conception of himself. If a new idea seems to be consistent with the … individual's conception of himself, it is accepted and assimilated easily. If it seems to be inconsistent, however, it meets with resistance and is likely to be rejected. (p. 246)

Not everyone endorses a self-consistency motive (Steele & Spencer, 1992), but it has played an important role in several influential theories. For example, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) maintains that the holding of two inconsistent cognitions produces an aversive state of arousal

that people are motivated to avoid and reduce. Aronson (1968) subsequently amended this formulation, contending that one of the cognitions must involve people's beliefs about themselves. What produces dissonance, Aronson argued, is not the realization that "I did *X* when I believe *Y*," it is the recognition that "I'm not a hypocritical person but I just said or did something I don't believe in." We will have more to say about dissonance theory in Chapter 5.

The self-consistency motive also plays an important role in Swann's (1990, 1996) self-verification theory. Self-verification theory contends that once people develop ideas about what they are like, they strive to verify these self-views. Consider, for example, a person who thinks of herself as highly intelligent. According to Swann, this person is motivated to verify this view of herself. To do so, she can (1) engage in activities that demonstrate her acumen; (2) selectively seek, accept, and retain information that confirms her sagacity; and (3) attempt to convince others that she possesses a brilliant mind.

Two considerations are thought to drive the search for self-verifying feedback (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). First, we feel more comfortable and secure when we believe that other people see us as we see ourselves. Imagine how unsettling it would be if you suddenly learned you were not the person you thought you were. Seeking self-verifying feedback helps people avoid this anxiety and epistemic confusion. The search for self-verifying feedback is also fueled by more pragmatic, interpersonal concerns. Self-verification theory assumes that our social interactions proceed more smoothly and profitably when other people view us as we view ourselves. This consideration gives people a second reason to selectively seek self-verifying feedback.

An especially controversial aspect of self-verification theory is the predictions it makes when people hold negative views of themselves. The theory asserts that people are just as interested in confirming their negative self-views as they are in corroborating their positive self-views. We will examine the support for this prediction later in this chapter.

SOURCES OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Suppose one day you read about a characteristic you have never heard of. How would you go about finding out whether you have this characteristic or not? Generally speaking, you have three sources of information at your disposal: the physical world, the social world, and the inner (psychological) world of thoughts and feelings.

Physical World

Physical reality provides one means by which you can learn about yourself. If you want to know how tall you are, you can measure your height; if you want to know how many pounds you can lift, you can go to a health club and take note of how many pounds you can lift. In these cases, you are using the physical world to gain knowledge of yourself.

Though useful as a source of self-knowledge, the physical world is limited in two important respects. First, many attributes are not anchored in physical reality (Festinger, 1954). Suppose you want to know how *kind* you are. You can't simply get out a yardstick and measure your kindness. The same is true if you want to know how clever or sincere you are. A physical basis for gaining knowledge in these domains (and many others) is lacking.

A second, and related point, is that even when attributes can be assessed with reference to the physical world, the knowledge we gain from the physical world isn't necessarily the knowledge we are after. Knowing your height doesn't really tell you whether or not you are tall. You need to know how tall other people are, and whether you are taller or shorter than they are. The same is true when it comes to knowing how many pounds you can lift. Before you can know whether you're strong or not, you need to know how many pounds other people can lift.

The larger point here is that attributes like tall and strong acquire meaning only with respect to the attributes of others. This is true of many of the ways people think about themselves. Most of our personal identities are couched in comparative terms. When we say we are independent, we are implicitly saying that we think we are more independent than are other people; when we say we are talented, we are implicitly saying that we think we are more

talented than are most others.

Social World

The comparative nature of self-views means that people must rely heavily on the social world when seeking to understand who they are and what they are like. Two social processes are particularly important.

Social Comparison

First, as just indicated, people engage in a process of social comparison. They compare their attributes with others and draw inferences about what they are like. Research on social comparison processes was initiated by Leon Festinger (1954). Festinger postulated that people have a drive to know what they are really like, and that often they can satisfy this desire only by comparing themselves with others. To illustrate, suppose you find out that you can run a mile in seven minutes. In order to know whether you're fast or slow, you need to know how long it takes other people to run a mile.

Of course, any conclusions you draw about yourself greatly depend on those with whom you compare yourself. The need for *accurate* self-knowledge was originally thought to guide the social comparison process (Festinger, 1954), and researchers assumed that comparing with others who are similar to us in important ways is most informative. From this perspective, you would best be able to tell how fast you really are by comparing with other people of your sex and age group. To the extent that you run a mile faster than these *similar others,* you would think of yourself as fast. Comparing your time with people of the opposite sex, or with those who are much older or younger than you, is less informative. These people are too different from you in areas relevant to running to serve as suitable targets of comparison.

There is considerable evidence that people do compare themselves with others who are similar to them in important ways (Wood, 1989). But this is not always true (Collins, 1996; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). People also compare themselves with those who are slightly better off than they are (a process called *upward comparison*) and with those who are slightly worse off or somehow disadvantaged on the dimension under consideration (a process called

downward comparison). There is also substantial evidence that the need for accurate self-knowledge is not the only, or even the most important, factor that guides the social comparison process (Helgeson & Mickelson, 1995). Under many circumstances, the need to feel good about ourselves affects the social comparison process (Wood, 1989).

Reflected Appraisals

Another way people gain self-knowledge is by observing how others respond to them. Imagine, for example, that a person tells a joke and perceives that other people are laughing at it. The person might reasonably infer that she is witty. Formally, this process is known as the *reflected appraisal* process.

Charles Horton Cooley, a turn-of-the-century American sociologist, first articulated this perspective in his discussion of the *looking-glass self*. Cooley (1902) was particularly concerned with how people's feelings toward themselves develop. He argued that these feelings are socially determined. We imagine how we are regarded by another person, and this perception determines how we feel about ourselves. The term *looking-glass self* was used to call attention to the fact that other people serve as a mirror; that is, we see ourselves reflected in other people's eyes.

> In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self … appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self. (Cooley, 1902, pp. 152–153)

Cooley went on to propose a three-step process. First, we imagine how we appear in the eyes of another person; second, we imagine how that person is evaluating us; third, we feel good or bad in accordance with this imagined judgment. Note the phenomenological nature of Cooley's model. It is our imagined judgment, not what the person actually thinks of us, that makes us feel proud or ashamed of ourselves.

> A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. (Cooley, 1902, p. 153)

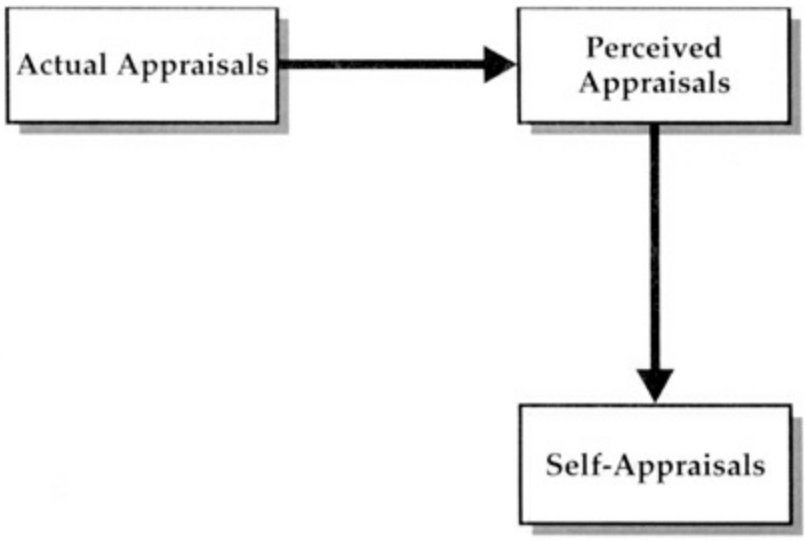

FIGURE 3.1. A schematic representation of the reflected appraisal model. In this model, what other people think of us (actual appraisals) influences our self-appraisals indirectly, via perceived appraisals.

Although Cooley was concerned with how people's feelings toward themselves develop, Kinch (1963) adapted these ideas to explain how people's thoughts about themselves develop. Kinch's model, which is shown in Figure 3.1, also has three components: (1) what other people actually think of us (the actual appraisals of others); (2) our perception of these appraisals (our perceived appraisals); and (3) our own ideas about what we are like (our self-appraisals). The model assumes that actual appraisals determine perceived appraisals, and perceived appraisals, in turn, determine self-appraisals. As an example, the model assumes (1) that another person thinks you are attractive (actual appraisal), (2) that you are aware of this (perceived appraisal), and (3) that, because of this, you think you are attractive. Note again the phenomenological nature of the model. The lack of a direct arrow linking actual appraisals to self-appraisals means that it is our perception of what other people think of us, rather than what they actually think of us, that determines our self-appraisals.

