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# **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

**CORE CONCEPTS AND EMERGING TRENDS**



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## What Is the Self?

Depiction of Anger, Disgust, Joy, Fear and Sadness from the animated movie *Inside Out*.



Pictorial Press/Alamy.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 4.1** Define the self, self-concept, schema, and self-schema; describe self-discrepancy theory and the actual, ideal, and ought selves.
- 4.2** Contrast introspection and self-perception and explain the limits to learning about the self via each process; describe how the facial feedback hypothesis relates to self-perception.
- 4.3** Describe the strengths and weaknesses of surveys and self-report methods and the following biases: response effects, acquiescence, extremity, and context effects.
- 4.4** Define intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and overjustification, and illustrate each with examples; define global and specific self-esteem and interpret them in terms of the sociometer hypothesis.

- 4.5 Explain each of the following and state how they are related to the goal of self-enhancement: social comparison theory, self-evaluation maintenance, downward and upward social comparison, better-than-average effect, self-serving judgments, the bias blind spot.
- 4.6 Define impression management, contrast high and low self-monitoring, and explain the spotlight effect, the illusion of transparency, ingratiation, and self-handicapping.
- 4.7 Define self-regulation and its relation to willpower and ironic processes; explain self-verification.

## THE MANY “ME’S” OF THE SELF

What is “your” self? Pause for 60 seconds and write down the first six to ten thoughts that come to mind. . . . Most likely you wrote down external features of your self, such as your gender, race, university affiliation, family status, and so forth. Although these are undoubtedly important aspects of who you are, social psychologists would urge you to delve more deeply into the mystery of the self and to consider less obvious attributes of the self, to even go as far as to ask if you possess just a single self. Over 100 years ago the famous American poet Walt Whitman (1892) wrote “I am large. I contain multitudes.” Whitman felt that he had multiple selves that, together, constituted “Walt Whitman.” Social psychologists follow Whitman in viewing the self in a more abstract sense that cannot be narrowed down to one noun or adjective. Recently, in the 2015 animated movie *Inside Out*, the mental life of the main character, Riley, is portrayed as a struggle among her various emotions (anger, disgust, joy, fear, and sadness), each presented as a different self. Although this fictional movie does not reflect how social psychologists view the self, it is consistent with the general idea of multiple selves. As you will see, the self may be more accurately construed as a multiplicity of properties and psychological processes that interrelate in complex and fascinating ways (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003).

One compelling perspective defines the self as that *something* that allows us to even ask the question, “what is the self?” According to this view, the **self** is the *psychological apparatus that gives a person the capacity to consciously think about him or herself* (Leary & Tangney, 2003; MacDonald, 2007). The self is defined as the ability to think about the self! It is almost impossible to imagine that a being can be said to have a self if it lacks the capacity for self-reflection. If a creature can’t ask, “what is the self?” then it doesn’t have one! Because the self lies at the center of our very being, as you’ll see in this chapter, social psychologists have exerted enormous effort toward developing a better understanding of its nature.

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**Self:** The psychological apparatus that gives a person the capacity to consciously think about him or herself

**TABLE 4.1** The Many Selves

Name	Description	Illustration
Self-concept	Beliefs about yourself, who you are	Student, brother, athlete
Self-esteem	Feelings about yourself, your self-evaluation	Good student, trustworthy brother, skilled athlete
Interpersonal self	Who you present to other people	Friendly, caring, selfless
Executive self	Engages in self-regulation, exercises willpower	Impulse control, delayed gratification

The self, then, is your experience of who you are. This encompasses your *beliefs* about yourself, what you *present* to other people, and how you *regulate* your self (see Table 4.1). These three components of the self are called the self-concept, the interpersonal self, and the executive self (Baumeister, 1987, 2011; Baumeister, Schmeichel, & Vohs, 2007; Cavallo, Holmes, Fitzsimons, Murray, & Wood, 2012). An additional component is self-esteem or how you *feel* about yourself. In this chapter we will review each of these aspects. We will also revisit several of the core themes of social psychology introduced in Chapter 1, including free will, rationality, sociality, and of course, the self. The self is the place where all of these themes intersect: Each is a constituent of the self, and together they comprise the fundamental dimensions of the self.

### **Think Ahead!**

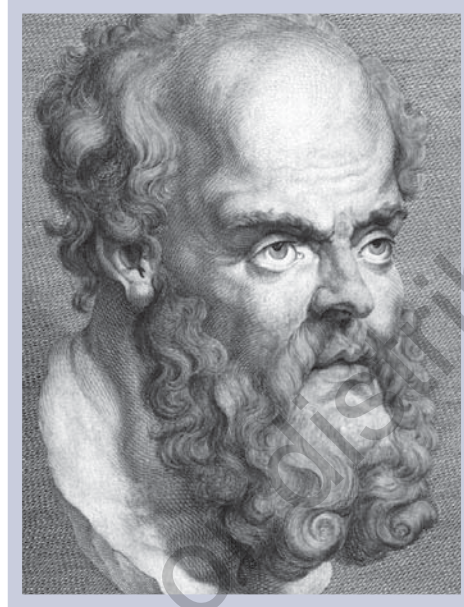
1. *What is the purpose of the self?*
2. *How do you come to know yourself?*
3. *What influences your self-esteem?*

## **WHAT IS THE SELF: THE SELF AS THINKER AND THE THOUGHT**

### Knowing Oneself: The Self-Concept

Over 2,000 years ago the Greek philosopher Socrates encouraged people to “know thyself,” important advice that on its face seems pretty straightforward (although we’ll

see later it may not be). As we've said, the very fact that we have a self means that we engage in some level of self-reflection. Thus the self is both the thinker and the thought: It is that which ponders the self—the thinker—and that which is pondered by the self—the thought. The self begins to emerge at a very young age, and as we transition through adolescence and into young adulthood, we tend to be much more preoccupied with knowing ourselves (Erickson, 1950). Unfortunately, although the desire to know ourselves is strong, there are limits to our ability to uncover certain aspects of the self, such as our motivations, desires, preferences, and behavioral tendencies, as well as the reasons for our behavior (Nisbett & Wilson,



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1977; T. D. Wilson, 2002). Before we discuss these, let's investigate several key features of the self, including our self-concept and possible selves.

