

# THE SELF-CONCEPT

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## INTRODUCTION

The self-concept is undergoing something of a renaissance in contemporary social psychology. It has, of course, been a central concept within symbolic interactionism since the seminal writings of Mead (1934), Cooley (1902), and James (1890). However, even within this sociological tradition there has been a revitalization of interest in the self-concept: with developments in role theory (Turner 1978; Gordon 1976), with the increasing focus on the concept of identity (McCall & Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980; Gordon 1968; Guiot 1977; Burke 1980), with the reemergence of interest in social structure and personality (House 1981; Turner 1976; Kohn 1969, 1981; Rosenberg 1979), and with the reconceptualization of small group experimental situations (Alexander and colleagues 1971, 1981; Webster & Sobieszek 1974).

The reemergence of the self-concept is even more dramatic within psychological social psychology. Much of this revitalization of interest in self-phenomena (e.g. self-awareness, self-esteem, self-image, self-evaluation) is due to the "cognitive revolution" in psychology (Dember 1974; Manis 1977), generally at the expense of behaviorism. As a result, the self-concept has become conspicuous in areas and traditions that were previously considered alien terrain: within behaviorism via Bem's (1972) theory of self-attribution; within social learning theory via Bandura's (1977) focus on self-efficacy; and within cognitive dissonance theory via Aronson's (1968) and Bramel's (1968) reformulations. It is also increasingly evident in theories of attitude and value formation and change (Rokeach 1973, 1979), in attribution theory (Epstein 1973; Bowerman 1978), and in various other recent theories of cognitive

processes (see Wegner & Vallacher 1980). Perhaps as important as these “intentional” theoretical developments in social psychology for the refocus on self-concept is what one reviewer calls “the inadvertent rediscovery of self” in experimental social psychology (Hales 1981a). This refers to the observation that experimental results frequently could be explained as well or better by the operation of self-processes within these settings [such as Alexander’s “situated identity theory” (1981)] than by the theoretical variables under investigation. This “inadvertent” discovery of self may have contributed to the so-called “crisis” in social psychology (Boutilier et al 1980; Hales 1981a).

In this review I focus on developments and trends in self-concept theory and research within social psychology.<sup>1</sup> However, as Stryker (1977) and House (1977) point out, there are several social psychologies. The major distinction is between social psychology developed within the sociological tradition and that emerging from the psychological tradition. The self-concept is increasingly important within both disciplines; developments within both are reviewed. The two social psychologies differ in their focus. Sociology tends to focus on the antecedents of self-conceptions, and typically looks for these within patterns of social interaction. Psychology, on the other hand, tends to focus on the consequences of self-conceptions, especially as these relate to behavior. The latter focus is more likely than the former to lead to questions of motivation (e.g. the self-esteem motive, consistency motive, efficacy motive). In a sense, sociology and psychology have complementary biases regarding the self-concept. If the “fundamental attribution bias” of psychologists is an overly “internal” view of the causes of behavior (Ross 1977), the attribution bias of sociologists is a tendency to look for the causes of behavior outside the individual—i.e. in culture, social structure, or social situation.

Several aspects of the self-concept literature are not reviewed: I do not delve into the extensive literature on specific social identities, such as sexual and gender identities, various occupational identities, and specific deviant identities (e.g. delinquent, criminal, mental patient). Here I treat the social-psychological literature on self-concept, largely ignoring the clinical, humanistic, and philosophical traditions.

## THE NATURE OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

An initial distinction must be made between the terms “self” and “self-concept.” Much confusion in social psychology over whether the self is a process or a structure stems from the failure to distinguish between “self”

<sup>1</sup>The self and its derivative terms have occupied a central place within humanistic and clinical orientations in the social sciences. The *reemergence* of the self-concept refers mainly to its status within social psychology.

and "self-concept." Self as used here refers to a *process*, the process of reflexivity which emanates from the dialectic between the "I" and "Me". While discussions of the relationship between the "I" and the "Me" have periodically appeared in the literature [see especially Lewis (1979) for a social-behaviorist interpretation of the "I"; Carveth (1977) and Petryszak (1979) for a biological interpretation; and Weigert (1975) for a phenomenological treatment], the major outlines of the concept of self have remained largely unchanged since the formulations of James (1890) and Mead (1934)—i.e. the self is a reflexive phenomenon that develops in social interaction and is based on the social character of human language. The concept of self provides the philosophical underpinning for social-psychological inquiries into the self-concept but is itself not accessible to empirical investigation.

The "self-concept," on the other hand, is a *product* of this reflexive activity. It is the concept the individual has of himself as a physical, social, and spiritual or moral being.<sup>2</sup>

Rosenberg defines the self-concept broadly as "the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (1979:7). Similarly broad is Snygg & Combs's statement that "the phenomenal self includes all those parts of the phenomenal field which the individual experiences as part or characteristic of himself" (1949:58). A more specific definition is provided by Turner: "Typically my self-conception is a vague but vitally felt idea of what I am like in my best moments, of what I am striving toward and have some encouragement to believe I can achieve, or of what I can do when the situation supplies incentives for unqualified effort" (1968:98). In Turner's (1968, 1976) formulation, the self-concept also involves (to some extent) the sense of spatial and temporal continuity, a distinction of essential self from mere appearance and behavior (which he terms "self-image"), and the identification of the person in qualitative and locational terms as well as in evaluative terms.

Perhaps the most novel conceptualization of the self-concept is offered by Epstein (1973). From an attribution perspective, Epstein suggests that the self-concept can best be viewed as a theory that a person holds about himself as an experiencing, functioning being in interaction with the world. In spite

<sup>2</sup>Self-awareness is central to human experience and a defining feature of the human condition, but there is some doubt about whether it is *uniquely* human. Recent studies of chimpanzees suggest that these primates are at least capable of self-recognition, as measured by their responses to their mirror-images (Gallup, 1977). In his review of the primate studies, Meddin (1979) concludes that chimpanzees are indeed capable of reflexive thought and have at least a rudimentary concept of self. Furthermore, it appears that this sense of self arises in chimpanzees much as it does (according to Mead) in humans—i.e. through social interaction, symbolic capacity, and role-taking ability.

of his overemphasis on knowledge and beliefs as the foundation for self-concepts (rather than on values, attitudes, and motivations), Epstein's interesting formulation accounts for many of the recurring features of the self-concept in the social-psychological literature. He would have been even more accurate if he had conceptualized the self-concept as a self-ideology—when it comes to our self-concepts, we are much less interested in “theory testing” than in self-affirmation and self-protection (as we shall see in the section on self-concept as a source of motivation). Nevertheless, Epstein's ideas about the self-concept are compatible with sociological formulations, especially those stemming from structural versions of symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980; Heiss 1968; Gordon 1968). There are differences in emphasis, to be sure; but within both of these views, the self-concept is conceptualized as an organization (structure) of various identities and attributes, and their evaluations, developed out of the individual's reflexive, social, and symbolic activities. As such, the self-concept is an experiential, mostly cognitive phenomenon accessible to scientific inquiry. This review deals with the self-concept and not with the concept of self.

## SOURCES AND DIMENSIONS OF SELF-CONCEPTION

Numerous dimensions of the self-concept have been considered in social psychology (for elaborate typologies see Gordon 1968; Rosenberg 1979:Ch. 1). An elementary but useful distinction is between the content of self-conceptions (e.g. identities) and self-evaluations (e.g. self-esteem). Identity focuses on the meanings comprising the self as an object, gives structure and content to self-concept, and anchors the self to social systems. Self-esteem deals with the evaluative and emotional dimensions of the self-concept. In experience these two aspects of the self-concept are closely interrelated: Self-evaluations are typically based on substantive aspects of self-concept, and identities typically have evaluative components. Within social psychology these two dimensions involve largely separate literatures.