In recent years, a great deal of research has tested the model shown in Figure 3.1 (for reviews, see Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). A typical investigation with college students involves a group of friends, roommates, or acquaintances. The students rate themselves and each other on a number of dimensions (e.g., how attractive, intelligent, and sociable do you think person X is?). The students are also asked to predict how they are being rated by others (e.g., how attractive do you think person Y thinks you are?).

Finally, the relations among actual appraisals, perceived appraisals, and self-appraisals are examined.

In general, this research has turned up only limited support for the reflected appraisal model. First, contrary to the model, people are not very good at knowing what any particular individual thinks of them. Felson (1993) believes this is because communication barriers and social norms limit the information we receive from others. This is especially true when the feedback would be negative. People rarely give one another negative feedback ("if you don't have anything nice to say about someone, don't say anything at all"), so people rarely conclude that other people dislike them or evaluate them negatively.

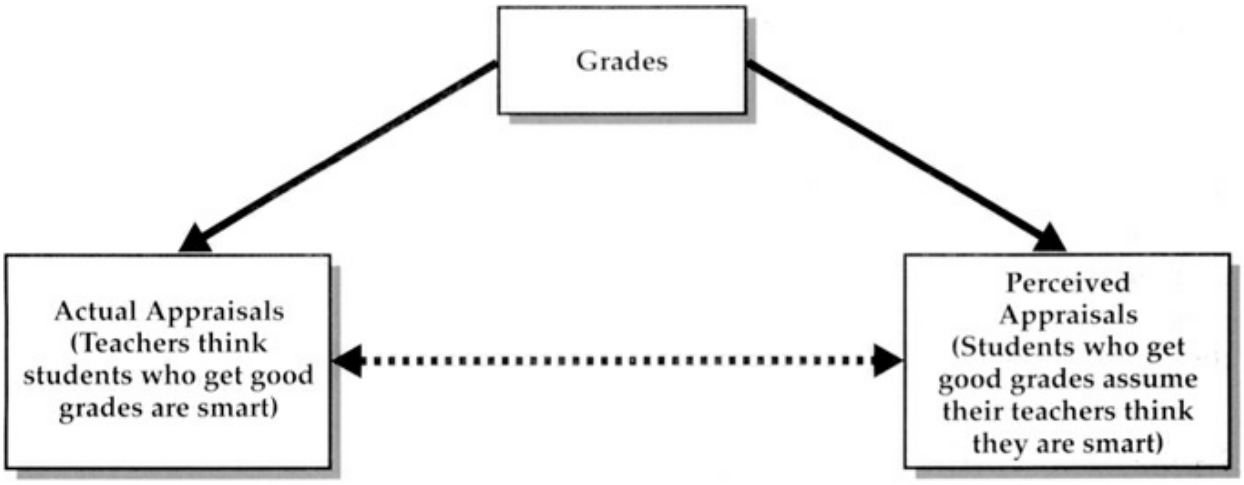

FIGURE 3.2. A schematic representation of the reflected appraisal process. In this example, grades function as a common third variable that leads to an association between actual appraisals and perceived appraisals.

Despite being largely unaware of how any particular person evaluates them, people are better at knowing what people *in general* think of them. At the same time, the nature of this association may not conform to the one specified in Figure 3.1. The reflected appraisal model assumes that actual appraisals determine perceived appraisals (e.g., other people think you are smart, somehow communicate this information to you, and you correctly perceive that they think you are smart). Although this pattern may occur, the influence of a common third variable could also produce a spurious association between actual appraisals and perceived appraisals (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993).

Performance in the classroom provides a suitable example (see Figure 3.2).

Some students get better grades in school than do others. Teachers think students who get good grades are smart, and students who get good grades assume their teachers think they are smart. In this case, actual appraisals and perceived appraisals will be correlated, but there is no causal relation between them. They are correlated simply because they are both associated with grades.

A related problem clouds the interpretation of the association between perceived appraisals and self-appraisals. As shown in Figure 3.1, these variables are highly correlated (Felson, 1993; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979), but the causal association between them is unclear. The reflected appraisal model assumes that perceived appraisals determine self-appraisals (e.g., if we think other people think we are clever, then we think we are clever), but the reverse causal sequence is also possible (e.g., if we think we are clever, we assume other people think so, too). Although correlational studies do not afford a definitive test of this issue, the tendency to assume that others see us as we see ourselves seems to account for most of the correlation between perceived appraisals and self-appraisals (Felson, 1993).

These findings suggest some important qualifications to the reflected appraisal model. As originally conceived, the model assumed that people see themselves as others see them. Person A forms an opinion about Person B, and Person B pliantly registers this opinion and incorporates it into her self-concept. This sequence may accurately characterize matters in early childhood (parents give their children lots of personal feedback, and children incorporate this feedback into their ideas about themselves), but it appears to be less relevant later in life. This is because people are not as passive as the model assumes; they actively and selectively process information from the social world. Once people's ideas about themselves take shape, these ideas influence the manner in which new information is gathered and interpreted.

Inner (Psychological) World

Three processes of a more personal nature also influence the way people acquire knowledge of themselves.

Introspection

One of these processes, introspection, involves looking inward and directly consulting our attitudes, feelings, and motives. Suppose, for example, I want to know whether I'm a sentimental person. I can look inward and ask myself how I generally feel at weddings, funerals, and other occasions that are relevant to sentimentality. If I feel soft and warm inside on these occasions, I'm apt to conclude that I am a sentimental person.

Introspection would seem to be a very reliable way of knowing what we are like. After all, what better way to know ourselves than to examine our own thoughts and feelings? This perception appears to be widely shared. Andersen and Ross (1984) asked college students whether another person would know them better (1) if they knew their private thoughts and feelings for one day, or (2) if they were able to observe their behavior over a period of several months. By a wide margin, the students believed that other people would know them best if they were privy to their inner world of thoughts and feelings.

Andersen (1984) conducted a follow-up investigation to test this assumption. Andersen had participants describe themselves to people they did not know, emphasizing either their private thoughts and feelings, their behavior, or a mixture of the two. Later, the observers rated the participants on a number of dimensions, and Andersen calculated the correspondence between these ratings and the participants' own self-assessments.

The results from this investigation, which are displayed in Figure 3.3, show that observers produced ratings that most closely matched the participants' own ratings when the participants had described their thoughts and feelings. These findings indicate that your thoughts and feelings provide other people with valuable information about what you are like. By extension, these findings suggest that consulting your own thoughts and feelings can yield meaningful self-knowledge (see also, Hixon & Swann, 1993; Johnson & Boyd, 1995; Millar & Tesser, 1989).

Whether introspection always fosters self-insight is not entirely clear, however. Wilson and his colleagues have argued that thinking too much about *why* we feel the way we do about some person, object, or issue can confuse us and undermine accurate self-knowledge (for a review, see Wilson & Hodges, 1992). Wilson's research is built on the premise that people do not always know why they feel the way they do (Freud, 1957; Lyons, 1986;

Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Nevertheless, people have little difficulty generating plausible explanations for their feelings. The problem is that these reasons often reflect common cultural assumptions rather than private, accurate self-knowledge. For example, if you were asked why you like your boyfriend or girlfriend, you would probably say it has something to do with the person's personality (e.g., the person's warmth or kindness). In fact, these reasons are imperfectly related to why you feel the way you do. Other reasons, such as the person's physical attractiveness or even the way the person walks, laughs, or gestures, may be equally or more important.

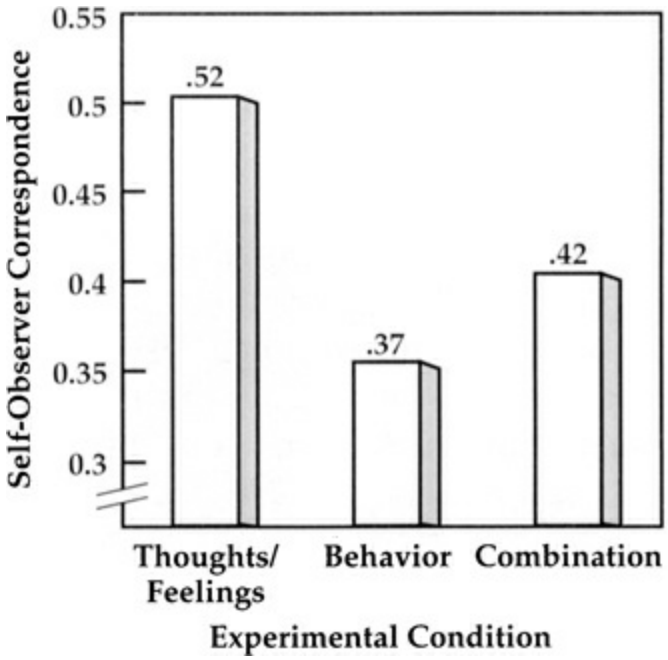

FIGURE 3.3. Correspondence between self-ratings and observer ratings as a function of whether people revealed their thoughts and feelings, their behavior, or a combination. The data show that observers learn more about what a person is like when the person reveals his or her thoughts and feelings.

