

Self-schemas

By using a number of *schemas*, we store information about the self in a way that is similar to what we do for other people (see Chapter 2). However, the outcome is much more varied.

According to Helen Markus, the self-concept is neither a ‘singular, static, lump-like entity’ nor a simple averaged view of the self – it is complex and multi-faceted, with a relatively large number of discrete self-schemas (Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987). People tend to have clear conceptions of themselves (i.e. self-schemas) on some dimensions but not others – i.e. they are schematic on some but aschematic on others. People are self-schematic on dimensions that are important to them, on which they think they are extreme and on which they are certain the opposite does not hold. For example, if you think you are sophisticated, and being sophisticated is important to you, then you are self-schematic on that dimension – it is part of your self-concept. If you do not think you are sophisticated, and if this does not bother you, then being *sophisticated* is not one of your self-schemas.

We try to use our self-schemas strategically. Patricia Linville (1985) used a colourful phrase to describe what we usually do: ‘Don’t put all your eggs in one cognitive basket’. Having a variety of self-schemas provides a buffer from some of life’s misfortunes: we can always pull some self-schemas out of other baskets to derive some satisfaction.

Self-schemas that are rigidly compartmentalised have disadvantages (Showers, 1992). If some self-schemas are very negative and some are very positive, events may cause extreme mood swings according to whether a positive or negative self-schema is primed. Generally, more integrated self-schemas are preferable. For example, if James believes that he is a wonderful cook but an awful musician, he has compartmentalised self-schemas – contexts that prime one or the other self-schema will produce very positive or very negative moods. Contrast this with Sally, who believes that she is a reasonably good cook but not a great musician. She has self-schemas where the boundaries are less clear – context effects on mood will be less extreme.

Learning about the self

One of the most obvious ways to learn about who you are is to examine your private thoughts and feelings about the world – knowing what you think and feel about the world is a very good clue to the sort of person you are.

However, when these internal cues are weak we may make inferences about ourselves from what we do – our behaviour. This idea underpins Daryl Bem’s *self-perception theory* (Bem, 1967, 1972). Bem argued that we make attributions not only for others’ behaviour (see Chapter 2) but also for our own, and that there is no essential difference between self-attributions and other attributions. Furthermore, just as we construct an impression of someone else’s personality on the basis of being able to make internal dispositional attributions for their behaviour, so we construct a concept of who we are, not by introspection but by being able to attribute our own behaviour internally. So, for example, I know that I enjoy eating curry because, if given the opportunity, I eat curry of my own free will and in preference to other foods, and not everyone likes curry – I am able to make an internal attribution for my behaviour.

How we perceive ourselves can also be based on simply imagining ourselves behaving in a particular way. For example, sports psychologist Geraldine van Gyn

and her colleagues divided runners into two groups; one group practised power training on exercise bikes, the other did not. Half of each group used imagery, i.e. also imagined themselves sprint training, whereas the others did not. Of course, the sweaty business of power training itself improved subsequent performance; but, remarkably, those who imagined themselves sprint training did better than those who did not. The researchers concluded that imagery had affected self-conception, which in turn produced performance that was consistent with that self-conception (van Gyn, Wenger & Gaul, 1990).

Self-attributions have important implications for motivation. The theory predicts that if someone is induced to perform a task by either enormous rewards or heavy penalties, task performance is attributed externally and thus motivation to perform is reduced. In the absence of external factors to which performance can be attributed, we will instead look to enjoyment or commitment as causes, so motivation increases. This has been called the **overjustification effect** (see Figure 3.2), for which there is now substantial evidence (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

For example, Mark Lepper and his colleagues had nursery-school children draw pictures. Some of the children simply drew of their own free will, while the rest were induced to draw with the promise of a reward, which they were subsequently given. A few days later, the children were unobtrusively observed playing; the children who had previously been rewarded for drawing spent half as much time drawing as did the other group. Those who had received no extrinsic reward seemed to have greater intrinsic interest in drawing (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973).