The answer to the question “Who am I” is called our **self-concept**: the set of beliefs we have about the characteristics we possess (Amiot, de la Sablonniere, Smith, & Smith, 2015; Burkley, Curtis, Burkley, & Hatvany, 2015). The self-concept is at the core of everything we think, feel, or do, and it serves as a framework for understanding the social world (Slotter, Winger, & Soto, 2015). For instance, my self-concept includes such elements as father, psychology professor, textbook author, husband, and so on. The set of all of my beliefs about myself is my self-concept, and each of these beliefs is known as a self-schema. **Schemas** are cognitive structures that serve to organize knowledge about particular objects of thought, such as concepts, experiences, or roles (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015; H. Markus, 1977). We have schemas for people, things, places, and events that are automatically activated when we think about each of these (H. Markus & Wurf, 1987). For instance, what is your schema for a library? I expect that when you think of a college library you likely imagine the presence of books, computers, students working quietly, and so forth. What is your schema for a grocery store?

**Self-schemas** are one kind of schema that organize information about yourself with respect to specific domains of your life (such as work, school, family, a sport, etc.) and are particularly important when they are clear and unambiguous (H. Markus, 1977). Self-schemas affect how you process information relevant to you and often guide your behavior. Go back and look at what you wrote down about your self. Did you list any roles that you play? Perhaps a student, store clerk, or restaurant worker? Or a son, daughter, or uncle? Each of these roles serves as a self-schema and, when activated, affects how you think, feel, and act.

Over 2000 years ago Socrates encouraged people to “know thyself.”

**Self-Concept:**

Set of beliefs a person has about the characteristics she or he possesses

**Schemas:**

Cognitive structures that organize knowledge about particular objects of thought, such as concepts, experiences, or roles

**Self-Schema:**

Schema that organizes information about oneself with respect to specific domains of one's life

Who you are in one domain of your life will in some ways be different from and in others the same as who you are in another domain. In my case, who I am varies depending on whether I am leading discussion in a social psychology class, at home playing games with my daughter, or at a pub playing pool with a friend. These selves are of course interrelated and have much in common (McConnell & Strain, 2007). Many of my “professor” traits—such as the tendency to be responsible, take initiative, and provide sound guidance—will mirror my “father” traits. Yet there are other traits that would be manifest in one self but not another. For instance, I can get pretty silly when goofing off with my daughter, and although I try to inject humor into the classroom (albeit, with mixed success), it is not generally of the silly variety. Because we hold many self-schemas, it makes sense for us to think about the self not as a single unit but rather as multiple distinct yet overlapping elements (Swann & Bosson, 2010).

Another crucial feature of the self is its cultural embeddedness (Lee, Leung, & Kim, 2014). In Chapter 1 we discussed the individualism-collectivism (IC) dimension that, in a nutshell, reflects the extent to which individuals and cultures view the self as separate from others or closely tied to them. In relatively individualistic cultures, the self is seen as *independent*: as defined by its inner attributes, traits, and characteristics, and as stable over time and place (H. R. Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures understand the self as interdependent: It is largely derived from its connections to others and the groups to which it belongs. The independent self is considered to be unique, and in fact individualists seek to affirm its separate identity. The interdependent self overlaps with the selves of others and prefers to blend in rather than stand out. Although psychologists commonly refer to these two types of self-construal as distinct, in reality people are more flexible and fall somewhere in between. Moreover, situations may prime one or the other self-construal and hence lead people to think more about their own needs and goals or those of others, and this in turn can affect social behavior (Trafimow & Clayton, 2006). We will return to this fundamental dimension at various places in this text.

#### Self-Discrepancy Theory

Idea that each person has an actual, ideal, and ought self

**Actual Self:** Who one is

**Ideal Self:** Image of a hypothetical self that possesses the qualities and features that a person's wishes he had

**Ought Self:** Image of a hypothetical self who a person believes important others think he or she should be

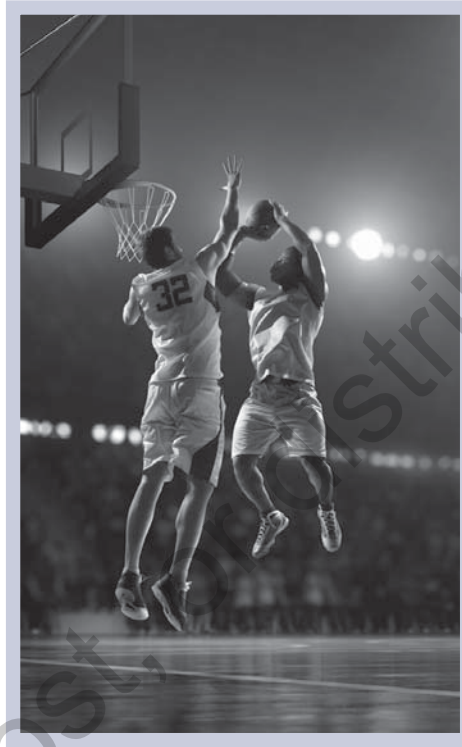
### Self-Discrepancy Theory and Possible Selves

When you reflect on who you are, do you ever think about your *possible* selves, such as who you would *like* to be or what kind of a person you *ought* to be? **Self-discrepancy theory** postulates that each of us has an actual self, an ideal self, and an ought self (Hardin & Larsen, 2014; Higgins, 1989b, 1997; Stanley & Burrow, 2015). Our understanding of who we are is called our **actual self** and is closely tied to our self-concept. In addition, we can imagine the person we would like to be—called the **ideal self**—that consists of the qualities and features that we wish we had (Hardin & Larsen, 2014). Perhaps you work at Starbucks but would rather be interning at a local mental health center. When we feel a discrepancy such as this between our actual and ideal selves, we tend to feel frustrated, dissatisfied, or disappointed (Higgins, 1989).