(Adapted from Andersen, 1984, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46,* 294–307. Copyright 1984. Adapted by permission of The American Psychological Association.)

Wilson and his associates have conducted numerous studies demonstrating that problems can arise when people introspect about reasons. In these studies, some participants (those in the introspection condition) are encouraged to carefully consider why they feel the way they do about some person, object, or issue before making a decision. Other participants (those in the control condition) make their decision without being asked to analyze the basis of their feelings. The results show that participants in the introspection condition are less accurate when predicting their future behavior (Wilson &

LaFleur, 1995) and are less satisfied with their choices and decisions (Wilson et al., 1993) than are participants in the control condition. On the basis of these and other findings, Wilson concludes that thinking too much about why we feel the way we do can diminish, rather than promote, accurate self-knowledge.

Self-Perception Processes

Wilson's work is based on the assumption that people are not always aware of why they feel the way they do. Bern's (1972) *self-perception* theory makes a similar assumption. Self-perception theory is concerned with how people explain their behavior. The theory argues that people do not always know why they do what they do. When this occurs, they infer the causes of their behavior by analyzing their behavior in the context in which it occurs.

To illustrate, suppose you ask me whether I like country music. To answer this question, I might recall that every time I'm in my car I keep my radio tuned to a country music station. So I answer, "Yes, I like country music." After all, what other reason can there be? No one makes me listen to country music, so the only reasonable explanation for why I listen to it all the time is that I like it.

Note that an outside observer would have reached a similar conclusion. If you knew I always listened to country music, you would also infer that I like country music. This equivalence is a hallmark of Bern's theory. The theory assumes that people often gain self-knowledge simply by observing their own behavior, and drawing logical conclusions about why they behaved as they did.

> Individuals come to "know" their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs. Thus, to the extent that internal cues are weak, ambiguous, or uninterpretable, the individual is functionally in the same position as an outside observer, an observer who must necessarily rely upon those same external cues to infer the individual's inner states. (Bern, 1972, p. 2)

Self-perception theory has been applied to a wide range of phenomena. Under certain conditions, people have been shown to infer their attitudes (Olson & Hafer, 1990), emotions (Laird, 1974; Schachter & Singer, 1962), and motives (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973) in the manner specified by the theory. Some of the most intriguing demonstrations of the theory come

from research on emotion. In one study (Laird, 1974), participants were induced to smile or frown while reading a series of cartoons to themselves. Those who read the cartoons while smiling thought the cartoons were funnier and liked them more than did those who read the cartoons while frowning. According to self-perception theory, the participants thought, “Well, I’m smiling a lot. I guess I think these cartoons are really amusing” (but see also, Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988 for a different interpretation).

Self-perception processes are akin to introspection, but there is an important difference. With introspection, we directly examine our attitudes, feelings, and motives; with self-perception, we indirectly infer our attitudes, feelings, and motives by analyzing our behavior. Another way of saying this is that only introspection involves directly consulting our internal states; the self-perception process is an indirect one that does not require direct access to our internal states.

Causal Attributions

The explanations people give for their actions are the key elements in self-perception theory. Formally, these explanations are known as causal attributions. Causal attributions are answers to *why* questions (Weiner, 1985). Imagine that we see a person staggering as he walks across the street. We ask, “Why?” Is it because the person is injured, mentally unstable, physically challenged, drunk, or high on drugs? The explanation we settle on is a causal attribution; we attribute the person’s behavior to a cause. People also make attributions for their own behavior. In our previous example, I decided that the reason I always listen to country music is that I like it. This is a causal attribution.

The attributions people make for events in their lives constitute an important source of self-knowledge. This is especially true when people make attributions for positive and negative events. Imagine, for example, that you take a math course and fail all of the tests. You might decide it’s because you’re not good at math. In this case, the attribution you made for your poor test performance led you to conclude that you have low ability in this area. If you had decided that you failed the exams for some other reason (e.g., you didn’t study hard enough; you studied the wrong material; or the tests were unfair) you would not have concluded that your ability was low.

Finally, people can gain self-knowledge by making attributions for *other* people's behavior. Imagine, for example, that I ask several people to play bridge with me and they all say "no." If I decide the reason they won't play with me is because I'm not a good bridge player, the attribution I have made for other people's behavior has influenced what I think about myself.

Section Summary

In this section we have discussed a number of ways people learn about themselves. They can (1) consult the physical world; (2) compare themselves with others (social comparison); (3) incorporate the opinions of others toward them (reflected appraisals); (4) look inward (introspection); and (5) examine their behavior in the context in which it occurs and draw an appropriate inference (self-perception and attributions).

Not all of these sources of information are relevant for every attribute, but most are. Consider, for example, how these processes could lead a person to think of herself as shy and introverted. To begin, she might examine how she behaves at parties. If she's always standing off to the side, apart from others, she might come to regard herself as introverted through a self-perception process. She could also engage in introspection and examine her feelings in social situations. If she feels anxious and uncomfortable in the company of others, she might conclude that she is shy. People may also have told her she was shy. If she accurately perceived what they were saying, and she incorporated this information into her self-concept, she could come to believe that she was shy through the reflected appraisal process. Finally, she could also compare her level of social activity with others and conclude that she is less socially inclined than most other people. From that information, she might also infer that she is introverted.

WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK OF THEMSELVES?

Having identified the motives that guide the search for self-knowledge and examined various sources of information that people consult to learn what they are like, it is time to look more closely at what people think of themselves. To begin, let's note that so far we have characterized the manner in which people acquire knowledge of themselves as a fairly logical and rational process. We think we are smart *if* we can solve difficult problems, *if* we outperform our peers in school, *if* other people think we are smart, and so forth. In short, we think we are smart *if* we *are* smart. This characterization implies that there should be a strong correspondence between what people think they are like and what they are really like.

Positivity Bias

This is not really the case, however. When it comes to their ideas about their socially valued qualities and abilities (e.g., their kindness, attractiveness, and intelligence), many (if not most) people do not have entirely accurate views of themselves. They regard themselves as better than they really are.

The data shown in Table 3.1 provide initial support for this assertion. The data come from a group of undergraduates attending the University of Washington. As part of a class project, I asked these students to indicate how well a number of attributes described them, most other people, and most University of Washington students (1 = not at all; 5 = very much). Several things about the data are of interest. First, note the extent to which these students regard themselves in very positive terms. They rated themselves above the scale midpoint of 3 on all of the positively valued attributes, and far below the scale midpoint of 3 on all of the negatively valued attributes. This tendency shows that people generally think of themselves in very positive terms. They think of themselves as very loyal, sincere, kind, and intelligent, and not at all as inconsiderate, phony, insensitive, and unintelligent.

The second thing to notice is that this positivity bias is less apparent when the students rate "most other people." In fact, ratings of "most other people" hover around the scale midpoint. Consequently, the students regard themselves in more positive and far less negative terms than they regard most

other people. This bias is apparent for every single attribute, and it is particularly strong for attributes that refer to important interpersonal qualities (e.g., kindness, loyalty, sincerity).[1] Moreover, the bias is quite general and is not due to extreme ratings from only a few students. Collapsed across the various attributes, 89 percent of the students rated themselves more positively than they rated most other people, and 92 percent of the students rated themselves less negatively than they rated most other people. In short, there is a widespread tendency for these students to regard themselves in more favorable terms than they regard most other people.