In fact, a review by John Condry (1977) showed that introducing external rewards can backfire by reducing motivation and enjoyment of a task that was

Self-knowledge
 Motives
 Further and more detailed theory of how the process of acculturating
 depend on a group's
 member products
 social learning and
 group and culture
 beliefs
 Beliefs
 Story – that is, the
 bringing together
 of all these factors

Overjustification effect

In the absence of obvious external determinants of our behaviour, we assume that we freely choose the behaviour because we enjoy it.

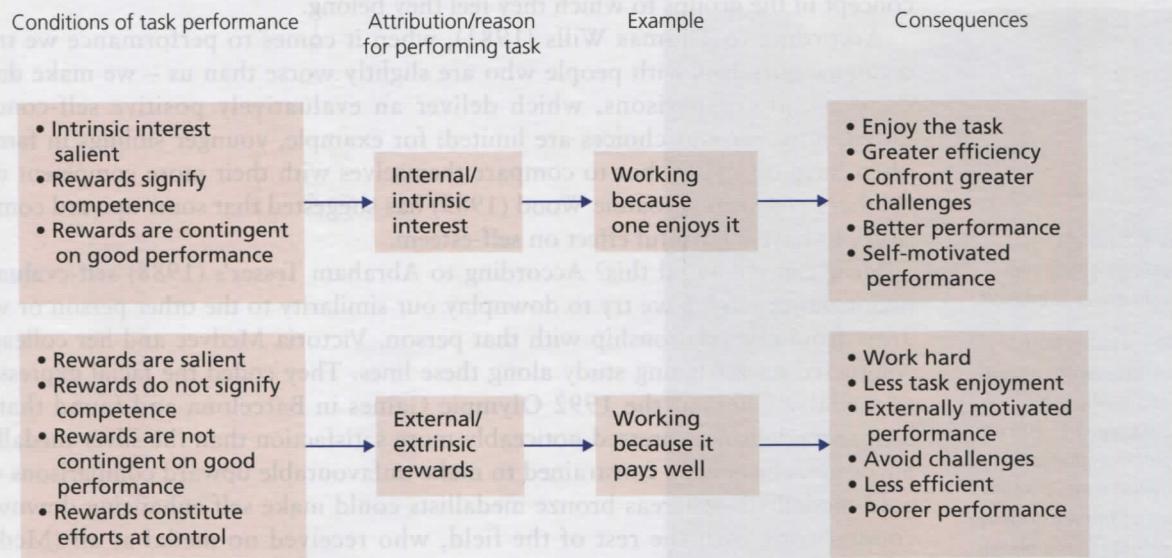


Figure 3.2

The overjustification effect.

Our motivation to perform a task can be reduced, and performance of the task impaired, if there are obvious external causes for task performances – an overjustification effect that is reversed if performance can be internally attributed.

previously intrinsically motivated. This has clear educational implications. Parents generally love to tell their children stories and in time encourage the young ones to enjoy stories by learning to read themselves. However, if reading is accompanied by rewards their intrinsic joy is put at risk. Is it possible for rewards to play any useful role? The answer is yes. The trick is to reduce a reliance on rewards that are *task-contingent* and make more use of those that are *performance-contingent*. Even a task that people find boring can be enlivened when they shift their attention to features of their performance (Sansone, Weir, Harpster & Morgan, 1992). Consider how you look for ways to maintain interest in a monotonous physical fitness programme, especially when you need to work out alone. You could of course listen to music or watch television. However, a performance-contingent strategy is to set targets using measures such as 'distance' covered on an exercycle, checking your heart rate and how many calories you expended.

We turn now to the impact that other people have on how our self-concept develops.

Social comparison and self-knowledge

Are you bright? How do you know? There are aspects of ourselves that call for a yardstick: we can learn by comparing ourselves with other people. Indeed, Leon Festinger (1954) developed **social comparison** theory in just this way, to describe how people learn about themselves through comparisons with others. People need to be confident about the validity of their perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviour, and because there is rarely an objective measure of validity, people ground their cognitions, feelings and behaviour in those of other people. In particular, they seek out similar others to validate their perceptions and attitudes, which can, to some extent, be read as meaning that people anchor their attitudes and self-concept in the groups to which they feel they belong.