People also have thoughts about who they think others think they *should* be—what is called the **ought self**. Your ought self comes into play, say, if your parents own the



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#### IS, OUGHT, AND IDEAL SELVES

Are you who your parents want you to be? Who you want to be? Perhaps you work in package delivery (is self), yet you want to be a basketball player (ideal self), and your parents want you to be a doctor (ought self).

local hardware store and have been pressuring you to work there and eventually be the owner. You think that you *ought* to be following the career that your parents prefer, but you have elected to choose your own career path (see photos). Here you would experience an actual-ought discrepancy and may feel guilty, ashamed, or anxious (Higgins, 1989b). As you can see, discrepancies between the actual, ideal, and ought selves have important implications for how we evaluate or feel about ourselves, a theme we will return to later in this chapter in the context of self-esteem.

***Think Again!***

1. *What is your self-concept? A schema?*
2. *What are your actual, ideal, and ought selves?*

**Introspection:**

Looking internally at the self to examine who one is, how one feels, and so forth

**KNOWING WHO WE ARE: INTROSPECTION AND SELF-PERCEPTION**

How do you know who you are? Sounds like an odd question, right? You are probably thinking something like “I know who I am because I can look inside and see myself.” Unfortunately, looking internally at the self to examine who we are, how we feel, and so forth—a process we call **introspection**—may not be as straightforward as it seems (Corallo, Sackur, Dehaene, & Sigman, 2008). As we’ll discuss in a moment, there is no guarantee that mere reflection will uncover important aspects of the self. When introspection falls short, we can engage in a second process called self-perception, during which we essentially examine ourselves from the outside, similarly to what others may do. A third method for learning about the self involves focusing on the responses that other people have to us. In these different ways, others can serve as mirrors that help us better understand who we are.

Cooley (1902) called this aspect of the self the looking-glass self, because we see ourselves partially through the eyes of others or, rather, how we *think* they perceive us (see Chapter 3). Not only can we gain self-knowledge by taking the perspectives of others, but we may also derive an element of our self-esteem from how we believe they appraise us, what are called reflected self-appraisals (Asencio, 2013; Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2011). The interdependence between our self-understanding and our relationships with others further demonstrates once again the close connection between two of our fundamental questions: the nature of the self and of our sociality.

**Introspection**

Who was your third-grade teacher? It probably took you a moment, but eventually the name popped into your mind. How did you produce this answer? Easily, you respond—*I just thought about it!* Or maybe—*I just knew it!* But if I were to press you further and ask you to explain how you retrieved this from your memory, you’d likely hesitate before offering an answer. This is because you typically do not have access to the “how” you generated your response but only the response itself. Let’s look at another scenario. Suppose I were to place four blue sweaters side-by-side on a shelf. I inform you that the sweaters are of differing quality and ask you and nineteen others to individually select your preferred sweater. Unbeknownst to all of you, the sweaters are identical. Judging by the results of



a similar study by Nisbett and Wilson (1977), the vast majority would pick the sweater farthest to the right. When asked to explain why, most would likely state that the one on the right was of better quality than the other three. You would be unaware that the physical placement of the sweaters had an impact on your choice. Why? Because humans often have little access to and knowledge of our internal processes. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) have pro-



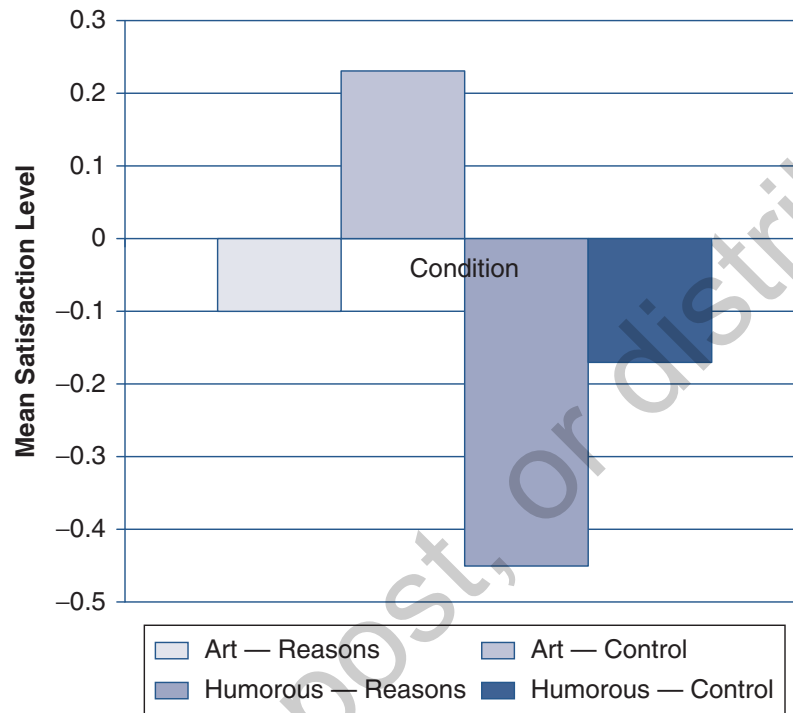
David Grossman / Science Source.