TABLE 3.1. Evaluations of Self and Others

	Target		
Attribute	Self	Others	UW
Positive Attributes			
Loyal	4.25_a	2.59_b	2.74_b
Sincere	4.03_a	2.63_b	2.74_b
Kind	3.99_a	2.90_b	2.86_b
Intelligent	3.85_a	2.90_b	3.74_a
Athletic	3.22_a	2.61_b	3.29_a
Well-liked	3.58_a	3.03_b	3.23_c
Talented	3.46_a	3.08_b	3.60_a
Attractive	3.26_a	2.91_b	3.20_a
M =	3.71_a	2.83_b	3.18_c
Negative Attributes			
Inconsiderate	1.43_a	3.02_b	2.70_c
Phony	1.44_a	2.91_b	2.97_b
Insensitive	1.46_a	2.91_b	2.53_c
Unintelligent	1.25_a	2.30_b	1.70_c
Dumb	1.10_a	2.11_b	1.48_c
Unattractive	1.64_a	2.43_b	2.10_c
Unwise	1.52_a	2.42_b	2.00_c
Unpopular	1.82_a	2.31_b	2.09_c
M =	1.46_a	2.55_b	2.20_c

Note: Values could range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Others = Most other people; UW = most

University of Washington students. Within each row, means with ifferent subscripts differ at $p < .05$ or less.

Table 3.1 shows one other effect of interest. The tendency to see oneself as "better than others" is reduced when the students' self-ratings are compared with their ratings of most University of Washington students. But it is not completely eliminated. It is still very apparent for the socially valued interpersonal qualities (e.g., loyal, sincere, kind). There is also a corresponding tendency for the students to appraise their fellow University of Washington students in very positive terms. In almost all cases, students regard their fellow students in more positive and less negative terms than they regard most other people. This tendency, which was discussed in Chapter 2, is known as ingroup favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The term refers to the fact that people not only regard themselves in more favorable terms than they regard most other people, they also regard their family, friends, and fellow group members as better than others (Brown, 1986).

The tendency to regard oneself as somehow better than others is pervasive. People think they are more fair than others (Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985), possess richer and more adaptive personalities than others (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988), drive better than others (Svenson, 1981), and have more satisfying interpersonal relationships than others (Buunk & van der Eijnden, 1997; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). One of the most dramatic illustrations of this tendency was provided in a 1976 College Board survey, in which nearly 1 million high school students were asked to compare themselves with their peers (cited in Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Seventy percent of the students rated themselves above the median in leadership ability, 60 percent rated themselves above the median in athletic ability, and 85 percent rated themselves above the median in their ability to get along well with others. Of these, 25 percent placed themselves in the top 1 percent!

It would be one thing if these tendencies were simply due to the excesses of youth, but similar results are found with adults. In one survey, 90 percent of business managers rated their performance as superior to other managers, and 86 percent rated themselves as more ethical than their peers (cited in Myers, 1993). Another study found that 94 percent of college professors believe they do above average work (Cross, 1977). Finally, people facing threats to their health (e.g., cancer patients, people with HIV) show the same

self-aggrandizing bias when evaluating themselves relative to other patients with their disease (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990; Helgeson & Taylor, 1993; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, & Aspinwall, 1991).

To summarize, there is extensive evidence that most people regard themselves in highly favorable terms (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986, 1991; Brown & Dutton, 1995a; Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994). They believe they have many fine qualities and few negative qualities. This is particularly true when we compare people's self-evaluations with their evaluations of most other people. The majority of individuals regard themselves (and members of their extended self) in far more desirable terms than they regard people in general.

Assessing the Accuracy of People's Self-Views

Because most people can't be *better* than most people, the data shown in Table 3.1 speak to the accuracy of people's self-views. They suggest that people's views of themselves are not only highly positive, they are also inaccurate. But caution is indicated when drawing this conclusion. It is possible (though not likely) that this is an exceptional sample. These students could, in fact, be exceedingly loyal, sincere, and kind (though none too modest!). It is not likely, but it is possible. Determining whether people's ideas about themselves are accurate requires a firmer standard against which these ideas can be measured.

Finding these standards is not as straightforward as it may seem. Multiple constructions of reality are the rule, not the exception (Watzlawick, 1976). Two people can be looking at the same stimulus and legitimately disagree about what they are seeing. This is especially true when it comes to social perception (Funder, 1987; Kenny, 1991; Kruglanski, 1989; Swann, 1984). Suppose Mary thinks Larry is friendly and warm, but Carrie thinks Larry is cold and detached. Both may be right: Larry may be amicable with Mary but aloof with Carrie. Problems like these only get worse when we try to assess the validity of people's thoughts about themselves (Robins & John, 1997). If Barry thinks he has a wonderful sense of humor, who's to say he's wrong? If he laughs at all of his jokes, to him, he has a good sense of humor.

Despite these difficulties, attempts have been made to assess the accuracy of people's self-views. The following research areas speak to this issue.

Correspondence between Self-Views and Objective Criteria

The most obvious (and decisive) way to determine whether people's views of themselves are accurate is to compare these views with some objective criterion. Unfortunately, this is rarely done, in part because physical reality is lacking for most attributes.

One (albeit imperfect) exception is people's perceptions of their intelligence. Considering the importance of intelligence in our culture and the fact that people routinely receive feedback on their intellectual abilities throughout schooling, we might expect that people are quite accurate with respect to where they fall on this dimension. This is not the case. People's self-appraisals of their intelligence and their scores on standardized IQ tests hover around .3 (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993; Hansford & Hattie, 1982). Importantly, these values are not just found with college students. They are also found with community samples, ruling out the possibility that the modest correlations are due to an attenuated range of intelligence scores.

Intelligence is a broad construct with many components, and this generality may make it difficult to judge. People's ideas about themselves may be more accurate when a narrower, more specific domain is considered. There is some reason to believe this is so. Students' self-appraisals of ability in school ("How good a student are you?") are substantially correlated with their actual classroom performance (Cauce, 1987; Faunce, 1984; Felson, 1984). This is especially true when we look at the association between self-ratings of ability and performance in particular subject areas. For example, students' judgments of how good they are in math are highly correlated with their classroom performance in this area (Marsh, 1993a). This suggests that people's ideas about themselves in very specific domains may be rather accurate.

Unfortunately, the use of correlations to assess the accuracy of people's self-views limits the informational value of these findings. To illustrate the problems involved, consider the information presented in Table 3.2. In these hypothetical examples, we have asked three students to estimate their class rank. The data show that one of the students is in the 25th percentile, one is in the 50th percentile, and one is in the 75th percentile.

In both examples, the correlation between actual class rank and self-reported class rank is 1.0. But only Example 1 shows strong evidence of

accuracy. In Example 2, all three students vastly overestimate their class rank. This illustration shows why correlation coefficients are largely uninformative as to whether people truly know what they are really like. They can tell us whether people are *relatively* accurate, but they cannot tell us whether people are accurate in any absolute sense. Although this issue was raised some time ago (Cronbach, 1955), and more appropriate methods for analyzing data like these are available (Gonzales & Griffin, 1995), researchers have generally ignored the importance of this issue when assessing the accuracy of people's self-views (for an exception, see Sheppard, 1993).

TABLE 3.2. Two Hypothetical Examples Showing the Relation between Actual Class Rank and Self-Reported Class Rank

Example 1		*Example 2*	
Actual Class Rank	Self-Reported Class Rank	Actual Class Rank	Self-Reported Class Rank
25	25	25	93
50	50	50	96
75	75	75	99
Correlation	$r = 1.0$		$r = 1.0$

Note: In both examples, the correlation between actual class rank and self-reported class rank is 1.0. However, only Example 1 provides evidence of accuracy. In Example 2, all three students substantially overestimated their class standing.

Correspondence between Self-Views and the Judgments of Others

In contrast to the paucity of research relating self-assessments to objective criteria, many studies have related people's self-appraisals to the judgments of others. Although self-other agreement does not constitute accuracy (i.e., reliability is not validity), some attributes, such as attractiveness and popularity, are socially defined. In such cases, the judgments of others provide an appropriate standard for gauging the accuracy of people's self-views.

Consider first, people's perceptions of their attractiveness. In a meta analysis involving over 5,000 participants, Feingold (1992) reported that the correlation between people's perceptions of their own attractiveness and how attractive they are regarded by others was .24. It is important to note that this rather modest value does not arise because observers disagree on who is attractive and who is not. In fact, just the opposite is true: Inter-rater

agreement in these studies is generally high, typically exceeding .60. Thus, people are in strong agreement about the attractiveness of others, but these consensual judgments do not coincide with people's perceptions of their own attractiveness.

Felson (1981) found a similar pattern in an examination of college football players' estimates of their ability. In this investigation, each player rated his athletic ability, and these ratings were compared to the ratings made by the players' coaches. There was substantial agreement between coaches about the players' abilities (r = .65), but little agreement between the players' assessments and the coaches' assessments (r = .16).