According to Thomas Wills (1981), when it comes to performance we try to compare ourselves with people who are slightly worse than us – we make downward social comparisons, which deliver an evaluatively positive self-concept. Often, however, our choices are limited: for example, younger siblings in families often have no option but to compare themselves with their more competent older brothers and sisters. Joanne Wood (1989) has suggested that some upward comparison can have a harmful effect on **self-esteem**.

How can we avoid this? According to Abraham Tesser's (1988) **self-evaluation maintenance model**, we try to downplay our similarity to the other person or withdraw from our relationship with that person. Victoria Medvec and her colleagues conducted an intriguing study along these lines. They coded the facial expressions of medal winners at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona and found that the bronze medallists expressed noticeably more satisfaction than the silver medallists! Silver medallists were constrained to make unfavourable upward comparisons with gold medallists, whereas bronze medallists could make self-enhancing downward comparisons with the rest of the field, who received no medal at all (Medvec, Madley & Gilovich, 1995).

Downward comparisons also occur between groups. Groups try to compare themselves with inferior groups in order to feel that 'we' are better than 'them'. Indeed, intergroup relations are largely a struggle for evaluative superiority of one's own group over relevant outgroups (Hogg, 2000). This in turn influences self-conception as a group member – social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According

Social comparison

Comparing our behaviours and opinions with those of others in order to establish the correct or socially approved way of thinking and behaving.

Self-esteem

Feelings about and evaluations of oneself.

Self-evaluation maintenance model

People who are constrained to make esteem-damaging upward comparisons can underplay or deny similarity to the target, or they can withdraw from their relationship with the target.

to **self-categorisation theory**, an extension of social identity theory, the underlying process is one in which people who feel they belong to a group categorise themselves as group members and automatically internalise as a self-evaluation the attributes that describe the group – if the group is positive, the attributes are positive, and thus the self is positive (see Chapter 7).

Sport provides an ideal context in which the outcome of this process can be seen. Few Italians will not have felt enormously positive when their team beat Germany in the finals of the 2006 football World Cup. Robert Cialdini and his associates have referred to this phenomenon as ‘basking in reflected glory’, or **BIRGing** (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). To illustrate the effect, they conducted experiments in which they raised or lowered self-esteem via feedback on a general knowledge test; and student participants were then, seemingly incidentally, asked about the outcome of a recent football game. Participants who had had their self-esteem lowered tended to associate themselves with winning and not with losing teams – they tended to refer to the teams as ‘we’ in the former case and as ‘they’ in the latter.

Self-categorisation theory

Turner and associates' theory of how the process of categorising oneself as a group member produces social identity and group and intergroup behaviours.

BIRGing

Basking In Reflected Glory – that is, name-dropping to link yourself with desirable people or groups and thus improve other people's impression of you.

Self-regulation

Do you find it easy to stick to a diet? Many people do not, and yet they may really want to. Self-schemas not only describe what we are but what we want to be. Markus and Nurius (1986) have suggested that we have an array of possible selves: future-oriented schemas of what we would like to have happen, or of what we fear we might become. For example, a postgraduate student may have hopes of becoming a university lecturer or a successful executive – or a fear of being unable to get a job.

Another perspective is offered by Higgins's (1987) **self-discrepancy theory**. Higgins suggests that we have three types of self-schema:

Self-discrepancy theory

Higgins' theory about the consequences of making actual-ideal and actual-'ought' self comparisons that reveal self-discrepancies.

Many selves, multiple identities

It is probably inaccurate to characterize the self as a single entity. In his book *The Concept of Self*, Kenneth Gergen (1991) describes the self as containing an ensemble of relatively discrete and often incompatible identities, each associated with a distinct body of knowledge. My identities provide me with different ways of relating to others and to myself. I have several social relationships in my life, some are professional, some personal relationships with friends and family, some at work, some with my hobbies and pastimes, some from my ethnicity, some from my nationality, some from my religion.

As we move through life, we differ in what categories we have a greater concern and extensive knowledge about. These categories are called our identities.

Self-discrepancy theory. Oprah has reported some concern that her body weight fluctuates. No doubt, her actual self in this picture is far from her ideal self.