All of us engage in introspection in our efforts to better understand ourselves.

vocatively argued that, although we know the result of our thought processes (e.g., what our third-grade teacher's name was), we often do not know *how* we arrived at that result.

In the fascinating book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Timothy Wilson (2002) reviews the vast research literature on this topic that provides convincing evidence regarding the limits of introspection. Wilson shows that not only are we unaware of how thoughts are produced, we often don't know who we are, what we feel, or why we do what we do! In another study, participants watched a film either while a very loud power saw was operated just outside of the room or with no distracting noise (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Respondents were asked to rate the film on a number of dimensions, and the distraction participants also indicated whether or not the noise affected their evaluations. A majority of the distraction participants reported, erroneously, that the noise had in fact lowered their evaluation of the film. Here, participants believed a stimulus affected them when in fact it did not, and again, introspection failed to uncover the truth.

There is another way in which introspection can fail us: The process of thinking about how we feel can itself change the way we feel (T. D. Wilson et al., 1993). In one study, participants evaluated two artistic and three humorous posters and later had the opportunity to bring one of them home after the experiment. Participants in the *reasons* condition described why they liked each of the posters, whereas those in the *control* condition did not. Wilson et al. predicted and found that participants in the reasons condition were more likely to bring home a humorous poster than were control participants, most likely because it was easier to provide a rationale for preferring the humorous poster to the art poster: it was funny. When all participants were asked at the end of the semester how happy they were with their poster choice, those who had earlier listed reasons were less satisfied than the control participants, especially when they had chosen and justified selection of a humorous poster. The amusing effects of the comical poster—although humor was the initial reason for choosing it—seem to have worn off during the semester. Think about it—how many times can you laugh at the same joke?! Wilson et al.'s (1993) study demonstrates that analyzing reasons for preferences can undermine the pleasure produced by those preferences: Introspection can reduce satisfaction with one's decisions.

**FIGURE 4.1** Introspecting About Reasons Can Undermine Satisfaction

Participants who provided reasons for their choice of poster were less satisfied several weeks after making their choice than control participants, especially if they selected the humorous poster.

Source: Adapted from Wilson, T. D., Lisle, D. J., Schooler, J. W., Hodges, S. D., Klaaren, K. J., & LaFleur, S. J. (1993). Introspecting about reasons can reduce post-choice satisfaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 331–339.

Similarly, another study found that analyzing reasons for liking one's romantic partner decreased satisfaction with that partner (T. D. Wilson & Kraft, 1993).

Clearly, using introspection as a way to understand our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors has its limits (Corallo et al., 2008; E. A. Locke, 2009). Not only might we fail to understand why we act as we do, even thinking about the reasons for liking something can reduce that liking. And here we see that how our understanding of the self is inextricably tied to the limits of our reasoning and the nature of rationality itself. Attempting to achieve rationality can have interesting, if unintended, consequences for the self.

### Self-Perception

As we've seen, introspection is an imperfect way to gain knowledge about who we are. What other means are at our disposal for gaining self-understanding? Well, how do you get to

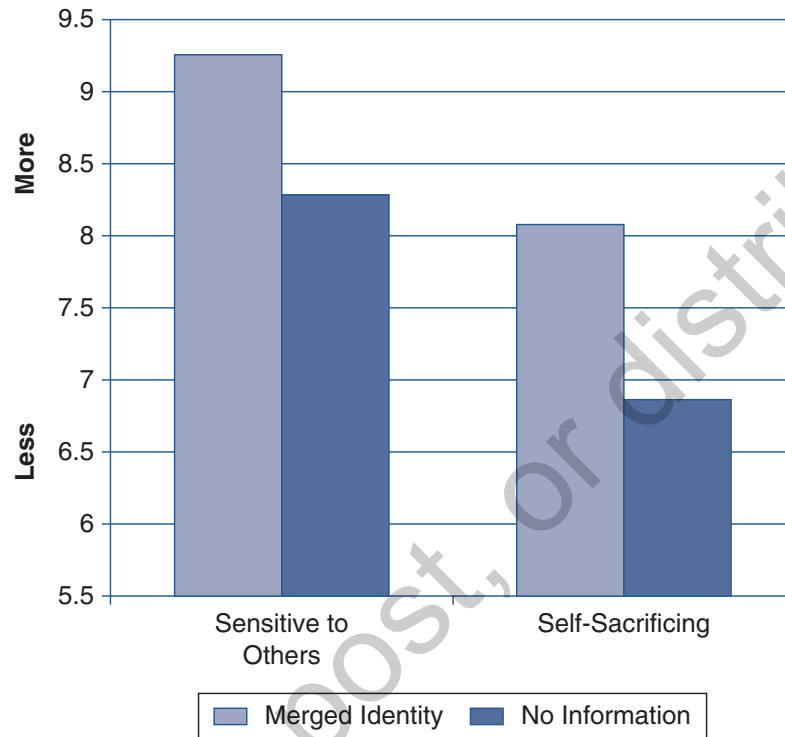
know other people when you don't have direct access to their inner processes? One way is to simply ask them, but then of course you are relying on the questionable veracity of their introspection. Another strategy is to observe their behavior to see how they act in a variety of situations and under various conditions and use this as a guide to determine their attitudes and beliefs. Although not a perfect method, merely watching them could give us insights that asking them could not. The social psychologist Daryl Bem suggested that we can use the same method for gaining insight into our own selves: observe our own behavior. According to Bem's (1967) **self-perception theory**, you can infer your attitude in this same way that a third party might do so: by watching your own behavior (Olson & Stone, 2005; Yee & Bailenson, 2009). Let me say that again: Bem argues that there are times when we rely on observations of our own behavior to figure out what our attitude, emotions, and personality traits are. This is particularly true when our attitudes are weak or ambiguous (Bem, 1967).