An investigation using popularity as a criterion produced similar results. Bohrnstedt and Felson (1983) had 415 children in grades 6 through 8 indicate how well liked they were by the boys or girls in their class. These judgments were then compared with how popular the students actually were. Averaging across the two sexes, Bohrnstedt and Felson found a .32 correlation between children's beliefs about how popular they were in class and their actual classroom popularity. These values provide additional evidence that people's self-perceptions are not strongly tied to the perceptions of others (Malloy, Yarlas, Montvilo, & Sugarman, 1996).

The situation is somewhat different when we examine the correspondence between people's perceptions of their *personality traits* and the way they are perceived by others. Research in this area has found substantial self-other agreement for traits that are unambiguous (Hayes & Dunning, 1997) or clearly manifested in behavior (Funder & Dobroth, 1987). For example, people who are very talkative, outgoing, and sociable tend to think of themselves as being extroverted, and they are judged by others to be extroverted. This leads to a substantial correlation between self-ratings and the ratings of others. Conscientiousness shows a similar effect. People who are meticulous in their appearance and fastidious in their bearing recognize that they are conscientious and are rated that way by others. These effects are so robust that they are found with only minimal acquaintanceship: After knowing someone for only a few minutes, our impressions of the person along these attributes correlate highly with what the person thinks he or she is like (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Watson, 1989).

Of course, this last finding does not mean that strangers know you as well as your good friends or family. Funder and Colvin (1988) found consistent evidence that the personality judgments of friends correlated more highly with people's self-assessments than did the judgments of strangers. Husbands and wives also show substantial agreement regarding one another's personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae, 1982). These effects appear to be particularly large for attributes that are *hidden from view* (i.e., attributes that do not have clear behavioral referents). For example, although strangers are able to judge your sociability, only your family and friends can gauge how intellectually curious you are (Paulhus & Bruce, 1992; Paunonen, 1989).

A final variable that influences the strength of self-other agreement is the desirability of the trait. The more desirable the trait, the less correspondence there is between people's self-ratings and the way they are rated by others (John & Robins, 1993; Park & Judd, 1989). One interpretation of this finding is that people's ideas about themselves in nonevaluative domains are largely accurate, but their thoughts about themselves in highly evaluative domains are not.

To summarize, people's ratings of their personality traits often are correlated (sometimes substantially) with the judgments of others (Funder, 1987, 1995). This correspondence may indicate that people know what they are really like. At the same time, agreement does not constitute accuracy. My wife and I may agree that I am creative, but this concordance doesn't make it so (Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae, 1982). Furthermore, as noted earlier, correlations do not provide an unambiguous estimate of accuracy. Finally, it's also important to bear in mind that the agreement that exists is limited to evaluatively neutral traits. People's judgments of themselves in evaluative domains do not correspond highly with the judgments of others.

Correspondence between Self-Views and Behavior

Another domain relevant to the accuracy issue is the agreement between people's ideas about themselves and their actual behavior. For example, does a person who says he is kind act compassionately? Does a person who says she is generous behave charitably? Several research areas address issues of this nature.

First, there is a vast literature that has looked at the correspondence between personality and behavior. Personality is often measured with self-report, so much of this research is relevant to whether people's views of themselves accurately predict their behavior. This research has found only limited evidence that they do. To illustrate, those who describe themselves as "extremely honest" are only slightly less likely to refrain from cheating when given the opportunity to do so than are those who claim simply to be "rather honest" (Mischel, 1968). In a similar vein, people's attitudes (as expressed by self-report) do not always predict their overt behavior. For example, people who describe themselves as "environmentally conscious" do not always act in an environmentally responsible manner (Wicker, 1969).

Finally, people overestimate their ability to predict their own behavior. A study by Vallone, Griffin, Lin, and Ross (1990) examined this issue (see also, Osberg & Shrauger, 1986). At the beginning of an academic term, university students indicated the likelihood that they would engage in a variety of behaviors in the coming weeks (e.g., declare a major, vote in an upcoming election). They then indicated how certain or confident they were in their judgments. Despite the obvious difficulties involved in predicting one's future behavior, the students were very confident in their prognostications. This confidence turned out to be unfounded. Less than two-thirds of the students' behavioral predictions came true, a value well under the degree of certainty they had expressed. One interpretation of these findings is that people mistakenly believe that their self-knowledge is accurate enough to allow them to unerringly predict their own behavior.

Prediction errors are especially likely for positively valued outcomes. For example, most students predict their grades in class will be better than they actually are (Robins & John, 1997). People also overestimate the likelihood that they will engage in socially desirable behaviors. To illustrate, Sherman (1980, Experiment 3) asked college students whether they would spend three hours collecting for the American Cancer Society if they were ever asked to do so. Nearly half of the students (47.8 percent) said they would. Yet when they were contacted later and asked to donate three hours of their time, less than one-third (31.1 percent) of the students actually agreed to do so. Along with other research (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987), these findings support the claim that people exaggerate the degree to which they will behave in socially desirable ways.

Section Summary

In summary, people's ideas about themselves in evaluative domains are rarely a faithful representation of what they are really like. Most people regard themselves (and those who are part of their extended selves) in more positive terms than they regard people in general. Insofar as it is logically impossible for most people to be *better* than most people, these tendencies suggest that people's views of themselves are not entirely accurate.

Also consistent with this conclusion is the modest agreement that exists between people's self-views and their standing in domains that are objectively defined (e.g., intelligence) and in domains that are consensually determined (e.g., attractiveness, popularity). Additionally, although people's judgments of their personality traits are related to the judgments of others, this agreement occurs largely in nonevaluative domains. Finally, people are not very good at predicting how they will behave in particular situations. Considering all of the evidence, it seems fair to conclude that people's beliefs about themselves in socially valued domains are overly positive.

In a moment, we will examine factors that contribute to this state of affairs. Before we do, several points should be kept in mind. First, we have only used self-reports to examine how people think of themselves. A number of factors may taint these reports, including a desire to present oneself to others in a positive manner and a tendency to defensively distort what one truly thinks of oneself. We will consider these issues in Chapters 7 and 10.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that the research we've reviewed comes from Western cultures. As we have noted, these countries are very competitive and individualistic, and these factors may lead people to try and distinguish themselves from others by exaggerating their virtues. Although research on this point is in its infancy, overly positive self-views seem to be less apparent among people from Eastern cultures (Heine & Lehman, 1995; but see also, Falbo, Poston, Triscari, & Zhang, 1997; Kurman & Sriram, 1995).

It is also worth mentioning again that the present discussion is limited to people's beliefs about their socially valued abilities and psychological qualities. People show greater accuracy when it comes to qualities that are less evaluative (e.g., their tidiness; their punctuality). Moreover, the degree of bias is not excessive. People are not completely unaware of what they are

like. A student who gets very poor grades is unlikely to think of herself as being the smartest person in class; a person who has no friends is unlikely to think he's the most popular child in school. Instead, people's views of themselves in evaluative domains tend, on average, to be just slightly more positive than can be justified.

Finally, not everyone is self-enhancing (John & Robins, 1994). Some people's self-views are more modest, and some people are even self-deprecating. Sometimes these differences are associated with greater accuracy; sometimes they are linked to inaccuracy. We will discuss these differences in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. At that time we will also consider whether these biases are beneficial or detrimental to psychological and physical well-being.

HOW DO PEOPLE MAINTAIN POSITIVE SELF-VIEWS?

At this point, let's consider how people are able to maintain positive beliefs about themselves. How, for example, are the majority of people able to sustain a belief that they are kinder, more loyal, and more sincere than their peers? Several processes conspire to sustain these beliefs.

Perhaps the most important one is that most personality attributes are inherently ambiguous. Consider, for example, what it means to be *honest*. Does it mean you never fudge on your income taxes? Regularly tell your friends what you think of their new clothes and hair styles? Always correct a waiter when he forgets to charge you for some item? All of these examples, and more, are indicative of honesty, but none is necessary or defining. This opens the door for individuals to define honesty in ways that cast them in a favorable light.

Dunning and his associates have provided considerable evidence that people do define traits in self-serving ways (for a review, see Dunning, 1993). For example, Dunning, Perie, and Story (1991) had participants rate themselves on two sets of attributes relevant to leadership. One set of attributes emphasized task-oriented qualities (e.g., ambitious, independent, and competitive); the other set emphasized interpersonal skills (e.g., friendly, agreeable, pleasant). Later, participants were asked what qualities are important to leadership. The results showed that participants who believed they possessed many task-oriented qualities also believed that successful leaders were ambitious, independent, and competitive. In contrast, participants who thought they possessed well-developed interpersonal skills believed that successful leaders were friendly, agreeable, and pleasant. In short, participants defined leadership in ways that matched how they thought of themselves (see also Kunda & Sanitioso, 1989). In follow-up research, Dunning, Leuenberger, and Sherman (1995) found that self-serving trait definitions are especially apparent after people receive negative feedback about themselves, suggesting that the tendency is motivated by a desire to enhance feelings of self-worth.