Source: Fred Prouser / Reuters



(Tajfel, 1970; see Chapter 7). A consistent finding is that categorisation makes people discriminate against an outgroup, conform to ingroup norms, express attitudes and feelings that favour the ingroup, and indicate a sense of belonging and loyalty to the ingroup.

We now need to address the question of how we get our selves together!

The search for self-coherence

Although we may have a diversity of relatively discrete selves, we also have a quest: to find and maintain a reasonably integrated picture of who we are. Coherence provides us with a continuing theme for our lives – an ‘autobiography’ that weaves our various identities and selves together into a whole person. People who have highly fragmented selves (e.g. some people with schizophrenia, amnesia or Alzheimer’s disease) find it extraordinarily difficult to function effectively.

People use many strategies to construct a coherent sense of self (Baumeister, 1998). Here are some tricks you can use:

- Restrict your life to a limited set of contexts. Because our various selves come into play as contexts keep changing, by reducing their number you will protect yourself from self-conceptual clashes.
- Keep revising and integrating your ‘autobiography’ to accommodate new identities. Along the way, get rid of any worrisome inconsistencies. In effect you are rewriting your history to make it work to your benefit.
- Attribute changes in the self externally to changing circumstances, rather than internally to fundamental changes in who we are. This is an application of the **actor–observer effect** (see Chapter 2).

We can also develop a self-schema that embodies a core set of attributes that we feel distinguishes us from all other people – that makes us unique. We then tend to recognise these attributes disproportionately in all our selves, and as Nancy Cantor and John Kihlstrom (1987) have argued, provide a link that delivers a sense of a stable and unitary self.

In summary, people find ways to construct their lives such that their self-conceptions are both steady and coherent.

Self-motives

Because selves and identities are such critical reference points for the way we adapt to life, people are enthusiastically motivated to secure self-knowledge. Entire industries are based on this search for knowledge, ranging from personality tests to dubious practices such as astrology and palmistry. However, people do not go about this search in a dispassionate way; they have an idea about what they want to know and can be dismayed when the quest unearths things they did not expect or did not want to find.

Social psychologists have identified three classes of motive that may interact to influence self-construction and the search for self-knowledge. We pursue:

- self-assessment to validate ourselves;
- self-verification to be consistent;
- self-enhancement to look good.

theories like
sense of individual self
self-esteem was too
too little and too
to too much and
etc. etc.
habitat the
nonaligned
like culture and
the future
make work
etc.
etc.

immigration
of
of individual self
a strong and
to equal educational
etc.

immigration
of
of individual self
to equal educational
etc.

**Actor–observer
effect**
Tendency to attribute
our own behaviours
externally and others'
behaviours internally.

Self-assessment and self-verification

Self-assessment

The motivation to seek out new information about ourselves in order to find out what sort of person we really are.

Self-verification

Seeking out information that verifies and confirms what we already know about ourselves.

Self-enhancement

The motivation to develop and promote a favourable image of self.

Self-affirmation theory

The theory that people reduce the impact of threat to their self-concept by focusing on and affirming their competence in some other area.

We have a simple desire to have accurate and valid information about ourselves – there is a **self-assessment** motive, as an overview by Yaacov Trope (1986) has shown. People strive to find out the truth about themselves, regardless of how unfavourable or disappointing the truth may be. But people also like to engage in a quest for confirmation – to confirm what they already know about themselves they seek out self-consistent information through a **self-verification** process, as Bill Swann (1987) has described. So, for example, people who have a negative self-image will actually seek out negative information to confirm that image.