### *Sources of Self-Evaluation*

Self-evaluation or self-esteem refers to the evaluative and affective aspects of the self-concept (Wells & Marwell 1976; Shibutani 1961). Most research on the self-concept focuses on this dimension, so that sometimes self-concept is equated with self-esteem (Wells & Marwell 1976). For example, Wylie's (1974, 1979) extensive reviews of the self-concept literature deal almost exclusively with self-evaluation. The main reason for the preeminence of this aspect of self-concept is the motivational significance of self-esteem (see below).

In much of this literature, self-esteem refers to an individual's overall self-evaluation [Rosenberg's (1965) unidimensional scale is one of the most widely used measures of self-esteem]. Increasingly, however, various aspects of self-esteem have been differentiated—e.g. sense of power and sense of worth (Gecas 1971); “inner” and “outer” self-esteem (Franks & Marolla 1976); evaluation and affection (Wells & Marwell 1976); sense of competence and self-worth (Smith 1978); self-evaluation and self-worth (Brissett 1972); and competence and morality (Rokeach 1973; Vallacher 1980; Hales 1980). Common to these subdivisions is the distinction between (a) self-esteem based on a sense of competence, power, or efficacy and (b) self-esteem based on a sense of virtue or moral worth. The importance of this distinction lies in the suggestion that these two bases of self-esteem may be a function of different processes of self-concept formation (Wells & Marwell 1976) and that they constitute different sources of motivation. Briefly, competency-based self-esteem is tied closely to effective performance (Bandura 1978; Franks & Marolla 1976; Gecas 1979; Harter 1978; Mortimer & Lorence 1979; Smith 1968). As a result, it is associated with self-attribution and social comparison processes. Self-esteem based on virtue (termed self-worth) is grounded in norms and values concerning personal and interpersonal conduct—e.g. justice, reciprocity, honor. The process of reflected appraisal (see below) contributes to the formation of self-worth (Vallacher 1980; Gecas 1971). The distinction between “self-efficacy” and “self-worth,” while conceptually important, tends to blur at the experiential level. Sense of worth may be strongly affected by sense of competence and vice versa [see, for example, Covington & Beery (1976) on the interconnection between these sources of self-esteem in school].

**REFLECTED APPRAISALS** That our self-concepts reflect the responses and appraisals of others is the dominant proposition in the sociology of self. Grounded in Cooley's (1902) influential concept of the “looking-glass self” and in Mead's theory (1934) that the self-concept develops through the process of role-taking others, the process of reflected appraisals is the cornerstone of the symbolic interactionist perspective on self-concept formation (see Rosenberg 1979:64; Kinch 1963).

Given its widespread acceptance within sociology and even psychology, one would think this proposition had been demonstrated empirically beyond question; but this is hardly the case. To be sure, many (especially symbolic interactionists) have investigated the relationship between others' appraisals and the individual's self-concept (e.g. see Miyamoto & Dornbusch 1956; Quarantelli & Cooper 1966). However, the power of the opinions of others to initiate and/or affect the development of the self-concept is still in doubt. Shrauger & Schoeneman (1979) examined the empirical evidence for the

"looking-glass self" in over fifty studies. They observe that: (a) People's self-perceptions agree substantially with the way they think others perceive them. However, (b) there is very little agreement between people's self-perceptions and how they are actually viewed by others. Shrauger & Schoeneman conclude that "there is no clear indication that self-evaluations are influenced by the feedback received from others in naturally occurring situations" (1979:549).

There are a number of reasons we should not be surprised at the disparity between self-concepts and the appraisals of others. One is the difficulty of getting honest feedback from others, especially if it is negative (Felson 1980). The norms of adult social interaction in our culture, which Goffman (1959) examined with such insight, inhibit honest appraisal of others, substituting "tact" and proper "deference and demeanor" to protect self-esteem. As a result, we may often be unaware of what others think of us.

Another reason for the mismatch between self-concept and others' appraisals is that not all others are equally significant to us. In a large study of Baltimore school children, Rosenberg (1973) found that the credibility and the value of the significant other's evaluations significantly affected the child's self-concept. Similarly, Webster & Sobieszek (1974) found that the credibility of the evaluator had a substantial effect on the individual's task-specific self-perceptions.

Perhaps the most important reason for the low correspondence between self-concept and the appraisals of others is the active distorting influence of the self-concept. Our perceptions of others' evaluations of us are biased toward favorable assessments. The self-esteem or self-enhancement motive has a distorting effect on our perceptions, concepts, and memories. Rosenberg (1973) demonstrates how this process of selectivity is even reflected in whom we choose to be our significant others, as well as in other sources of influence on our self-concepts (Rosenberg, 1979).

Given the generally low correlations between self-evaluations and the actual evaluations of others, and the generally strong relationships between self-evaluations and the perceived evaluations of others, we must focus research much more on such neglected considerations as: How is information from others about the self transmitted, received, interpreted, and acted upon (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979)? If role-taking is the fundamental process through which appraisals are reflected, what affects the content of what is "taken" in role-taking? Even though the hypothesis of reflected appraisals remains important in the theory of self-concept formation, empirical demonstration of its validity has become problematic in recent years.

**SOCIAL COMPARISONS** Social comparison is the process in which individuals assess their own abilities and virtues by comparing them to those of others.

According to Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparisons, the main function of the process is reality-testing, which is most likely to occur in situations where knowledge about a self-attribute is ambiguous or uncertain. In the experimental research guided by this theory, comparison processes have been initiated by exposing the subject to the presence of another person. For example, Morse & Gergen (1970) used "Mr. Clean" and "Mr. Dirty" as the comparison others in a "job application" situation, and found that the presence of "Mr. Clean" produced a significant decrease in subjects' self-esteem, while the presence of the undesirable other ("Mr. Dirty") significantly enhanced subjects' self-esteem.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of social comparison as merely a means of reality-testing, for the individual is not a neutral observer but an active constructor of social reality. Veblen's (1899) penetrating analysis of conspicuous consumption by the leisure class for the purpose of self-enhancement reveals the more insidious side of social comparison processes.

Within sociology, social comparison processes are most likely to be studied via the concept of the reference group, which serves (*a*) as a normative group (i.e. the source of norms and values for the individual) and (*b*) as a comparison group [i.e. as the provider of standards of self-evaluation (Kelley, 1952)]. In the former usage, the reference group's norms may become the internalized standard against which the individual judges himself. This would be consistent with James's (1890) conceptualization of self-esteem as a function of the discrepancy between aspirations and achievements.

Most sociological research on social comparison processes treats reference groups as comparison groups. Davis's (1966) study of the campus as a "frog pond" (emphasizing the importance of the local frame of reference) is a good example.

Social comparison processes are most likely to operate within local groups under conditions of competition [see Covington & Beery (1976) on the consequences of "grading on the curve" for students' self-esteem] and great subgroup differentiation and visibility. Rosenberg (1975) focused on the latter condition in a study of the effects of "contextual dissonance" on students' self-esteem. He used "contextual dissonance" to denote the result of the interaction, in a social context such as a classroom, between the majority and a disvalued minority. Rosenberg found that minority status with regard to race, social class, competence, or values had a negative effect on students' self-esteem. The findings of Bachman (1970), and Drury (1980), showing the negative consequences of school integration for the self-esteem of black children, are consistent with Rosenberg's analysis.

**OTHER PROCESSES AFFECTING SELF-EVALUATION** Bem's (1972) "self-perception theory" proposes that individuals determine what they are feeling

and thinking by making inferences based on observing their own overt behavior. Thus Bem suggests that we learn about ourselves and others in essentially the same way—i.e. from observing behavior and making dispositional inferences.