The tendency to define traits in self-serving ways is most evident for

attributes that cannot easily be verified. An investigation by Felson (1981) documents this point. As discussed earlier, Felson had college football players rate themselves on a number of attributes relevant to performance in football; the players' coaches also evaluated the players along these dimensions. Some of the abilities (e.g., speed, size) were considered relatively unambiguous and verifiable, insofar as clear standards exist for assessing one's standing on these attributes (speed can be measured, for instance). The remaining abilities (e.g., mental toughness, football sense) were deemed to be more ambiguous and subjective, insofar as one's standing on these measures cannot easily be determined. The prediction was that the players' estimates would be more likely to exceed the coaches' on the ambiguous attributes than on the unambiguous attributes. This prediction was confirmed, suggesting that people's most aggrandizing self-assessments occur for attributes that are more subjective in nature (see also Dunning et al., 1989).

The indeterminate nature of most attributes is one factor that allows individuals to maintain highly positive views of themselves. But it is not the only factor. Other processes are also relevant. We can begin to appreciate these factors by reconsidering the sources of self-knowledge we discussed earlier. These were (1) direct self-assessment with the physical world, (2) social comparison, (3) reflected appraisals, (4) introspection, (5) self-perception, and (6) attribution processes. All of these processes involve a good deal of inference and selectivity. We *decide* when to assess ourselves against physical criteria; we *choose* targets of social comparison; we *interpret* how others feel about us; we *label* our emotions; we *infer* our dispositions. Very little (if any) of the information we receive about ourselves reaches us without first being filtered somehow.

Generally speaking, these filters reflect two of the motivations we discussed earlier. The self-enhancement motive (i.e., the desire to feel good about ourselves) leads people to process information in ways that allows them to believe they have many favorable characteristics. The self-consistency motive (i.e., the desire to preserve our self-views) leads people to process information in ways that ensure that their present self-views endure. In the following section, we'll see how these filters affect the way people gather and process information about themselves.

Behavioral Factors That Promote Positive Self-Views

Selective Exposure to Favorable Feedback

One way people could develop and maintain positive self-views is by only seeking favorable information about themselves. Completely insulating oneself from negative feedback is doomed to be maladaptive, however. Individuals who remain completely oblivious to their lack of ability in some domain would be condemned to experience repeated failure in that aspect of life. A more modest, but adaptive, strategy would involve approaching positive self-relevant information more vigorously than negative self-relevant information. In this manner, the preponderance of the feedback one received would be positive, but negative feedback, though not actively sought, would still be encountered from time to time.

Evidence supporting such a biased pattern of information-seeking behavior has been reported. In one study (Brown, 1990), participants were first led to believe that they had high ability or low ability at an intellectual task. Later, they were given the opportunity to learn more about their ability. Those in the high-ability condition expressed a good deal of interest in learning more about themselves, whereas those in the low-ability condition were more ambivalent. This pattern, which was especially pronounced when participants sought information under private (rather than public) conditions, suggests that people enthusiastically seek feedback about their abilities when they expect it to be positive but not when they expect it to be negative (see also, Sachs, 1982; Sedikides, 1993).

This tendency is not restricted to achievement-related situations. Several investigations have documented that positive information about one's health is preferentially sought and accepted (e.g., Croyle, Sun, & Louie, 1993; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Quattrone & Tversky, 1984). In keeping with this evidence, many people at risk for HIV and other serious medical conditions (e.g., Huntington's disease) choose not to learn whether they have the condition, despite the availability of diagnostic tests (Bloch, Fahy, Fox, & Hay den, 1989; Myers, Orr, Locker, & Jackson, 1993).

Self-Handicapping

Occasionally, individuals will even work to obscure the informational

value of negative feedback (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Darley & Goethals, 1980; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Snyder & Wicklund, 1981). Berglas and Jones (1978) coined the term self-handicapping strategies to refer to situations in which people erect barriers to their own success. A student who doesn't study for an exam or an athlete who doesn't practice before an important competition is exhibiting self-handicapping behavior. These behaviors make success less likely, but they allow individuals to dismiss failure as nondiagnostic and uninformative of their underlying abilities.

Self-handicapping also occurs in interpersonal settings. When I was in high school, my friends and I used to wait until the last minute to ask a girl for a date. In part, this was because we were scared to make the phone call! But it also gave us a good excuse if the girl said no. Instead of attributing her refusal to anything about *us*, we consoled ourselves by saying that we had just asked too late.

Berglas and Jones (1978) tested the conditions that promote self-handicapping behavior. They first led some male participants to believe that they were likely to succeed on an upcoming test; other participants were led to believe that future success was unlikely. All of the participants were then told that the second part of the experiment involved testing the effects of two new drugs on test performance. One of the drugs purportedly facilitated test performance; the other supposedly impaired test performance. The participants were then given a choice as to which drug they wished to ingest. Participants who doubted their ability to succeed preferred the performance-inhibiting drug, even though the drug made success even less likely.

Findings like these make an important point about psychological life. Often, what's important to people is not simply whether they succeed or fail, it's whether these outcomes reveal something positive or negative about the self. With self-handicapping, people actively risk failure because doing so ensures that failure does not implicate valued aspects of the self (e.g., low ability). In this manner, people are able to cling to an image of competency even if they fail.

Task Choice in Achievement Settings

To this point we have seen that people avidly seek positive feedback but indifferently approach or actively avoid negative feedback. One research

program, Trope's (1986) research on task choice in achievement settings, seems inconsistent with this tendency. In these studies, participants are first told that they are about to take a test of an intellectual ability. They are then offered a choice between various kinds of tests. Some of the tests are allegedly very good at identifying whether or not a person has the ability; others are allegedly not very good at identifying whether or not a person has the ability. In several investigations (e.g., Strube, Lott, Le-Xuan-Hy, Oxenberg, & Deichmann, 1986; Trope, 1975, 1979), participants have been shown to prefer tests that promise to provide them with information about their ability. Moreover, this is true even if the test is good at disclosing whether a person has low ability.

These findings have led some theorists to conclude that people characteristically strive to learn the truth about themselves (Strube et al., 1986; Trope, 1986). There is a problem with this conclusion, however. The vast majority of participants in these studies believe they have high ability and expect to succeed at the task. Consequently, the interest they show in learning more about themselves may represent a desire to confirm an image of competency and gain additional favorable information about themselves, rather than any genuine interest in learning the truth about themselves. Only if people seek feedback without regard for whether they will learn something good or bad about themselves can they truly be said to be seeking accurate feedback. These conditions have generally not been met in the studies of task choice in achievement settings (for an elaboration of these views, see Brown, 1990; Brown & Dutton, 1995a).

Further Evidence of Strategic Information-Seeking Behavior

Two additional points about selective exposure to positive feedback are worth making. First, avoidance of negative feedback is not always obvious or deliberate (Greenwald, 1988). Often, people believe they possess some ability or talent, but they are not sure. They can evade finding out whether the ability is truly present or not by avoiding situations that call for its display (Shrauger, 1982). Suppose, for instance, that in the privacy of his mind (or shower) an individual believes his singing voice is second only to Sinatra's. By judiciously avoiding situations that call for public singing, he will never have to put this belief to a test. As a result, he will forever be free to cling to the belief that he is a spellbinding vocalist.

Second, people do seek diagnostic feedback on attributes that are modifiable (Brown, 1990; Dunning, 1995). Many professors, for example, ask their colleagues to comment on their manuscripts. To some extent, this practice stems from an expectation that the remarks they receive will be favorable (few professors send their papers to their enemies and critics), but it also reflects a genuine desire to improve the quality of one's work. But seeking feedback about the *products* of one's ability is not the same as seeking feedback about one's underlying ability. One's work is subject to modification and improvement; one's abilities are relatively fixed. Consequently, although they may ask for feedback on what they have written, few professors ask their colleagues to let them know whether they think they truly possess the intellectual ability to make a contribution to the field, whether they have any innate ability as a writer, and so forth.

Social Factors That Promote Positive Self-Views

Numerous social factors enable individuals to maintain positive views of themselves. At an early age, most (though not all) children receive a great deal of praise from their parents. They are fussed over, complimented, and adored. Social feedback continues to be positive as children age. Teachers are encouraged to find each child's "gift" and to let children know that they are valued and respected. Social norms also actively discourage peers from giving one another negative feedback. With the exception of anonymous journal reviews, we rarely hear what our peers really think of us, especially when this feedback is negative (Blumberg, 1972; Felson, 1993; Tesser & Rosen, 1975).