Self-enhancement

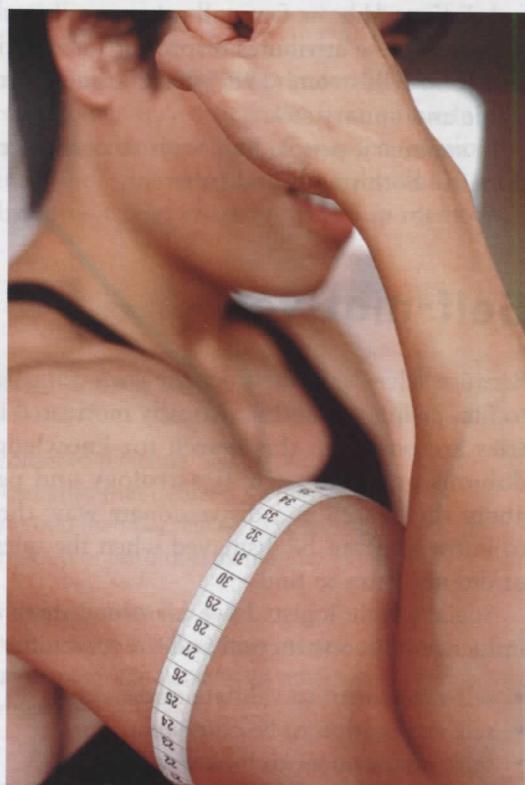
Above all else, people like to learn things about themselves that make the self look good. We like to learn new things that are favourable about ourselves as well as finding ways to revise existing views that are unfavourable. People are guided by a **self-enhancement** motive (e.g. Kunda, 1990). Using **self-affirmation theory**, David Sherman and Geoffrey Cohen (2006) described how this motive reveals itself. People strive publicly to affirm positive aspects of who they are; this can be done blatantly by boasting or more subtly through rationalising or dropping hints. The urge to self-affirm is particularly strong when an aspect of one's self-esteem has been damaged. So, for example, if someone draws attention to the fact that you are a lousy artist, you might retort that while that might be true, you are an excellent dancer. Self-affirmation rests on people's need to maintain a global image that they are competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice and capable of controlling important outcomes.

Table 3.1 Self and self-attributes are related to levels of identity concern

Social identity

Self-affirmation theory. Publicly affirming a positive aspect of oneself sometimes conceals other aspects that are less positive. Perhaps this young man's biceps are more impressive than his grades!

Source: Pearson Online Database (POD)



See how Claude Steele put the process of self-affirmation in a test of adherence to religious faith in Box 3.2.

Which motive is more fundamental and more likely to prevail in the pursuit of self-knowledge – self-assessment, self-verification or self-enhancement? In a series of experiments, Constantine Sedikides (1993) pitted the three motives against one another. His participants used a self-reflection task in which they ask themselves questions. Some of these involved central traits that applied their selves whereas other questions related to more peripheral traits about their selves. The degree of self-reflection should depend on which of the three self-motives is operating:

- *Self-assessment* – greater self-reflection on *peripheral* than central traits of self, whether the attribute is desirable or not, indicates a drive to find out more about self (people already have knowledge about traits that are central for them).
- *Self-verification* – greater self-reflection on *central* than on peripheral traits, whether the attribute is positive or not, indicates a drive to confirm what one already knows about oneself.
- *Self-enhancement* – greater self-reflection on *positive* than on negative aspects of self, whether the attribute is central or not, indicates a drive to learn positive things about self.

Sedikides found that self-enhancement was strongest, with self-verification a distant second and self-assessment an even more distant third. The desire to think well of ourselves reigns supreme; it dominates both the pursuit of accurate self-knowledge and the pursuit of information that confirms self-knowledge. (Does this apply to you? See the second focus question.)

Because self-enhancement is so important, people have developed a formidable repertoire of techniques to pursue it. People engage in elaborate self-deceptions to

Research and applications 3.2

Self-affirmation in Salt Lake City

Claude Steele (1975) reported a study in Salt Lake City in which Mormon women who were at home during the day were telephoned by a female researcher posing as a community member. She asked them if they would be willing to list everything in their kitchen to assist the development of a community food cooperative; those who agreed would be called back the following week. Because community cooperation is a very strong ethic among Mormons, about 50 per cent of women agreed to this time-consuming request.

In addition to this baseline condition, there were three other conditions in the study arising from a previous call, two days earlier, by an entirely unrelated researcher posing as a pollster. In the course of this call, the pollster mentioned in passing that it was common knowledge that as members of their community, they were either:

- uncooperative with community projects (a direct threat to a core component of their self-concept), or
- unconcerned about driver safety and care (a threat to a relatively irrelevant component of their self-concept), or
- cooperative with community projects (*positive reinforcement* of their self-concept).