Self-perception theory can be subsumed under the more general attribution theory, which deals with how individuals make causal inferences about their own and others' behavior. Attribution theory in general is more appropriate to the consideration of self-concept as a causal factor in social interaction than to questions of self-concept development. This distinction becomes rather blurred, however, since the self-concept is an important "cause" of its own formation. For example, Rosenberg's (1979) discussion of "psychological centrality" and Gergen's (1971) discussion of "biased scanning" as processes of self-concept formation, essentially refer to mechanisms or processes *within* the self-concept which are instrumental in the formation of self-conceptions. Some of these processes will be the focus of the section on self-concept as a source of motivation.

**SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL VARIATIONS IN SELF-ESTEEM** A good deal has been written on variations in self-esteem across such categories as race and social class. With regard to race, current research has found either no difference between the self-esteem levels of blacks and whites, or that blacks have slightly higher self-esteem than whites (Yancey et al 1972; Rosenberg & Simmons 1972; Jacques & Chason 1977; Taylor & Walsh 1979). This counterintuitive finding has generated theoretical speculation. McCarthy & Yancey (1971) developed the idea that blacks are more likely than whites to blame the "system" (externalize blame) for their relatively low status, thereby minimizing the effect of social stratification on self-esteem. Rosenberg & Simmons (1972) propose "value selectivity" (i.e. devaluing the domain where one has low status) as a method of mitigating the effects of low economic status. Heiss & Owens (1972) suggest that the black subculture is a reference group that provides a buffer between the larger society and black self-esteem. All of these explanations sound reasonable, but none has received much empirical support so far (see Taylor & Walsh, 1979). In a recent review of research on black identity and self-esteem, Porter & Washington (1979) observe that general comparisons shed little light on the development of self-esteem within minority groups: "At this point, we do not need more studies of general differences in self-esteem between black and white populations. Variations in racial and personal self-esteem should be investigated with careful attention both to the effect of macrostructural factors and to the specific situational and personal contexts in which these factors operate" (1979:70). I would add that greater specification of dimensions of self-evaluation and of self-concept is advisable in this area of research. Porter & Washington (1979), for example, found that



blacks reported higher levels of self-regard but lower feelings of personal efficacy than whites. Taylor & Walsh's (1979) decomposition of self-esteem into several context-specific dimensions revealed racial differences that would have been hidden if only global self-esteem had been considered [see also Schwartz & Stryker's (1970) dimensionalization of self-esteem].

Likewise, the literature on social class and self-esteem is fraught with contradictory, inconsistent, and generally weak findings (see Wylie 1979: 57–116). The exception to this generalization is the work of Rosenberg and his colleagues [see Rosenberg (1979) for a synthesis of much of this research]. Pursuing the question of how the broader social environment structures the *immediate interpersonal interactions* of the individual, Rosenberg & Pearlin (1978) masterfully demonstrate how social class impinges on the self-esteem of adults through four processes of self-concept formation (i.e. reflected appraisals, social comparisons, self-attribution, and psychological centrality), and why the operation of these processes produces negligible social-class differences for children.

Rosenberg has shown the same sensitivity in his analysis of social-structural influences on self-esteem in other social contexts, especially school and family (Rosenberg 1965, 1975; Rosenberg & Simmons 1972). In the family context, Rosenberg found that the influence of such structural variables as birth order and “broken families” on the self-esteem of children is substantially affected by a number of conditional variables—e.g. religious background, age of mother at divorce or separation, child's age, and number and sex of siblings. An important intervening variable is the extent to which parental interest and support for the child is affected by these structural and conditional variables, since parental interest is positively related to child's self-esteem. This finding of a positive relationship between parental support/affection and child's self-esteem is one of the most consistent in the family research on self-esteem formation (Coopersmith 1967; Gecas 1971; Hales 1980; Thomas et al 1974).

One limitation of Rosenberg's extensive research is that it treats self-esteem as a global and unidimensional variable. There is some evidence, for example, that the efficacy and worth dimensions of self-esteem are differently related to family processes. Gecas (1971) found parental support to have a stronger positive relationship with adolescents' feelings of self-worth than with their feelings of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, on the other hand, was more sensitive to the power relationships within social contexts—i.e. sense of self-efficacy was lower when the individual was in a subordinate position, such as in school (Gecas 1972). Furthermore, Gecas (1972) found that parental behaviors as antecedents of the adolescents' “family self-esteem” (i.e. self-esteem within the family) had little effect on self-esteem in other social contexts (i.e. when peers or school were used as the frame of reference for self-evaluations). This suggests that research on self-esteem formation must increasingly refine its

focus by specifying antecedents and delimiting both the concept of self-esteem and the contexts in which it operates [a conclusion also reached by Schwartz & Stryker (1970:122–23) in their attempt to explain their anomalous findings regarding the self-esteem of “bad Negro boys”]. Such refinement is beginning to be pursued in the research on social class and self-esteem (Walsh & Taylor, forthcoming) and may help to increase the amount of variance in self-esteem that can be explained by social class (now typically 4% or less).

### *Content of Self-Concepts: Identities*

If there is a central theme in the sociological literature on the self-concept it is the idea that the content and organization of self-concepts reflect the content and organization of society. Prominent as the evaluative dimension of self-concept is in social psychology, it does not bear directly on this proposition. The concept of identity does. Perhaps this is one reason that the most prominent contributor to the sociological research on self-esteem has urged that we “go beyond self-esteem” (Rosenberg 1979). Beyond self-esteem lies the concept of identity, that vast domain of meanings attached to the self and comprising the content and organization of self-concepts.

The interpenetration of self and society is most directly addressed in the symbolic interactionist tradition [traced primarily to Mead (1934), Cooley (1902), and Thomas (1923)]. This tradition has split into two major (and several minor) variants that differ on fundamental conceptualizations and assumptions regarding self and society, on substantive foci, and on methodology. The two main variants are the “processual interactionists” (more commonly known as the “Chicago School”) and the “structural interactionists” (associated with the “Iowa School”). The divisions between these two orientations reflect in many respects the fundamental division in the social sciences between humanistic/interpretive orientations and positivistic/nomothetic orientations [for reviews of the “Chicago” and “Iowa” schools of symbolic interactionism, see Kuhn (1964) and Meltzer et al (1975)]. The concept of “identity” has a somewhat different character in each of these orientations.

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN SOCIAL INTERACTION The key feature of the processual interactionist perspective, as exemplified by Blumer (1969), its major architect, and others (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss 1978; Becker 1964; Stone 1962), is its emphasis on the social *situation* as the context in which identities are established and maintained through the process of negotiation. This identity negotiation, or identity bargaining (Blumstein 1973), is a central aspect of the individual’s broader task of “defining the situation” and “constructing reality.” Meaning is viewed as an emergent of this fluid and reciprocal process of interaction. Action and interaction are seen primarily as indeterminate because of the unpredictable “I” and the problem involved in

aligning actions. The construction of identities for self and others in the situation is always a problematic activity based on a tenuous consensus of the participants. Role-taking becomes an important cognitive activity in this dialectical process (Turner 1962), as is the process of altercasting [imposing identities on others (Weinstein & Deutschberger 1963)]. In sum, identity from the processual interactionist perspective is situated, emergent, reciprocal, and negotiated. Furthermore, processual interactionists view the self-concept as inseparable cause and consequence in social interaction.

The inseparability of self-concept as cause and consequence is most evident in Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) imaginative and influential variant of processual symbolic interactionism.<sup>3</sup> Utilizing the metaphor of social life as theater, Goffman describes in considerable detail the "staging operations" and "impression-management" involved in the presentation of self in social encounters. Desired identities are the prizes sought in these interaction arenas, which are acquired as much by competent performance of the actors as by the social constraints of the situation and the dispositions of the relevant others in the interaction. In Goffman's view, self and others construct identities by staging a definition of the situation that involves all participants. We are at once the products and the creators of these encounters.