Take for example the results of a study of environmental attitudes by Chaiken and Baldwin (1981). Based on their responses to a survey completed earlier in the semester, participants were classified as either holding well-defined or poorly defined attitudes toward protecting the environment. During the subsequent experimental session, participants were led to focus either on their past pro-ecology behaviors or their past anti-ecology behaviors. Finally, they again responded to several questions in which they indicated the extent to which they consider themselves environmentalists. Chaiken and Baldwin predicted that individuals with weak attitudes would, when completing the final attitude measure, infer their attitude toward the environment from the behaviors that they focused on. In this way people with weak attitudes would "observe" their own behavior to determine their attitude. Consequently, those focused on pro-ecology behaviors should identify themselves as pro-ecology, whereas those focused on anti-ecology behaviors should lean toward the anti-ecology attitudes. In contrast, individuals with strong pre-existing attitudes would not need to resort to self-perception to infer their attitudes and therefore would not show any effects of the experimental manipulation.

The findings were as predicted: Self-reported attitudes corresponded to whichever type of behavior participants with weakly defined attitudes concentrated on but not for those with previously well-defined attitudes. In short, consistent with self-perception theory, participants with weak attitudes relied on their own behavior to infer their attitudes (Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981). Two recent extensions of self-perception theory have shown that people's perception of their own avatars—their virtual selves inserted into computer games or online social media—can affect their self-concept as well as their behavior (Yee & Bailenson, 2009) and that people may use their observation of the *behavior* of others to learn about themselves (see Figure 4.2).

Other research has demonstrated that people may also infer their motivation from their behavior, which in turn has implications for whether they will engage in subsequent related behavior. Before discussing this research in class, I present my students with the following scenario: Say my daughter loves to read and does so with great frequency on her own (which is true). Now say I decide to reward her for reading over the summer by giving her

**Self-Perception Theory:** Idea that people sometimes infer their own attitudes in the same way that a third party might infer their attitudes: by watching their behavior

**FIGURE 4.2** Vicarious Self-Perception

Source: Goldstein, N. J., & Cialdini, R. B. (2007). The spyglass self: A model of vicarious self-perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 402–417.

All participants listened to an interview in which the interviewee ultimately decided to provide additional, unexpected help to the interviewer/experimenter. Participants were either led to believe that they were very similar to the interviewee (merged identity condition) or were given no information about similarity (no information condition). Merged-identity participants saw themselves as more sensitive to others and more self-sacrificing versus the no-information participants (higher numbers reflect greater self-rating of sensitivity or self-sacrificing). That is, their self-perceptions changed as a result of witnessing the behavior of a similar other. In addition, as a result of the similarity manipulation, the merged-identity participants were more likely to help the experimenter than were the no-information participants.

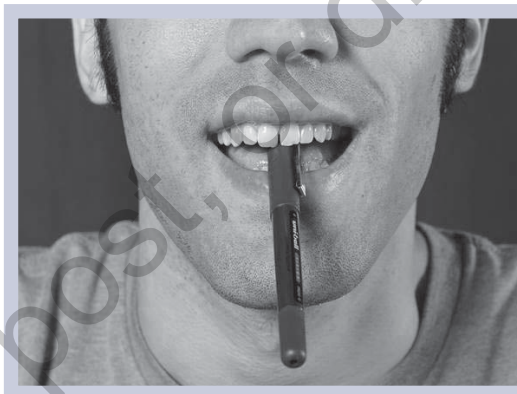
Source: Adapted from Study 2, Goldstein, N. J., & Cialdini, R. B. (2007). The spyglass self: A model of vicarious self-perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 402–417.

\$4 for every book she reads (which I don't). By the end of the summer, I am deeply in debt to her and give her the money she earned. When school starts and I stop rewarding her for reading, is she likely to freely read even more, read about the same, or read less than she did before being offered the money? Most students believe that she will read more because she has been rewarded. In all likelihood, however, my daughter's reading frequency

would likely *decrease*, because she has now associated reading with money, and when the money stops, so too will the reading. As a consequence of my paying her to read, her **intrinsic motivation**—the desire to engage in a behavior simply because it is interesting or enjoyable—would be undermined by an **extrinsic motivation**—the desire to perform the behavior as a result of external rewards or pressures (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Durik & Harackiewicz, 2007; Harackiewicz, Durik, & Barron, 2005). My daughter may reconstrue reading as something that she does for money rather than for sheer enjoyment. Hence she will infer that she must only be reading for money and may stop reading in the absence of this external reinforcement.

This anecdote illustrates the **overjustification effect**, which occurs when one's intrinsic motivation—such as enjoyment experienced by simply enacting the behavior—is weakened by the presence of extrinsic motivation (Forehand, 2000; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973; Lepper, Henderlong, & Gingras, 1999). In one study, giving small children a reward for playing with special, colorful felt-tipped markers made them less likely to voluntarily choose to play with those same markers later (Lepper et al., 1973). Although external rewards may sometimes deter desirable behavior, they are often useful. For instance, rewarding children by praising them for working hard rather than being smart can increase self-motivation and school achievement (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

There is another arena where Bem's self-perception theory offers a useful way of understanding oneself: emotion. Earlier we described how people may not always know how they feel, especially when introspection can itself change one's feelings. Is it possible that, like with attitudes and motivation, observing our behavior may help us determine what we are feeling? According to the **facial feedback hypothesis**, the answer is yes, at least under certain circumstances (Dzokoto, Wallace, Peters, & Bentsi-Enchill, 2014). For instance, Strack, Martin, and Stepper (1988) showed cartoons to participants who evaluated their funniness while holding a pen either between their teeth or in their lips. Participants with the pen



#### HOW FACIAL EXPRESSIONS CAN AFFECT YOUR EMOTIONS

Participants who held a pen in their lips rated a comic as less humorous than those who held a pen in their teeth.