Consistent with self-affirmation theory, the two threats greatly increased the probability that women would subsequently agree to help the food cooperative – about 95 per cent of women agreed to help. Among women who had been given positive reinforcement of their self-concept, 65 per cent agreed to help the cooperative.

Self-serving bias

Attributional distortions that protect or enhance self-esteem or the self-concept.

enhance or protect the positive aspects of their self-concepts (Baumeister, 1998). See Box 3.3 for examples of esteem-enhancing and esteem-protecting behaviours; and Box 3.4 and Figure 3.4 for an applied example of self-enhancement among young drivers.

The sheer power of the self-enhancement motive leads us naturally to our next topic, self-esteem.

Real world 3.3

Techniques people use to enhance or protect positive aspects of the self

You may have noticed how people (perhaps you!) sometimes wish to boost themselves. Here are some of the tricks that folk get up to:

- They take credit for their successes but deny blame for their failures – this is a **self-serving bias** (see Chapter 2).
- They forget failure feedback more readily than success or praise.
- They accept praise uncritically but receive criticism sceptically.

- They try to dismiss interpersonal criticism as being motivated by prejudice.
- They perform a biased search of self-knowledge to support a favourable self-image.
- They place a favourable spin on the meaning of ambiguous traits that define self.
- They persuade themselves that their flaws are widely shared human attributes but that their qualities are rare and distinctive.

Research and applications 3.4

Self-enhancement in young drivers

How able and cautious young drivers think they are predicts their level of crash-risk optimism, along with one other measure – perceived luck in avoiding crashes!

Can people accurately judge how good they are as drivers? Niki Harré and her colleagues asked this question in studying self-enhancement bias and crash optimism in young drivers. More than three hundred male and female technical institute students (aged 16–29 years) compared their driving attributes to their peers on a series of ten items. A self-enhancement bias was found for all items. An analysis showed that the ten items were based on two underlying dimensions, perceived driving ability and perceived driving caution. Here are examples of items, one for each factor (*italics ours*):

- Perceived ability: 'Do you think you are more or less skilled as a driver than other people your age?'

- Perceived caution: 'Do you think you are more or less safe as a driver than other people your age?'

The students responded to all items on seven-point rating scales that ranged from 'much less' to 'much more' with a mid-point labelled 'about the same'. The results for the *skilled* and *safe* items are shown in Figure 3.4. Most rated themselves as above average or well above average, both on skill and safety. Although there was no age difference within the range sampled, there was a gender difference: when comparing with their peers, men gave slightly higher skill ratings while women gave slightly higher safety ratings.

Crash-risk optimism was another variable investigated. These young drivers estimated the likelihood of being involved in a crash, again relative to their peers. How they perceived ability and their degree of caution were

significant predictors of crash-risk optimism, in combination with another measure – believing that luck would help them avoid crashes!

Harré and her colleagues noted that their study was not designed to identify which young drivers are biased, since to do so would require measuring a person's actual skill and actual safety when driving. Nevertheless, these young drivers had an overly

optimistic view of themselves. Other research suggests that optimistic drivers may, for example, ignore safety messages because they do not believe they are relevant. This is a concern, given that safe-driving campaigns are a major strategy used to reduce the road toll.

Source: Based on Harré, Foster and O'Neill (2005).



Figure 3.4

Self-enhancement bias: rating one's driving as above average.

- Young drivers compared attributes of their individual driving behaviour (skilled, safe) with their peers.
- Most showed a self-enhancement bias, using above-average ratings of 5, 6 or 7.

Source: Based on data from Harré, Foster & O'Neill (2005), Study 1.

Self-esteem

Why are people so strongly motivated to think well of themselves – to self-enhance? Research suggests that people generally have a rosy sense of self – they see, or try to see, themselves through ‘rose-tinted spectacles’. For example, people who are threatened or distracted often display what Del Paulhus and Karen Levitt (1987) called *automatic egotism* – a widely favourable self-image. In their review of a link between illusions and a sense of well-being, Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown (1988) concluded that people normally overestimate their good points,

overestimate their control over events and are unrealistically optimistic. Sedikides and Gregg (2003) call these three characteristics of human thought the *self-enhancing triad*.