The methodological predilection of the processual interactionists has been the observation (especially from the vantage point of a participant) of social interaction in "natural" social settings. The rationale [emphasized by Blumer (1969)] is that the investigator can best capture the process of identity construction by entering the "universe of discourse" of this social world as a role-taking participant. Other methodologies have also been used to reveal the situated, processual, and meaningful world of the interactants—e.g. life histories, historical analysis, and even the laboratory experiment when it is viewed as a *social situation* created by the scientist (Denzin 1970; McPhail 1979).

Several research streams relevant to the development of the self-concept have been generated by the processual interactionist orientation. One body of research, inspired largely by Goffman's work, deals with the dynamics of self-presentation and altercasting [see Arkin (1980) and McCall & Simmons (1978) for reviews]. These studies have focused on such topics as tactics of identity bargaining (Weinstein 1966; Blumstein 1973, the presentation of motives, disclaimers, and accounts (Hewitt & Stokes 1975; Scott & Lyman

<sup>3</sup>There is some question regarding Goffman's "fit" within the processual symbolic interactionist tradition. For example, Gonos (1977) makes a persuasive case for viewing Goffman as a "structuralist" rather than as an "interactionist" because of Goffman's emphasis on the formal properties of social interaction rather than on process *per se* and its infinite variations—a point made with some condemnation by Denzin & Keller (1981).

1968; Blumstein et al 1974), and embarrassment and face-saving processes (Goffman 1967; Gross & Stone 1964; Modigliani 1971).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the naturalistic methods of most symbolic interactionist research, some recent studies on these topics use experimental methods. Of special note is the work of Alexander and his colleagues (1971, 1977, 1981) on "situated identity theory." Building on Goffman's ideas about the importance of "expressions given off" as the basis for making dispositional inferences, Alexander & Lauderdale define situated identities as "the attributions that are made about participants in a particular setting as a consequence of their actions" (1977:225). The establishment of identities is considered the fundamental task of social encounters. Alexander considers an identity to be a working self-meaning constructed out of the material of a particular situation, and not an aspect of a person's self-concept carried from one situation to another (Alexander & Wiley 1981). Alexander argues that people act (because of the self-esteem motive) to create the most socially desirable situated identity available (Alexander & Wiley 1981). Alexander has tested situated identity theory in a number of experimental studies originally designed to test other social-psychological theories (e.g. cognitive dissonance, risky shift, prisoner's dilemma, and expectation states). He has found that situated identity theory can account for the results of these experiments at least as well as the other theories proposed.

It should be noted, however, that the "situated identities" in Alexander's studies are described by evaluative terms—warm, friendly, honest—that are attached to experimental outcome alternatives such as "conforming subject" vs. "non-conforming subject". Other ways of operationalizing situated identities would presumably produce different results. Furthermore, the relationship between "situated identities" and the identities actors bring with them into social situations has not been explored. Alexander and associates are aware of this issue but have not yet pursued it themselves [see Alexander & Wiley (1981)]. Doing so would take them beyond the immediate interaction situation and closer to the concerns of the structural symbolic interactionists.

A second body of work inspired by the processual interactionist perspective involves "labeling theory." Labeling theory is an adaptation of the more general process of reflected appraisal to the development of deviant identities [Wells (1978) reviews the place of self-concept in theories of deviance]. Labeling theory suggests that society's reaction to an individual's initial deviant behavior is the major factor in the systematization of deviance, since it alters the self-concept and social identity of the person labeled (Lemert 1951; Becker 1963; Scheff 1966). This societal response can be either formal (e.g.

<sup>4</sup>The concepts of "impression management" and "self-presentation" have become increasingly prominent within psychology as well (see, for example, Tedeschi 1981).

arrest or imprisonment) or informal (e.g. stigmatization) (Goffman 1963). As Wells (1978) points out, the self-concept is implicit in this perspective on deviance: "[It] functions more as an intuitively obvious intervening process than as a variable to be actually measured in empirical events" (1978:193). The related concept of "self-fulfilling prophecy" has generated its own body of research showing how labeling processes create certain "self-fulfilling" identities in the classroom and elsewhere (Jones 1977; Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968).

Labeling theory, the dominant theory of deviance, has been criticized and debated in the past decade (Wells 1978; Glassner & Corzine 1978), partly because it posited too passive a role for the individual in becoming a deviant. Concepts such as "self-labeling" (Rotenberg 1974) and "resistance to labeling" (Prus 1975; Rogers & Buffalo 1974) have appeared reflecting the general trend toward theories of a more assertive self in the sociological literature on deviance.

A third research stream from the processual interactionist perspective has focused on socialization. Some studies have dealt with child socialization and self-concept development (Denzin 1972; Stone 1970), but most have focused on adults (symbolic interactionists seem reluctant to study children). Most of this research has dealt with occupational socialization [e.g. Becker et al (1961) on socialization in medical school], socialization into various subcultures, especially deviant subcultures (Adler & Adler 1978; Becker 1963), and contexts of resocialization or identity transformation (Lofland 1977; Gecas 1981). Most of these studies of socialization from the processual interactionist perspective are based on field research—i.e. ethnographic reports illustrating the operation of general symbolic interactionist assumptions concerning communication, social interaction, reality construction, and self-concept formation.

The processual interactionists have contributed a number of "sensitizing concepts" and conceptual refinements to the study of identity formation and reformation. Empirically, their contribution has illustrated more than tested these ideas (although the increasing turn toward experimentation, mentioned above, may change this situation). Processual interactionists strongly maintain that self and society interpenetrate. However, since both self and society are viewed in fluid, processual terms, it is not clear how social organization is reflected in the organization of self-conceptions. The concepts of structure and organization remain a problem at both the social group and the individual levels [in spite of the valiant efforts of Maines (1977) and Strauss (1978) to argue the contrary].

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN STRUCTURAL SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM What the concept of "situation" is to the processual interactionists, the concept of "role" is to the structural interactionists as the *entré* for considering identity

and self-concept. Identities are viewed mainly as internalized roles. The connection between these two concepts is so close that they are often used together, as in "role-identity" (Stryker 1980:60; McCall & Simmons 1978:16; Burke & Tully 1977). This connection directly links self-conceptions to social structures because roles are seen as elements of social structure, and it provides the basis for considering the self-concept in organizational terms—i.e. as a multidimensional configuration of role-identities. Stryker put it this way: "The self is seen as embracing multiple identities linked to the roles and role relationships that constitute significant elements of social structures" (1979:177). Gordon elaborates just how roles link persons to social structures: "the value aspects of roles connect persons to culture; the normative aspects of roles provide motivation to conduct and structure to social action; and the 'sense-making' or interpretive aspects of roles determine much of personal cognition, attitudinal predispositions, memories, and plans" (1976:405). The term "role" typically refers to the behavioral expectations associated with a position or status (either formal or informal) in a social system. However, "role" and "position" are frequently used interchangeably, especially when they are translated into identities—e.g. "father," "handball player," "mediator".

The structure of self-concept is viewed as a hierarchical organization of an individual's role-identities (Stryker 1968; McCall & Simmons 1978; Heiss 1968). Stryker developed the idea of self-concept as a salience hierarchy of identities most fully through the concept of *commitment*. He proposes that "one is committed to an identity to the degree that one is enmeshed in social relationships dependent on that identity" (1979:177). In this view of self-structure, the greater the commitment to an identity, the more consequential it is for the individual's conduct [elaborated in Stryker (1980), especially pp. 83–84]. Note that Stryker's conception of commitment emphasizes the relational aspect of role-identities: The nature and extensiveness of the "role-set" (Merton 1957) or "identity-set" (i.e. the network of identities and role-relationships a given identity implies) affect the degree of commitment to the identity.