#### **Intrinsic Motivation:**

Desire to engage in a behavior simply because it is interesting or enjoyable

#### **Extrinsic Motivation:**

Desire to perform a behavior as a result of external rewards or pressures

#### **Overjustification Effect:**

When one's intrinsic motivation—such as enjoyment experienced by simply enacting the behavior—is weakened by the presence of extrinsic motivation

#### **Facial Feedback Hypothesis:**

Idea that people infer their feelings from their facial expressions

A Chinese census taker collecting personal information.

Self-reports are often accurate and can be very useful, particularly when the information sought is noncontroversial and the respondent is unlikely to wish to hide his answers from the researcher.



AP Photo/Liu mingxiang - Imaginechina.

between their teeth—which just happens to produce a facial expression that mimics a smile—rated the comics as more humorous than did those with it in their lips—a pose that causes a frown-like expression. Similarly, Kleinke, Peterson, and Rutledge (1998) found that simply watching oneself in the mirror intentionally posing angry or happy facial expressions led people to feel angrier

or happier than others who made the expressions but did not see themselves in the mirror. Here again we see how people infer their inner states by observing their own behavior.

As surprising and counterintuitive as self-perception theory may be, it has wide-ranging application and has received a great deal of empirical support. Note though that Bem (1967) did not argue that we rely exclusively on observing our own behavior when determining our attitudes, feelings, and personality traits, but that we do so only when we are uncertain about them. Earlier in this chapter, we asked how it is that we come to know ourselves. So far we have discussed two ways in which people can learn about their self-concept: introspection and self-perception. But there is an alternative approach: looking to other people for feedback about how we are doing. We will elaborate on this method in the section on self-evaluation and self-enhancement below.

### ***Think Again!***

1. *What are the limits to introspection?*
2. *What does self-perception theory say about how we learn about the self?*
3. *Try listing a couple of activities that you are intrinsically and a couple that you are extrinsically motivated to do.*

## **DOING RESEARCH: QUESTIONING SELF-REPORTS AND SURVEYS**

The most commonly used method for obtaining data in social psychology is the **self-report**, which is an individual's conscious response to a question or situation. A direct question asking about your attitude toward your college is a self-report. Self-reports are often accurate and can be very useful, particularly when the information sought is noncontroversial and

**Self-Report:**  
Individual's conscious response to a question or situation

the respondent is unlikely to wish to hide his answers from the researcher. For example, self-reported gender is likely to be accurate, whereas attitudes toward members of another race is less likely to be. Researchers use self-reports to obtain a variety of data, including people's opinions, feelings, behaviors, and physiological experiences (e.g., hunger or pain). Three advantages of self-report measures are that they are relatively easy to construct, are inexpensive, and can be utilized in a variety of research methods, including surveys, interviews, and many experiments.

There are also several disadvantages to using self-reports, whether in surveys, interviews, or experiments. One is that self-reports may not always provide accurate information, either as a result of participant psychology or the construction of the questions (Krosnick, Lavarakas, & Kim, 2014; Schwarz, 2007b). Researchers have extensively investigated the psychology of self-reports and have identified a number of undesirable response effects that can undermine the accuracy of the answers. **Response effects** are unintended variations in question responses that stem from procedural aspects or features of the survey instrument, such as the wording of a question or the order of the questions (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2015; Helmes, Holden, & Ziegler, 2015; Schwarz, 1999; Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). These survey features may affect how participants understand questions, the role of memory and judgment in generating potential responses, and how participants report their answers (Schwarz, 1999, 2007a; Tourangeau et al., 2000).

One response effect is the **acquiescence bias**, which is the tendency to agree with or say "yes" to questions (Savalei & Falk, 2014). This is of particular concern when conducting cross-cultural research, because clear culture-based differences have been found (Riemer & Shavitt, 2011). For instance, East Asians are more likely to agree with questions than are certain other groups (Grimm & Church, 1999). Another type of response effect is the **extremity bias**, wherein respondents provide answers that are at the extremes of the response options (Levashina, Weekley, Roulin, & Hauck, 2014). For instance, on a scale ranging from "very unlikely" to "very likely," a person exhibiting this bias will tend to choose one of the endpoints of the scale rather than the more moderate options, such as "likely" or "unlikely." As with the acquiescence bias, the extremity bias varies across cultures: African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to demonstrate extreme responding than European Americans, whereas East Asians are less likely (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984; Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1995; Hui & Triandis, 1989). Question wording can also bias or distort the answers (Schwarz, 2007a). A recent example is a survey reported in the *New York Times* in which 20% of respondents said that the U.S. government spent too little on "welfare," but 65% indicated that it spent too little on "assistance to the poor" (See Figure 4.3) (Schneiderman, 2008).