In one study (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), very low achieving students (in the bottom 12 per cent) thought they were relatively high achievers (in the top 38 per cent). According to Patricia Cross (1977), your lecturers show positivity bias too, with 94 per cent convinced that their teaching ability is above average! A positivity bias, based on positive illusions, is psychologically adaptive. People without these psychological props tend towards depression and some other forms of mental illness (Tennen & Affleck, 1993). Box 3.5 describes some health aspects of self-esteem and self-conception.

An inflated sense of how wonderful I am can, however, not only nauseate but also be maladaptive. It does not match reality. Having an accurate sense of self is important but, as we have seen, is less important than feeling good about oneself. A positive self-image and associated self-esteem is a significant goal for most people most of the time.

Self-handicapping

Publicly making advance external attributions for our anticipated failure or poor performance in a forthcoming event.

Research and applications 3.5

Threats to your self-concept can damage your health: ways of coping

There are three major sources of threat to our self-concept and all can affect our sense of self-worth:

- 1 *Failures* – ranging from failing a test, failing a job interview, to a marriage ending in divorce.
- 2 *Inconsistencies* – unusual and unexpected positive or negative events that make us question the sort of person we are.
- 3 *Stressors* – sudden or enduring events that can exceed our capacity to cope, including bereavement, a sick child and over-commitment to work.

Threats to our self-concept not only arouse negative emotions that can lead to self-harm and suicide, they also contribute to physical illness. They can affect our immune responses, nervous system activity and blood pressure. For example, one study found that when people were reminded of significant self-discrepancies, the level of natural killer cell activity in their bloodstream decreased (Strauman, Lemieux & Coe, 1993). These cells are important in defending the body against cancers and viral infections.

There are several ways in which people try to cope with self-conceptual threats.

- *Escape* – people may remove themselves physically from the threat situation.

- *Denial* – people may take alcohol or other drugs, or engage in risky ‘just for kicks’ behaviour. This is not a particularly constructive coping mechanism, since it can create additional health problems.

- *Downplay the threat* – this is a more constructive strategy, either by re-evaluating the aspect of self that has been threatened or by reaffirming other positive aspects of the self (Steele, 1988).

- *Self-expression* – this is a very effective response to threat. Writing or talking about one’s emotional and physical reactions to self-conceptual threats can work. It reduces emotional heat, reduces headaches, muscle tension, and a pounding heart, and improves immune system functioning (Pennebaker, 1997). Most benefits come from communication that enhances understanding and self-insight.

- *Attack the threat* – people can directly confront threat by discrediting its basis ('This is an invalid test of my ability'), by denying personal responsibility for the threat ('The dog ate my essay'), by setting up excuses for failure before the event (on the way into an exam, announcing that you have a terrible hangover – **self-handicapping** (see Chapter 2)) – or by taking control of the problem directly, such as seeking professional help or addressing any valid causes of threat.

In concluding this section, we should note that self-esteem is closely associated with social identity – by identifying with a group, that group's prestige and status in society attaches to one's self-concept. Take a modern example: Bill is so overweight that he is on a severe warning to lose a lot or face major health consequences. This is a physical risk, but there is a psychological risk as well. Being identified as a member of a group stigmatised by their obesity is not likely to mediate positive self-esteem for Bill. Bill and others like him will probably experience negative self-esteem when they compare themselves with the 'slim and the beautiful' in their community. Helga Dittmar and her colleagues have shown how the spread of consumerism in contemporary Western culture has had a major negative effect on people's sense of self-worth (Dittmar, 2008). Their analysis points to media hype as chief culprit in creating a potent mix of goals that are unrealisable for most: the pursuit of the body beautiful, material goods and an affluent lifestyle.

The framework in which we have presented these ideas suggest a personal self-image is at centre stage: this is an individual level of explanation. However, we can also subject the phenomenon to an intergroup explanation, and we explore this more fully in Chapter 7. We will see that the outcome can hinge on which groups are normally used by disadvantaged people when they make a social comparison.