Turner (1978) expands our vision of the identity commitment process. He casts the problem of commitment in the form of role-person merger and examines the conditions under which this is most likely to occur. A distinction is made between "situational determinants" and "individual determinants". The former are circumstances under which observers consider the person as revealed in the role. Under the latter category, Turner identifies three principles governing role/person merger: (a) Individuals tend to merge with those roles by which significant others identify them; (b) they tend to merge role and person selectively so as to maximize autonomy (cf. the self-efficacy motive)

and positive self-evaluations (cf. the self-esteem motive); and (c) they tend to merge with those roles in which their investment has been greatest (1978:13). Turner formulates numerous propositions derived from these principles of role-person merger. This work constitutes the most extensive and formal attempt to integrate role theory and self theory.

Research on self-concept by structural symbolic interactionists has often used the Twenty Statements Test (TST), an open-ended instrument that simply asks persons to give twenty answers to the question "Who am I?" [Other measures of identity have recently appeared—e.g. Burke & Tully (1977), Jackson (1981), Turner & Schutte (1981).] Originally developed by Kuhn & McPartland (1954) the TST has been used in numerous studies focusing on identities and their organization [see Spitzer et al (1971) for a review]. The TST [and a parallel instrument developed within phenomenological self-psychology by Bugental & Zelen (1950) called the "Who are You?" (W-A-Y) technique] is not a measure of self-concept but a stimulus for self-descriptions. Measurement becomes possible when the responses are coded. Various coding schemes have been developed, from the initially simple distinction between "consensual" (public) and "subconsensual" (personal) identities (Kuhn & McPartland 1954), to the elaborate, computer-based scheme developed by Gordon (1968). Most such schemes aim to develop identity categories that (a) enable examination of the link between self-conceptions and social systems, and (b) reveal patterns among the identities that comprise self-conceptions. Self-descriptions mentioned first in the TST have often been considered to be more important to the respondent than those mentioned later [an assumption questioned by Gordon (1968) and McPhail & Tucker (1972); the importance of sequence has been shown to vary across populations]. Some coding schemes [e.g. Kuhn & McPartland's (1954) distinction between "consensual" and "subconsensual" identities, and Gordon's (1968) categories of "roles and memberships"] explicitly focus on the "anchorage" of individuals in social institutions. Comparisons are typically made between populations (men vs women; lower class vs middle class; college student vs older subjects, etc) with regard, for example, to their structural integration or their diversity of self-designations.

Other research using the TST has isolated particular identities for special attention, such as gender, ethnic, or family identities (Wellman 1971; Gecas 1973). These particular identities have, of course, received considerable attention outside of structural symbolic interactionism as well, and have been subjected to various measurement strategies [see Wylie (1979) for a review]. The bulk of the research on specific identities focuses either on socialization into the identity (e.g. the massive literature on sex-role socialization), evaluations of the identity [which characterizes much of the research on racial and

ethnic identities], or conflict and strain in the self-concept as a consequence of role-transitions [e.g. Lopata (1973) on adjustments to widowhood; and Weigert & Hastings (1977) on identity loss in the family].

**SOCIAL STRUCTURAL INFLUENCES ON SELF-CONCEPTION** The influence of social structure on self-conceptions has been most apparent at the macro levels of analysis—i.e. where the society or its major institutions are the focus of attention. Turner's (1976) work on "the real self" is exemplary. He argues that "the articulation of *real selves* with social structure should be a major link in the functioning and change of societies" (1976:990). By "real self" Turner means the locus of an individual's sense of authenticity, responsibility, and accountability. "To varying degrees," Turner proposes, "people accept as evidence of their real selves either feelings and actions with an *institutional* focus or ones they identify as strictly *impulse*" (1976:990). This distinction is reminiscent of Kuhn & McPartland's (1954) distinction between "consensual" and "subconsensual" identities, although Turner elaborates to a much greater extent the consequences of these two self-anchorages for personal behavior, for social structure, and for social change. "Institutionals" are likely to be future-oriented; they adhere to high moral standards and consider the self to be created through their actions. "Impulsives," on the other hand, are likely to be oriented toward the present, to feel constrained by institutional roles, and to view the self as something to be discovered. Turner seeks to locate the "real self" by using an open-ended format to elicit responses on the circumstances in which people feel most "authentic" or "inauthentic" (Turner & Schutte 1981). An important feature of Turner's approach to self-concept is not only its concern with what the self *is* (experientially), but also with what the self *is not* (Turner & Gordon 1981).

Considering social change, Turner (1976) hypothesizes that over the past few decades there has been a substantial shift away from an institutional and toward an impulsive locus of self. (He also speculates about Freud's role in facilitating this shift.) Others have observed similar changes in self-orientation as a function of changes in society: Riesman et al (1950) argued for an historical shift from "inner-directed" to "other-directed" motivational types; Lifton's (1970) chameleon-like "protean man" and Snyder's (1979) high "self-monitoring" individual are offered as prototypes of the individual in contemporary society. Zurcher (1977) proposed the "mutable self" to be a healthy adaptation to rapid social change. Marginality and uncertainty seem to facilitate the development of a "mutable self". Even if such conditions are becoming increasingly prevalent, there is some question whether rootlessness, lack of commitment to social institutions, and "going with the situational flow" are salutary features of the self even in a rapidly changing society.

Symbolic interactionists have not been alone in considering the relationship



between social organization and the self-concept. This concern is increasingly evident in studies of social structure and personality [see House (1981) and Simpson (1980) for reviews]. For example, Kanter's (1977) analysis of the psychological consequences of power and opportunity in the workplace, and Kohn's (1969, 1981) extensive work on the consequences of occupational conditions for self-values and intellectual flexibility (both forming their arguments in the sociological tradition of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx) are relevant here. In general, the Marxist perspective (and various derivatives) has encouraged examination of social organizational conditions in the development of self-estrangement, powerlessness, alienation, and other negative aspects of the self-concept [see, for example, Bowles & Gintis (1976) on the negative effects of the public school system on students' self-concepts]. An early impressive work from this perspective is Luria's (1976) research, conducted in the early 1930s, on the effects of the communist revolution on the consciousness and self-conceptions of peasants living in the remote villages of Uzbekistan, USSR. Through extensive interviews with these peasants, Luria and his colleagues found that degree of exposure to communist ideology and involvement in collective farm work had a dramatic effect on the level and nature of self-awareness. Some of Luria's conclusions may have been colored by his commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology and his desire to demonstrate its beneficial consequences. The specific content of the ideology may be less important in explaining changes in cognitive processes and self-awareness than the experience of a revolutionary movement itself, especially a movement that radically redefines relationships between individuals and between the individual and society. Inkeles's (1960) work, for example, has shown that modernization has similar consciousness-expanding consequences.

## SELF-CONCEPT AS A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION

The self-concept is, to a large extent, an agent of its own creation. This section focuses on three major motives associated with the self-concept: the self-efficacy motive; the self-esteem or self-enhancement motive; and the self-consistency motive. While sociologists have occasionally ventured into this domain, it has been dominated by psychologists, with their historically greater interest in questions of human motivation.

### *Self-Efficacy Motive*

Perhaps the most fundamental sense of self-concept as cause is found in the notion of human agency, expressed in such terms as effectance motivation (White 1959; Harter 1978), personal causation (deCharms 1968), self-efficacy (Bandura 1977), intrinsic motivation (Deci 1975), intentionality (Weigert

1975; Giddens 1979; Taylor 1977), internal locus of control (Rotter 1966) and self-control (Mischel & Mischel 1977). That the self is an originating agent seems crucial to the fundamental experience of self. As Turner observes, "behaviors thought to reveal the true self are also ones whose causes are perceived as residing in the person rather than the situation" (1976:991).