Selective Interaction

Selective affiliation also allows people to maintain positive self-views. The vast majority of people choose to associate with others who like them, not with those who dislike them. Think about your friends for a moment. Don't you think they have many positive qualities? Chances are, they think the same way about you (otherwise they wouldn't be your friends)! Choosing to interact with people who like and admire us ensures that most of the interpersonal feedback we receive is positive. To the extent that we incorporate this feedback into our self-views (as the reflected appraisal model maintains), this means we end up thinking positively about ourselves.

Biased Social Comparison

People also use social comparison processes to develop and maintain positive views of themselves. One way they do this is by strategically choosing targets of comparison. If I compare my athletic ability with most Nobel laureates, I'm apt to conclude that I am pretty athletic. If I compare my intellectual ability with most professional athletes, I'm likely to conclude that I am pretty smart. Had I reversed the targets of these comparisons, I would undoubtedly have come to some very different conclusions about myself!

Comparing ourselves with others who are worse off on a relevant dimension is known as downward social comparison (Wills, 1981). Wheeler and Miyake (1992) found that this type of social comparison activity is quite common. They asked University of Rochester students to keep track of how often they compared themselves with another person over a 10-day period. The students also indicated whether the person they compared with was better than they were on the relevant dimension (my roommate is more popular than I am), the same as them (my roommate and I both get good grades), or worse than them (my roommate is more phony and superficial than I am). Downward comparisons were most frequent and made people feel better about themselves (see also, Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991).

When there's nobody around to feel better than, people sometimes invent *zvorse-off others*. For example, a student may simply assume that other students are having great difficulty with their homework. Tendencies like these increase when people feel threatened in some manner, either because they have just failed at some important activity (Brown & Gallagher, 1992; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987) or because they are facing a threat to their health (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989). An investigation by Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman (1985) documents these effects. In a sample of breast cancer patients, these investigators found that the vast majority of women consoled themselves by comparing themselves with women who were worse off than they were. In essence, the women said "Yes things are bad, but they could be worse. I'm a lot better off than are other women who have cancer." Often, these *zvorse-off* others were manufactured; they represented a composite or fictional portrait of someone who was suffering more and coping less well with the trauma. Inventing a worse-off other allowed these women to feel good about themselves in

comparison.

Downward comparison is not the only form of social comparison. People also compare themselves with others who are similar to them in important ways, and even with people who are better off than they are. The effects of upward comparison have received a lot of attention in recent years. Initially, researchers assumed that upward comparison had only negative effects. After all, when you compare yourself with someone who is better than you, you look worse by comparison (Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Although this sometimes occurs, it is not always the case. Upward comparisons can also make people feel better about themselves, either because they serve as a source of inspiration and hope, or because people bask in the reflected glory of another person's positive qualities and achievements (Buunk et al., 1990; Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Cialdini et al., 1976; Collins, 1996; Brewer & Weber, 1994; Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989). It is for this reason, perhaps, that cancer patients prefer to affiliate with someone who is doing better than they are, rather than with someone who is doing worse (Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Tesser's Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model

Tesser's (1988, 1991) research examines the conditions under which upward comparison has positive or negative effects. The model is most concerned with situations in which people compare themselves with close friends, family members, and the like. How does it feel, for example, to have a "super smart sister" or a "gorgeous roommate"? Do these positive qualities make your own attributes seem paltry in comparison, or are you able to derive some benefit from the other person's talents and virtues? These are the questions that Tesser's model seeks to answer.

According to Tesser, the personal relevance of the comparison domain is the key variable to consider. In domains of low personal relevance, being outperformed by someone who is close to you has positive psychological effects. For example, if your sister is a concert pianist and you don't care much about music, you can bask in the reflected glory of her accomplishments. In this case, your sister's achievements make you feel good about yourself. The situation is quite different when the domain is something you care a lot about, however. Here, being outperformed by someone close to you has negative consequences. For example, if you and

your sister are trying to cultivate active social lives and only your sister is succeeding, you're apt to feel envious, threatened, and diminished by her achievements. In short, upward comparison is assumed to have positive consequences in domains of low personal importance but negative consequences in domains of high personal importance.

Tesser's model is a self-enhancement model. It assumes that people approach situations that make them feel good about themselves and avoid situations that make them feel bad about themselves. Building on these assumptions, the model makes some interesting predictions about friendship patterns. It predicts that people will choose to be friends with those who perform worse than they do in domains of high personal relevance, but better than they do in domains of low personal relevance. For example, a person who cares a lot about his athletic ability and little about his intellectual ability will prefer a friend who is less coordinated but more intelligent than he is. Tesser, Campbell, and Smith (1984) tested and found support for this prediction in a study of school-aged children. Beach and Tesser (1995) have recently applied these ideas to the study of close personal relationships. They believe husbands and wives often arrange matters so that each spouse excels in domains of low importance to the other. This arrangement allows people to have their cake and eat it too: People outperform their mate in areas about which they care deeply, but they bask in the reflected glory of their mate's accomplishments in areas about which they care very little.

Personal Factors That Promote Positive Self-Views

To this point, we have considered behavioral and social factors that allow individuals to acquire and maintain positive self-views. Processes of a more psychological nature are also relevant. These processes center around the unbalanced way people deal with positive and negative self-relevant information (Taylor, 1991). Most people (1) uncritically accept positive self-relevant feedback but carefully scrutinize and refute negative self-relevant feedback (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Liberman & Chaiken, 1992; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987); (2) show better memory for positive self-relevant information than for negative self-relevant information (Kuiper & Derry, 1982); (3) recall their past in ways that allow them to lay claim to possessing desired attributes (Conway & Ross, 1984; Klein & Kunda, 1993; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990); and (4) introspect about themselves in

ways that enable them to confirm the possession of positive traits and disconfirm the possession of negative traits (Sedikides, 1993).

Self-serving attributions are another factor that help people maintain positive self-views. One of the most reliable findings in social psychology over the last 20 years is the pervasive tendency for individuals to make asymmetric attributions for positive and negative outcomes (for reviews, see Greenwald, 1980; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979). Positive outcomes are attributed to stable, central aspects of the self (e.g., “I received a high test grade because I am smart”), but negative outcomes are attributed either to external factors (e.g., “I received a low test grade because the test was unclear”) or less central aspects of the self (e.g., “I received a low test grade because I studied the wrong material”). By denying that negative outcomes are due to one’s enduring character, abilities, or traits, individuals are able to hold on to their self-enhancing beliefs even when confronted with negative feedback.

In an early and influential review of this phenomenon, Miller and Ross (1975) reported that self-serving attributions were more apparent given success than given failure. Subsequent research has failed to support this conclusion. If anything, just the opposite is true (Brown & Rogers, 1991; Campbell & Fairey, 1985; Zuckerman, 1979). Individuals will occasionally concede that they succeeded because of good fortune or an easy test, but they will rarely attribute failure to enduring characteristics of the self.

Part of the confusion may have arisen because researchers were comparing internal attributions (attributions to personal factors) versus external attributions (attributions to factors other than oneself). This distinction ignores a crucial matter. The critical issue is not whether negative outcomes are attributed to *personal* factors, but whether they are attributed to highly valued and stable aspects of oneself. Students, for example, will freely admit that they did poorly on an exam because they didn’t try hard or because they studied the wrong material. Indeed, self-handicapping research shows that people sometimes actively create these impediments to success. What students don’t do, however, is readily attribute a poor performance to a general lack of intelligence.

This finding bears on another issue. It is widely assumed that people are generally disposed to make dispositional attributions for behavior (Gilbert &

Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977). A dispositional attribution is an attribution to a stable, inherent property of a person, such as the person's character, ability, or personality. No such bias exists when people make attributes for their own behavior. Instead, it depends entirely on whether the outcome in question is good or bad. People routinely make dispositional attributions for positive outcomes (e.g., "I got promoted because I am smart, dependable, and energetic"), but they rarely make dispositional attributions for negative outcomes (e.g., "I got fired because I am dumb, undependable, and lazy). Instead, people attribute negative outcomes to external factors (e.g., "The boss doesn't like me") or to less valued aspects of themselves (e.g., "I'm just not suited for this particular line of work").