Individual differences

We all know people who seem to hold themselves in very low regard and others who seem to have a staggeringly positive impression of themselves. Do these differences reflect enduring and deep-seated differences in self-esteem? The main thrust of research on self-esteem as a trait is concerned with establishing individual differences in self-esteem and investigating the causes and consequences of these differences.

One view that has become somewhat entrenched, particularly in the United States, is that low self-esteem is responsible for a range of personal and social problems such as crime, delinquency, drug abuse, unwanted pregnancy and underachievement in school. This view has spawned a huge industry, with accompanying mantras, to boost individual self-esteem, particularly in child-rearing and school contexts. However, critics have argued that low self-esteem may be a product of the stressful and alienating conditions of modern industrial society, and that the self-esteem 'movement' is an exercise in rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic* that merely produces selfish and narcissistic individuals.

So, what is the truth? American research suggests that individual self-esteem tends to vary between moderate and very high, so that most people feel relatively positive about themselves (Baumeister, Tice & Hutton, 1989). However, Shinobu Kitayama and his colleagues reported lower self-esteem in Japanese students studying in Japan or the United States (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto & Norasakkunkit, 1997).

Even if we focus on those people who have low self-esteem, there is little evidence that low self-esteem causes the social ills that it is purported to cause. For example, Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996) searched the literature for evidence for the popular belief that low self-esteem causes violence. They found quite the opposite. Violence was associated with high self-esteem; more specifically, violence seems to erupt when individuals with high self-esteem have their rosy self-images threatened.

However, we should not lump together everyone who happens to have high self-esteem. Consistent with common sense, some people with high self-esteem are quietly self-confident and non-hostile, whereas others are arrogant, conceited and overly assertive (Kernis, Granneman & Barclay, 1989). These latter individuals also

Table 3.2 Characteristics of people with high and low self-esteem

High self-esteem	Low self-esteem
Persistent and resilient in the face of failure	Vulnerable to impact of everyday events
Emotionally and affectively stable	Wide swings in mood and affect
Less flexible and malleable	Flexible and malleable
Less easily persuaded and influenced	Easily persuaded and influenced
No conflict between wanting and obtaining success and approval	Want success and approval but are sceptical of it
React positively to a happy and successful life	React negatively to a happy and successful life
Thorough, consistent and stable self-concept	Sketchy, inconsistent and unstable self-concept
Motivated towards enhancing the self	Motivated towards protecting the self

feel ‘special’ and superior to others, and they actually have relatively volatile self-esteem – they are narcissistic (Rhodewalt, Madrian & Cheney, 1998). One study has shown that narcissistic individuals were more aggressive towards people who had provoked and offended them (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). (Knowing this, you might want to learn a bit more about Manfred. See the third focus question.)

Overall, research into self-esteem as an enduring individual trait provides quite a clear picture of what people with high and low self-esteem are like (Baumeister, 1998; see Table 3.2).

In pursuit of self-esteem

Why do people pursue self-esteem? This may initially seem a silly question – the obvious answer is that having self-esteem makes you feel good. There is probably a grain of truth here, but on the other hand there are causality issues to be addressed. Being in a good mood, however caused, may provide a rosy glow that distorts the esteem in which people hold themselves. So, rather than self-esteem producing happiness, feeling happy may inflate self-esteem.

Terror management theory

The notion that the most fundamental human motivation is to reduce the terror of the inevitability of death. Self-esteem may be centrally implicated in effective terror management.

Fear of death

Jeff Greenberg and his associates suggested an intriguing, but somewhat gloomy, reason why people pursue self-esteem: it is to overcome their fear of death. In their **terror management theory**, they argue that knowing death is inevitable is the most fundamental threat that people face, and therefore it is the most powerful motivating factor in human existence. Self-esteem is part of a defence against that threat. Through high self-esteem, people can escape from the anxiety that would otherwise arise from continual contemplation of the inevitability of one’s death – the drive for self-esteem is grounded in terror of death. High self-esteem makes people feel good about themselves. They feel immortal, and positive and excited about life.