Historically, symbolic interactionism has strongly advocated an active, creative, and agentive view of the self. One of the basic assumptions of this perspective is that man is an actor as well as a reactor. Both James and Mead emphasized the creative aspects of human action, attributing these active properties to the "I" aspect of the self. Even Cooley, his looking-glass metaphor notwithstanding, considered effective action as the wellspring of the self [see Franks & Seeberger (1980) and Reitzes (1980) for examinations of this theme in Cooley's work]. The active self is also quite evident in contemporary expressions of symbolic interactionism, constituting a hallmark of the "processual interactionist" orientation. It is apparent, for example, in Goffman's (1959) work on impression management as interpersonal control, Weinstein's (1969) work on altercasting as identity manipulation, and various other discussions of constructing situations and negotiating realities (Blumer 1969; Stone & Farberman 1970).

Central as the idea of human agency is to symbolic interactionists, they have been reluctant to cast it in motivational terms. [Stone & Farberman (1970:467) reflect the symbolic interactionists' antipathy for the concept of motivation.] As a result, the active self is seen primarily as the major source of indeterminacy in human conduct, rather than as a source of motivation and self-determination. There has been no such reluctance on the part of psychologists to conceptualize motivational processes emanating from the self. One of the most influential formulations has been White's (1959) concept of effectance or competence motivation. White made a strong case for the operation of a motivation for mastery and the experience of self as a causal agent in one's environment. He noted that exploratory and manipulative behaviors (in animals as well as man) are rewarding in their own right and characteristically occur when basic physiological drives are satisfied [see deCharms & Muir (1978) for a review of the "intrinsic motivation" literature, and Ross (1976) for a review of conditions under which extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation]. Foote & Cottrell's (1955) concept of "interpersonal competence," which they define as the ability to produce intended effects (p. 38), Brehm's (1966) concept of "psychological reactance" (the motivation to seek freedom from constraints), Adler's (1927) concept of "mastery," Smith's (1968, 1978) discussion of the "competent self," Franks & Marolla's (1976) concept of "inner self-esteem" (self-esteem based on efficacious action), and McClelland's (1975) "power motive" (striving for power and control) all stress the basic motivational element of the active self.

The importance of self-efficacy as a major motivation becomes apparent when we consider the consequences of its inhibition or suppression. Within sociology, this has been associated with the concept of alienation (Seeman 1959). The classic statement on this association was formulated by Marx, who argued that the most important consequence of powerlessness is alienation. Alienation here refers to the feeling of self-estrangement produced when the products of work are no longer reflections of the self. This happens when labor becomes merely instrumental and the individual loses control over the direction and products of his work.

Within psychology, the case for the importance of self-efficacy is addressed by Seligman (1975), who has tied his concept of "learned helplessness" to depression. Learned helplessness refers to a chronic sense of inefficacy resulting from learning that one's actions have no effect on one's environment. In recent formulations of the theory, Seligman and his colleagues (Abramson et al 1978) argue that depression stemming from learned helplessness is likely to occur when the individual attributes his inefficacy to personal failure rather than to universal conditions. Seligman views learned helplessness as a sufficient but not a necessary antecedent of depression. His work, however, accentuates the importance of self-efficacy for psychological well-being.

The conditions and consequences of the perception of self-as-cause have become a major focus of contemporary attribution theory. Especially relevant here are the self-attributions individuals make with regard to personal control over events that affect them. Rotter (1966) distinguishes between "internal" and "external" loci of control, as generalized expectancies that individuals develop in relation to their environment. DeCharms (1968) distinguishes "origins" from "pawns". Kelley (1971) discusses the need to perceive oneself as exercising effective control in attribution processes. In most of the literature on consequences of these generalized expectancies, it is better to be origin (internal control) than pawn (external control) [see Wortman (1976) and Lefcourt (1976) for reviews of causal attributions and personal control].

Bandura (1974, 1977, 1978, 1981), who has recently been developing a highly cognitive version of social learning theory centered on self-evaluation processes, has added several refinements to the self-efficacy literature. Bandura makes an important distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. An outcome expectation is an estimate that a given behavior will lead to a certain outcome; an efficacy expectation is the belief that one can successfully perform the behavior required to produce the outcome (Bandura 1977:193). The former is a belief about one's environment, the latter a belief about one's competence. Feelings of futility may result from (a) low self-efficacy or (b) perception of a social structure as unresponsive to one's actions. "To alter efficacy-based futility requires development of competencies and expectations of personal effectiveness. By contrast to change outcome-

based futility necessitates changes in prevailing environmental contingencies that restore the instrumental value of the expectancies that people already possess" (Bandura, 1977:205). Thus Bandura differentiates perceptions of self from perceptions of self in relation to social structure—a distinction that provides a bridge to traditional sociological concerns.

The motivational significance of beliefs regarding self-efficacy is also evident in the literature on self-fulfilling prophecies (Jones 1977). When people act on erroneous beliefs they can sometimes alter social reality in the direction of the initially mistaken belief (Bandura 1981; Merton 1957). Self-fulfilling prophecies, of course, can either increase or decrease self-efficacy, depending on the nature of the individual's belief or expectation.

### *Self-Esteem Motive*

The motivation to maintain and enhance a positive conception of oneself has been thought to be pervasive, even universal (Rosenberg 1979; Wells 1978; Kaplan 1975; Rokeach 1979; Hales 1981a). Wells & Marwell observe that every self theory posits some variant of this motive (1976:54). Even some social-psychological theories that did not start out as self theories became such largely because of the operation of the self-esteem motive. The most dramatic transformation occurred for cognitive dissonance theory [see especially Greenwald & Ronis (1978)]. The original version of the theory, in which the motivational factor was a perceived incongruity between two cognitive elements, has essentially been replaced with one in which self-esteem motivates dissonance-reducing actions. Aronson (1968) and Rokeach (1968, 1973) argued that cognitive dissonance is a significant motivational force only when the self-concept is involved. Greenwald & Ronis describe the present state of cognitive dissonance theory as follows: "The motivational force in present versions of dissonance theory has much more of an ego-defensive character. . . . The theory seems now to be focused on cognitive changes occurring in the service of ego defense, or self-esteem maintenance, rather than in the interest of preserving psychological consistency" (1978:54–55).

Other notable theories have increasingly become self theories because of the perceived importance of the self-esteem motive in cognitive functioning—e.g. Rokeach's value theory (1973, 1979), and attribution theory. Rokeach has recently stated: "Thus, in the final analysis, I have come to view the problem of attitude change and behavior change as being ultimately linked to the problem of how changes are brought about in the self" (1979:53). Rokeach's theory resembles the reformulated cognitive dissonance theory in that both locate the motivating mechanism in the discrepancy between a cognitive or behavioral element and the person's self-conception. Such discrepancies are motivating, Rokeach points out, because they threaten self-maintenance and self-enhancement (1979:53).

As aspects of the self-esteem motive, self-enhancement emphasizes growth, expansion, and increasing one's self-esteem, while self-maintenance focuses on *not* losing what one has. The two engender different behavioral strategies. In their examination of self-esteem in the classroom, Covington & Beery (1976) describe these two motivational orientations as "striving for success" and "fear of failure." In general, persons with low self-esteem are motivated more by self-maintenance than by self-enhancement.