This tendency also occurs when we make attributions for members of our extended self. Earlier we discussed ingroup favoritism. This term refers, in part, to the fact that people evaluate ingroup members (i.e., people we feel close to or otherwise connected with) in a highly positive manner. Causal attributions are also affected by ingroup favoritism. We make dispositional attributions for the successes of ingroup members, but we make situational attributions for their failures. This bias does not occur when we make attributions for the behavior of people with whom we share no association or connection (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Pettigrew, 1979; Weber, 1994).

REVISITING THE MOTIVES THAT GUIDE THE SEARCH FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Having identified a variety of tactics that permit most people to believe they possess many positive qualities and few negative qualities, let's reconsider what these tactics tell us about the motives that guide the acquisition of self-knowledge. According to the self-enhancement model, people want to feel good about themselves. In Western cultures, this motive leads people to seek information in such a manner that they are apt to conclude they possess many positive qualities and few negative qualities. According to the accuracy model, people want to know what they are really like. This leads them to seek the truth about themselves, without regard to whether they will gain positive or negative self-knowledge. Finally, the self-consistency model assumes that people are motivated to preserve and strengthen their present self-views. As represented in Swann's (1990, 1996) self-verification theory, self-consistency needs lead people to seek and embrace information that is consistent with how they think of themselves, and to avoid and reject information that is inconsistent with how they think of themselves.

What can we conclude about the strength of these motives on the basis of our review? The fact that most people have overly positive self-views that do not correspond closely with objective reality or the judgments of others poses problems for the accuracy position. The issue is this: If people actively seek the truth about themselves, why don't they possess it? Although there is some reason to believe that people would have difficulty finding the truth even if they looked for it (Felson, 1993), the bulk of the evidence indicates that most people don't look all that hard to begin with. When it comes to attributes that are highly desirable, people seek positive, rather than necessarily accurate, feedback (Brown, 1990; Brown & Dutton, 1995a; Sedikides, 1993).

Both the self-enhancement model and self-verification theory can explain these findings. Both models assume that people with positive views of themselves preferentially seek and embrace positive feedback. Because most people think of themselves in positive terms, both models assume that this biased pattern characterizes most people.

But what about people with negative self-views? According to the self-

enhancement model, these people also desire positive feedback; according to the self-verification model, these people desire negative feedback. As counterintuitive as this latter position may seem, it is not without apparent support. Virtually all of the effects discussed earlier are less characteristic of people with negative self-views than of people with positive self-views (see Swann, 1990, 1996 for reviews). For example, people who believe they have low ability at some task are less apt to attribute failure to external factors than are people who think they are highly able (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

Self-verification theory makes its most provocative predictions when applied to the study of interpersonal relationships. The theory asserts that "people want others to validate and confirm their [self-views], even when those [self-views] are negative" (McNulty & Swann, 1984, p. 1013). This means that people who think negatively of themselves prefer to associate with someone who shares this negative perception, rather than with someone who views them more positively (see also, Secord & Backman, 1965).

Swann and his colleagues have tested this hypothesis in two ways. In laboratory studies, participants first learn that another person has evaluated them in either a positive or negative manner. For example, a participant in one of these studies might give a speech and be told that another person observing through a one-way mirror thought the participant was socially poised or socially awkward. Participants then indicate how interested they are in interacting with the (alleged) evaluator. Participants who think of themselves in positive terms (in this case as socially poised) overwhelmingly prefer to interact with the positive evaluator. This is less true for those who think of themselves in negative terms (in this case as socially awkward). These individuals generally show only a reduced preference for the positive evaluator or no preference either way.

Similar findings have been found in naturalistic settings. In a study of college roommates, people with many positive views of themselves wished to remain roommates with another person who evaluated them positively, but this preference was less apparent among people who did not think highly of themselves (Swann, 1990). Married couples seem to be especially interested in receiving congruent (as opposed to merely positive) feedback from their spouses (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994).

In sum, the desire for positive feedback is clearly less apparent among people with negative self-views than among people with positive self-views. This does not mean, however, that people with negative self-views want others to dislike them (Alloy & Lipman, 1992; Hooley & Richters, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). They desire positive feedback, but only if it is believable (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989).

In consideration of this evidence, Swann and his colleagues (De La Ronde & Swann, 1993; Swann, 1990,1996) have concluded that people possess two independent motives: a desire for favorable feedback and a desire for self-verifying (congruent) feedback. Normally, people satisfy these dual needs by seeking favorable feedback for their positive self-views (Swann et al., 1989). For example, a person who thinks she is smart but uncoordinated ordinarily seeks confirmation from others that she is intelligent, but she does not try and convince other people that she is clumsy. However, if circumstances are such that she is forced to confront this issue (e.g., she is asked to pitch for the office soft-ball team), she will take aims to ensure that others see her as she sees herself. Under these circumstances, people prefer authentic negative feedback to inauthentic positive feedback.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined the way people think about themselves in socially valued domains. We began by identifying three broad motivations that guide the search for self-knowledge. These were self-enhancement needs, accuracy needs, and self-consistency needs. Next, we discussed various sources of information that people consult when seeking to learn what they are like. These sources include physical factors, social factors, and psychological factors (such as introspection and self-perception processes).

We then looked at what people think of themselves in highly evaluative domains. Here we saw that most people think of themselves in very positive terms, especially compared to their beliefs about most other people. We also noted that people's self-views are not entirely accurate. In highly evaluative domains, people's self-views are only moderately correlated with what they are really like.

Finally, we examined various mechanisms that enable people to maintain their positive self-views. Some of these mechanisms ensure that individuals receive predominantly positive feedback in their lives; others are designed to minimize the degree to which negative feedback implicates central aspects of the self. We concluded by considering the relevance of these findings to understanding the motivations that drive the search for self-knowledge. The desire to feel good about ourselves seems to be the major motivational factor to consider.

- People actively acquire knowledge of themselves throughout their lives. The search for self-knowledge is shaped by three broad concerns: self-enhancement needs (a desire to feel good about ourselves and to avoid feeling bad about ourselves); accuracy needs (the need to know what we are really like); and consistency needs (a desire to keep our self-views consistent and to protect them against change).
- People consult various sources of self-knowledge when seeking to learn what they are like. They (1) consult the physical world; (2) compare themselves with others (social comparison); (3) incorporate the opinions of others toward them (reflected appraisals); (4) look inward (introspection); and (5) examine their behavior in the context in which it occurs and draw an appropriate inference (self-perception and attributions).
- Most people regard themselves (and those who are part of their extended selves) in highly positive terms. They believe they have many positive qualities and few negative qualities. This bias is especially apparent when we compare the way people evaluate themselves with the way they evaluate most other people. Many (if not most) people believe they are *better* than are most other people.
- Research assessing the accuracy of people's self-views has turned up mixed evidence that people know what they are really like. People's self-views in nonevaluative domains (e.g., "How punctual and conscientious are you?") are fairly accurate, but their self-views in highly evaluative domains (e.g., "How intelligent and attractive are you?") are not. People are also overly confident about their ability to predict their future behavior, particularly behaviors that are socially desirable or positive. Taken together, these findings suggest that people's ideas about themselves in evaluative domains are rarely a faithful representation of what they are really like.
- Various mechanisms help people maintain their positive self-views. Most people eagerly seek self-relevant feedback when they think it will be positive, but they reluctantly seek self-relevant feedback when they think it will be negative. Under some circumstances, people actively obscure the informational value of negative feedback by erecting barriers to their own success. People also selectively affiliate with those who like them, and compare themselves with others in ways

that are designed to promote and maintain positive self-views. Finally, the attributions people make for positive and negative outcomes further serve to bolster their positive self-views.

- Not everyone holds positive views of themselves, and not everyone seeks positive self-relevant feedback. Under some circumstances, people with negative self-views seek negative information about themselves. This is most apt to occur in interpersonal settings, when people fear they won't be able to live up to other people's positive perceptions of them.

For Further Reading

DUNNING, D. (1993). Words to live by: The self and definitions of social concepts and categories. In J. Suis (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 4, pp. 99–126). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

FELSON, R. B. (1993). The (somewhat) social self: How others affect self-appraisals. In J. Suis (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 4, pp. 1–27). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

KENNY, D. A., & DEPAULO, B. M. (1993). Do people know how others view them? An empirical and theoretical account. *Psychological Bulletin*, *114*, 145–161.

[1]This finding has an important implication. Colvin and Block (1994) have argued that it is entirely appropriate for college students to believe they are better than others on dimensions that are relevant to college admission (e.g., intelligence). Although this may be true, the data shown in Table 3.1 indicate that the tendency for these students to see themselves as "better than others" is actually strongest for attributes that bear no relevance whatsoever to college attendance (e.g., loyalty, sincerity, kindness)