Another response bias may result from the context in which the question is asked. For instance, participants in one study provided different explanations for a mass murder depending on whether the letterhead at the top of the survey was a fictional "Institute for Social Research" or "Institute for Personality Research." In the "social" condition

#### Response Effects:

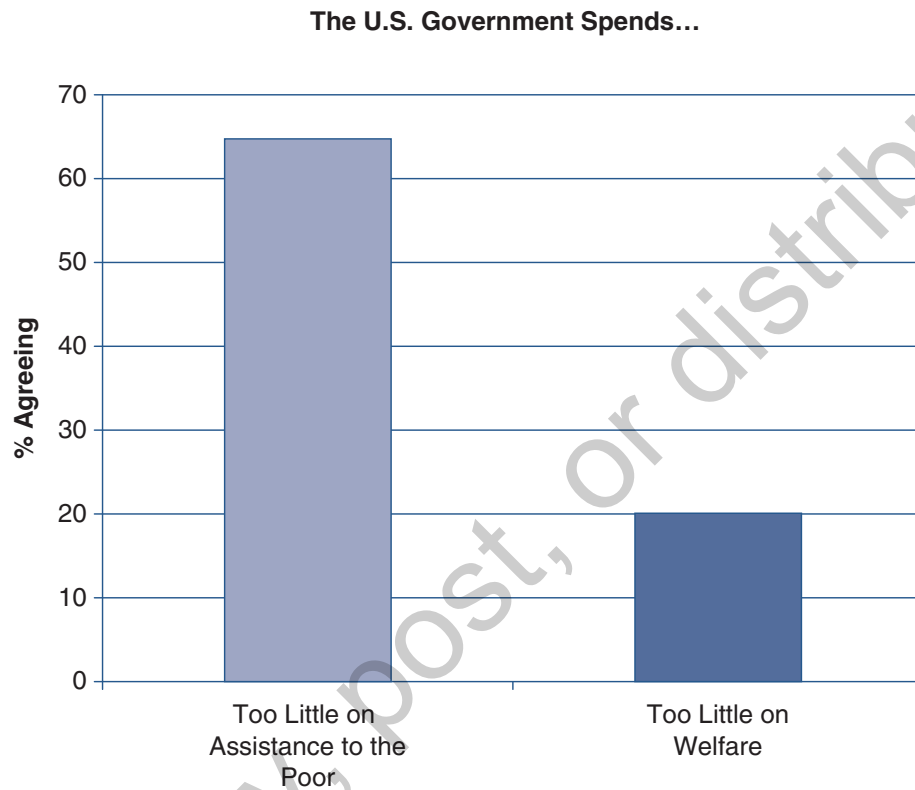
Unintended variations in question responses that stem from procedural aspects or features of the survey instrument, such as the wording of a question or the order of the questions

#### Acquiescence

**Bias:** Tendency to agree with or say "yes" to questions

#### Extremity Bias:

Tendency to provide answers that are at the extremes of the response options

**FIGURE 4.3** Do Americans Still Hate Welfare? Depends on How You Ask

Source: Based on Schneiderman, R. M. (2008, October 30). Do Americans Still Hate Welfare? *The New York Times*.

Often different data can be obtained by asking the same question in varying ways. A recent example is a 2006 survey by the National Opinion Research Center reported in the *New York Times* in which 20% of respondents said that the U.S. government spent too little money on “welfare,” but 65% indicated that it spent too little on “assistance to the poor.”

Source: Reported in Schneiderman, R. M. (2008, October 30). Do Americans still hate welfare. *The New York Times*.

respondents tended to focus on external or environmental causes, in contrast to the internal or personality factors emphasized in the “personality” condition (Norenzayan & Schwarz, 1999). Such **context effects**—variations in responding because of survey features encountered prior to answering a question—are also seen when the presence or wording of earlier questions alters responses to later ones (Schwarz, 1999; Toepoel & Couper, 2011; Weijters, Geuens, & Baumgartner, 2013). Researchers need to consider these biases when designing surveys and other self-reports (Schwarz, 1999, 2007a). One additional weakness in self-reports was discussed above: We often do not know how we

**Context Effects:**  
Variations in responding because of survey features encountered prior to answering a question



know what we know; that is, we cannot report on many of our mental processes, even if we can report on the outcome (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

**Surveys** are questionnaires that consist entirely of self-report items that can be administered on paper, computer, online, or during interviews. Survey research has several advantages over other strategies: It is relatively inexpensive, questionnaires are fairly easy to construct and implement, and they can be administered to large numbers of people quickly. As a result, surveys are widely used in social psychological research.

Unfortunately, there are several disadvantages that may outweigh the benefits of doing survey research. The first is that it does not allow for the manipulation of variables that is at the core of experimental research (discussed in Chapter 1). As a consequence, survey findings are only correlational and cannot be used to establish causal relations among variables. Second, there are many social psychological phenomena that cannot be studied using the survey method. For instance, asking people to imagine being in a particular situation—say, in a group of people of a different race—may not replicate the effects of actually being in that group. Finally, the utility of survey research depends upon the sample of individuals who participate in it—responses from Caucasian college students in Boston may not reflect those from Argentinians in Buenos Aires.

#### Surveys:

Questionnaires that consist entirely of self-report items that can be administered on paper, computer, online, or in interviews

### ***Think Again!***

1. *What are the advantages of self-reports?*
2. *What are the disadvantages of self-reports?*
3. *What are the three types of response biases?*

## **EVALUATING HOW WE ARE DOING**

### **Self-Esteem**

Let's say that you have a pretty good grasp of your self-concept—who you are as a person. How do you feel about the person you are? Do you like your personality, your social skills, your competencies, your relationships? Are there qualities or characteristics that you'd like to change? Your positive or negative evaluation of yourself as a whole is called your **self-esteem** (MacDonald, 2007; Rosenberg, 1965, 1989). In contrast to self-concept, which is who you are, self-esteem reflects how you *feel* about who you are (Carmichael, Tsai, Smith, Caprariello, & Reis, 2007; Sharma & Agarwala, 2014). If you have a generally positive view of yourself, then you have relatively high self-esteem. If instead you generally feel bad about yourself, your self-esteem is relatively low.