In Duval & Wicklund's (1972) self-awareness theory, a motivation to change arises from one's awareness of an incongruity between one's idealized self-concept and one's self-image (the self as it appears in behavior). The individual's evaluation of self as less than desirable motivates him or her to improve his/her behavior in order to maintain self-esteem. Duval & Wicklund emphasize self-focused attention as the initial step in the whole process. They argue that components of self (values, beliefs, identities, etc) exert little influence on individual functioning until activated. (This view is at odds with most sociological and many psychological conceptions of self.) Activation can be induced by any stimulus suggestive of the self—Duval & Wicklund used mirrors and voice recordings in their studies. Once self-directed attention comes into play it will gravitate toward the most salient feature of the self. The nature of salience is not well developed in this theory. [By contrast, Rokeach confronts subjects with feedback designed to increase their awareness of apparent discrepancies in salient aspects of their self-conceptions (Rokeach 1973).] Wicklund (1979) suggests that "once attention comes to bear on a specific dimension of self, self-evaluation takes hold" (1979:189). This evaluation can be either positive or negative; but, according to Wicklund, only negative self-evaluations have important motivational consequences. At first glance, "self-awareness theory" appears to be a cognitive consistency theory; but in fact the self-esteem motive, activated by a negative self-evaluation, is offered as the major impetus for change. [See criticism of this point by Hull & Levy (1979).]

Within attribution theory, the emergence of the self-esteem motive is most evident in discussions of self-serving bias in attribution processes (Bradley 1978; Arkin et al 1980; Bowerman 1978). This bias is the tendency of people to take credit for positive outcomes while denying responsibility for negative outcomes. Bradley's (1978) review of the attribution research reveals strong support for the operation of self-serving, or defensive, causal attributions [Miller & Ross (1975) present a more skeptical interpretation].

The self-esteem motive is manifest in the general tendency to distort reality in the service of maintaining a positive self-conception, through such strategies as selective perception (Rosenberg 1979), reconstruction of personal history (Greenwald 1980), and some of the classic ego-defensive mechanisms (Hilgard 1949). Rosenberg (1979) shows that selectivity protects self-esteem by

influencing (a) which others will be significant (i.e. through selective interaction, imputation, and valuation), (b) which social comparisons will be made, and (c) which aspects of the self-concept will be central. Psychological selectivity in the service of self-esteem is also the basis of Kaplan's (1975) theory of delinquent behavior. Kaplan (1975) proposes that low self-esteem due to failure in the pursuit of "legitimate" activities increases the probability that a person will engage in deviant activities and select deviant others as a reference group in an effort to increase self-esteem. His own research and that of others (Rosenberg & Rosenberg 1978) seems to support this motivational component of self-esteem in the etiology of deviance and delinquency.

**SELF-ESTEEM AS AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE** There is a vast research literature in which the self-concept is considered not in motivational terms but for its effects on a wide range of psychological and behavioral phenomena. Most of this literature focuses on the evaluative dimension of self-concept, partly because of the strength and pervasiveness of the self-esteem motive. As a result, self-esteem has been related to almost everything at one time or another (Crandall 1973:45). For example, self-esteem has been found to affect conformity or persuasibility, interpersonal attraction, moral behavior, educational orientations, and various aspects of personality and mental health [see Wells & Marwell (1976) and Rosenberg (1981) for reviews]. In most research areas, low self-esteem is associated with undesirable outcomes, such as greater propensity to engage in delinquent behavior or lower academic interests, aspirations, and achievements.

High self-esteem is generally viewed as having favorable consequences, but the research literature is by no means clear on this point. To be sure, high self-esteem is commonly associated with effective and "healthy" personal functioning—e.g. confidence and independence (Rosenberg 1965), creativity and flexibility (Coopersmith 1967), and lower disposition toward deviance (Kaplan 1975). But it can also be argued that defense mechanisms operate more effectively and forcefully under conditions of high self-esteem to inhibit the perception of negative information (Byrne 1961), thereby making the individual less open to new experiences and change (Katz & Zigler 1967). Others argue that a "medium" amount of self-esteem is optimal for psychological functioning, considering both the high and the low positions as dysfunctional (Cole et al 1967). Wells & Marwell (1976:69–73) review the confusing state of the research on optimal self-esteem.

Part of the reason for this confusion is that high self-esteem may be due either to genuinely high self-evaluation, based on effective performance, or to "defensively" high self-esteem, based on insecurity and confounded with a need for social approval (Hales 1981b; Crowne & Marlowe 1964; Franks & Marolla (1976). But the problem is more complicated than the question of differential bases of self-esteem. It has already been argued that the self-

esteem motive distorts perceptions and cognitions, resulting in self-deception. This may be both functional and dysfunctional for the individual. In this regard, some interesting but disconcerting findings have been reported on the relationship between accuracy of self-perception and depression (Alloy & Abramson 1979; Lewinsohn & Mischel 1980). Lewinsohn & Mischel (1980) found that clinically depressed patients were more realistic in their self-perceptions (as judged by the degree of congruence between self-ratings and observer ratings on a number of social competencies) than were those in the "normal" control group, who were more likely to engage in self-enhancing distortions. This line of research on the mixed benefits of self-esteem led Mischel to speculate that "self-enhancing information processing and biased self-encoding may be both a requirement for positive affect and the price for achieving it" (1979:752).

### *Consistency Motive*

The motivation for consistency and continuity in self-concepts is considered weaker than that for self-enhancement (Jones 1973). Some have even questioned its existence as a self motive (Gergen 1968). The research evidence seems to support the claim that self-esteem is a more powerful motive than self-consistency when the two are posed against each other (Jones 1973; Krauss & Critchfield 1975). However, this may be due largely to the nature of the contrasts made and the areas of their application. Comparisons between the relative efficacy of self-esteem and self-consistency have all been made at the evaluative level of the self-concept, a circumstance that favors the self-esteem motive. Self-consistency is more relevant to the substantive dimension of the self-concept, the domain of identities and beliefs about self. Two literatures in social psychology address the self-consistency motive: the psychological literature on self-concept as a cognitive organization of knowledge and beliefs; and the sociological literature on identities as sources of motivation. In the former, consistency refers to the cognitive organization of attitudes about the self. In the latter, consistency is the congruence between identities and role behaviors.

To consider the self-concept as an organization of knowledge is to emphasize its information processing (or encoding) functions, which strive toward *perceived* consistency [see Epstein (1973), discussed earlier; Greenwald (1980); Markus (1977, 1980)]. Lecky (1951), an early advocate of the consistency motive, viewed the maintenance of a unified conceptual system as the overriding need of the individual. The self-concept as a self-theory (Epstein 1973) seeks to maintain a coherent view of itself in order to operate effectively in the world. Markus (1977) considers the self-concept to be a collection of cognitive generalizations (self-schemata) that organize the processing of self-relevant information. These self-schemata become increasingly resistant to

inconsistent information [Fiske & Linville (1980) provide a critical assessment of the schema concept in current social psychology]. Hull & Levy (1979) have recast Duval & Wicklund's (1972) self-awareness theory (which is based on the self-esteem motive) into a theory of self-concept emphasizing information processing and the organization of self-knowledge. They propose that "self-awareness corresponds to the encoding of information in terms of its relevance for the self" (Hull & Levy 1979:757). Greenwald (1980) identifies the motivational element in the self-concept (as an organization of knowledge) as "cognitive conservatism," which he views as "the disposition to preserve existing knowledge structures, such as percepts, schemata (categories), and memories" (1980:606). The motivation for cognitive conservatism and, hence, perceived self-consistency, manifests itself in the active reconstruction of memories and personal history, as well as in selective perceptions (Greenwald 1980). This selective processing of information is typically self-serving, which is why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish self-esteem theories from self-consistency theories [Greenwald (1980) considers these two self-motives complementary].

The self-concept as an organization of identities also provides a motivational basis for consistency. Foote (1951) argued that individuals are motivated to act in accordance with the values and norms implied by the identities to which they become committed. More recently, Stryker (1980) has argued that the higher the salience of an identity within the self-concept, the greater is its motivational significance, a proposition that has received some empirical support (Jackson 1981; Santee & Jackson 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). The motivation for consistency or congruence between self-conceptions, role preferences, and behaviors has been demonstrated in several studies (Backman & Secord 1968; Burke & Reitzes 1981). Note that self-consistency does not mean *actual* consistency and continuity in self-conception, but rather the *sense* or perception of consistency; we have a tendency to *create* a sense of self-consistency even if consistency and continuity may not in fact exist.

## SELF-CONCEPT OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

The topic of stability and change in self-concepts over the life cycle has been neglected, partly owing to the difficulties of longitudinal research. Also, life-cycle concerns have been dominated by developmental psychologists (especially Piaget and Kohlberg), with their major interest in childhood development, and by neo-Freudians [especially Erikson (1959)], with their focus on personality rather than on self-concept per se. A promising development is the increasing attention to historical influences on the life span, such as Elder's (1974) excellent longitudinal study of a cohort of children



during the Depression and in the following decades. Some of this historical research has tried to demonstrate the sociohistorical relativity of some of our life-span concepts and assumptions, especially our ideas about childhood, adolescence, and old age (Gergen 1980; van den Berg 1961). But here as well, the self-concept tends to be an incidental concern.

However, some attempts have been made to consider self-concept changes in the context of life-stage analyses. Gordon (1976), for example, uses a "stage-developmental" model based largely on Erikson's (1959) delineation of stage-specific dilemmas to discuss changes in self-concepts over the life cycle. Most research on life-cycle changes in self-concepts has tended to focus on transitions to or from a specific "stage" of development. The bulk of this research has focused on the transition to adolescence, inspired largely by Erikson's (1959) notion of an identity crisis associated with this stage. The research evidence, while far from consistent (cf Long et al 1967), seems generally to support the idea of a self-concept disturbance in adolescence (Rosenberg 1979; Simmons et al 1973; Simmons et al 1979). Rosenberg (1979) found that this disturbance in self-concept is due, not only to biological and hormonal changes, but especially to the shift from elementary school to junior high. The interacting effects of biological, environmental, and social factors on self-esteem in early adolescence are examined in greater detail by Simmons et al (1979), who found that the shift from elementary to junior high is more stressful for girls than boys, and is especially hard on the self-esteem of early maturing (pubertal) girls who have begun dating. The shift to junior high had little effect on boys' self-esteem, but early physical development had a *positive* effect. Clausen (1975) also found early maturation to be advantageous for boys' self-concepts, especially for those from the lower class. Along with self-esteem and body-image, other aspects of the self-concept found to be affected by the transition from childhood to adolescence are the locus and content of self-knowledge [e.g. see Rosenberg (1979) on the shift from "external" to "internal" self attributions, Gordon (1976) on changes in the content of role-identities, and Montemayor & Eisen (1977) on changes from concrete to abstract modes of self-representation].

Later life stages have not received nearly as much attention as adolescence. Recently, some interest has been directed toward the "middle years" and the "mid-life crisis" (Brim 1976; Levinson, 1978), and toward old age and the various transitions associated with it, such as retirement, the "empty nest," bereavement, and death. These are promising developments, though this literature is only indirectly concerned with matters of self-concept.

Focus on stages of the life cycle is not necessarily the best way of addressing the question of continuity and change in self-concepts over time. Another approach is to examine the structure and content of self-concepts across time, with an eye to determining their stability, variability, and mode of interaction

with life events. In a sophisticated and innovative analysis, Mortimer and her colleagues (Mortimer et al 1981; Mortimer & Lorence 1980) examined stability and change in self-concept in a panel study of 368 men. Using four separate criteria of self-concept stability, Mortimer et al (1981) found a high level of stability for this sample on four self-concept dimensions. They also demonstrate how early self-concept (focusing on the "sense of competence" dimension) shapes one's life events in the areas of work and family, and how these life events, in turn, have an independent effect on self-concept. Through a series of regression analyses, Mortimer et al (1981) demonstrate "that the relationship between life experiences and the self-concept is truly reciprocal."

## MEASURING THE SELF-CONCEPT

Measurement continues to be a serious problem facing research on the self-concept and the major obstacle to cumulative and valid knowledge in this area. There are several excellent reviews and critiques of the multitude of self-concept measures: Crandall (1973), Wells & Marwell (1976), and Wylie (1974, 1979) focus mainly on measures of self-evaluation; and Spitzer et al (1971; Spitzer 1976) deal with the Twenty Statements Test. Wylie's (1974, 1979) extensive reviews give the most dismal picture of the methodological state of self-concept research. She amply documents the prevalence of instruments of untested or questionable reliability and validity, many used only once or twice. Note, however, that such problems characterize most social and psychological measurement (Wells & Marwell 1976:250), and have especially plagued cognitive and motivational constructs.

Scholars in this area are at least becoming sensitive to problems of measurement [which even Wylie (1974:324) acknowledges as a favorable sign]. This is most evident in the study of substantive self-concept (identities), where, indeed, the most work has been needed. The TST, the most frequently used measure of identities, has been severely criticized as a measure of self-concept for its lack of reliability and its questionable validity (Wells & Marwell 1976:120; Wylie 1974:246), as well as for the limitations it imposes on statistical analysis (Jackson 1981). Several promising measures of identities have recently appeared. Burke & Tully (1977) have proposed the use of multiple-discriminant analysis on an "Osgood-type" semantic differential scale to discover empirically the (connotative) meanings associated with particular role-identities. Burke (1980) considers this procedure to be consistent with the measurement requirements for an interactionist conception of role-identities. Another development is Jackson's (1981) measure of commitment to role-identities, a 23-item index with apparently good reliability and construct validity. Burke & Tully, as well as Jackson, have shunned the open-

ended format of the TST. Turner (Turner & Schutte 1981), on the other hand, is developing an open-ended instrument to elicit responses regarding people's sense of their "real selves" and "false selves." For certain aspects of self-concept, an open-ended format is still the most appropriate measure.

## CONCLUSION

The self-concept is rapidly becoming the dominant concern in social psychology. In sociology, where it has long been a central concern of symbolic interactionists, the past decade has seen increased efforts to examine the relationship between social organization and the content and organization of self-concepts. In psychology, the past decade or so has witnessed the emergence of a number of specific self theories and the conversion of several major cognitive and behavioral theories into self theories. The pervasiveness of the processes of self-concept maintenance and enhancement may have precipitated what has come to be considered a crisis in social psychology. A key factor in this crisis for psychological social psychology has been the realization that the laboratory experiment is a social situation in which "demand characteristics" and "situated identities" are as relevant to the subjects' behavior as are the intended experimental manipulations.

Sociological social psychology has tended to focus on the development of self-concepts, with an eye to social structural and contextual influences. Psychological social psychology has been more interested in the consequences of self-concepts for individual functioning. Still, several trends in the recent self literature are common to both disciplines. One is the increasing tendency to view the self-concept as active. The theme of human agency is, of course, an old one in social psychology (as well as in philosophy). New is the attempt to capture this active aspect of the self-concept empirically. A related trend is the increasing recognition that the self and its social world are reciprocally determined, an idea with both methodological and theoretical implications (of Snyder 1981; Wentworth 1980). This brings me to the third trend: greater concern [mainly dissatisfaction (Wylie, 1974)] with the current state of self-concept measurement. One hopes this intellectual discomfort will be converted into the creation of more adequate measures of self-constructs.

The current "crisis" in social psychology may ultimately be resolved by an integrated self-theory, as several scholars have suggested (Marlowe & Gergen 1969:643; Sherif 1977); but we still have a long way to go. How to reconcile the need for a more anthropomorphic conception of the human being (McCall & Simmons 1978:254), one sensitive to the reciprocity in the self-concept/environment relationship, with the need for greater methodological precision is the major challenge in the study of the self-concept.

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