#### Self-Esteem:

Overall positive or negative evaluation of oneself

When laypeople talk about self-esteem, they typically mean *global* self-esteem, which is an overall evaluation of your whole self that encompasses many narrower self-evaluations confined to particular domains (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Self-esteem is a multifaceted construct, as you may have different evaluations of yourself regarding various elements of your personality, social skills, and competencies, with more weight given to those that are important to you (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Wagner, Hoppmann, Ram, & Gerstorf, 2015). Perhaps you consider yourself to be a pretty good student, a reliable friend, an unusually skilled musician, and a poor public speaker. If most of your self-concept is associated with how you perform as a musician, for instance, your self-esteem is heavily dependent on how you do in just that one domain. A failure or setback in that domain—such as blowing an audition for a band—can be quite devastating. In contrast, a person whose self-esteem is drawn from many domains—musician, student, long distance runner, parent, and so forth—tends to be more resilient, because any one setback is not as important. Self-esteem based on performance in multiple domains tends to be more stable. Self-esteem stability, in turn, helps predict how we will feel from day to day, as stable self-esteem means that a person's self-image will not bounce around in response to everyday pleasures and pains, setbacks, and successes.

Not surprisingly, people with high self-esteem also exhibit more self-esteem stability (Seery, Blascovich, Weisbuch, & Vick, 2004; Wagner et al., 2015). Crocker and Wolfe (2001) call the way in which self-esteem draws from multiple domains the contingencies of self-worth (L. E. Park & Maner, 2009). College students tend to derive most of their self-esteem from their academic performance, moral behavior, identity, approval from others, appearance, and religion (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). There may also be genetic influences on both the level and stability of self-esteem (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2006).

Why do people want high self-esteem? One explanation is that high self-esteem feels better than low self-esteem, and people obviously prefer the former. In this sense one can argue that people want a positive self-image or high self-esteem because it feels good. That is of course accurate, but it may only be part of the story. According to the **sociometer hypothesis**, self-esteem is closely linked to the quality of the relationships we have with other people (Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010; Leary, 1999, 2005). Given the enormous importance of our memberships in groups for survival and reproduction, people are particularly sensitive to social inclusion and exclusion. As a consequence of evolutionary pressures, humans have developed a psychological mechanism—the sociometer—that assesses the strength and importance of those relationships—what Leary (2005) calls their relational value. Self-esteem, then, is essentially an index of that relational value: how much you think important others value their relationships with you or accept you (MacDonald, 2007). In other words, how you feel about yourself is closely tied to how you feel others evaluate you. The sociometer hypothesis has been empirically supported both by cross-cultural research (MacDonald, 2007) and studies of brain functioning, in which a specific part of the brain—called the ventral anterior cingulate cortex (vACC)—is uniquely

**Sociometer Hypothesis:** Idea that people have a psychological mechanism—the sociometer—that assesses the strength and importance of social relationships and that these relationships strongly influence self-esteem

responsive to feedback regarding one's acceptance or rejection by others (Heatherston, Krendl, Macrae, & Kelley, 2007).

Self-esteem has important implications for how we view and respond to the world—we often see the world through a lens of self-protective mechanisms designed to shield self-esteem from bumps and bruises (more on this later) (Carmichael et al., 2007). In general, people strive to have high self-esteem and to instill it in their children (Crocker & Park, 2004). People assume that high self-esteem a good thing—but is it? Well, it depends on how high. Reasonably—but not excessively—high self-esteem is clearly adaptive and is positively correlated with overall physical and psychological health, especially if it is also stable (Kernis, 2005). People who have high self-esteem tend to demonstrate greater self-reported well-being, life satisfaction, better coping, and more positive affect, and persist longer at completing tasks, including difficult ones (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Furthermore, low self-esteem is related to poor health outcomes, signs of psychological distress (including hopelessness, anxiety, and depression), and increased vulnerability to personal failures and setbacks. However, excessively high self-esteem is associated with more aggression, bullying, and exhibitionism (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Despite the central role of self-esteem in psychological functioning and the enormous quantity of research focused on it, questions remain about how best to measure self-esteem (see Self-Reflection 4.1) (Falk & Heine, 2015; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Kwan & Mandisodza, 2007; Pelham et al., 2005).

What about gender and ethnic differences in self-esteem? We often hear that men generally have higher self-esteem than women (Williams & Best, 1990). By and large, that is correct, although the difference is not great. Interestingly, the disparities between the sexes tend to be found only for women in the middle and lower classes. This is likely due to the fact that women in these circumstances are less able to obtain desirable occupational positions than men: They are excluded to a greater extent from important domains of life (Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999). These gender differences emerge during adolescence and adulthood, after females have been subjected to devaluation and discrimination (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Moreover, the differences are found primarily between Caucasian men and women: Women and men minorities generally don't differ in their levels of self-esteem. Lastly, although there is a perception that minorities have lower self-esteem than Caucasians, the picture is more complex. African Americans tend to have higher self-esteem than do Caucasians, but the self-esteem of members of Asian, Hispanic, and Native American groups tends to be lower (Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

What influences our self-esteem? For one thing, individuals with a clearer self-concept—what is called self-concept clarity—have higher self-esteem than those with more ambiguous self-concepts (Campbell, 1990; Osborne & Taylor, 2010). Being more certain about who you are appears to help buffer your self-esteem from the ups and downs of everyday life. In the remainder of the chapter we'll discuss several other important influences on self-esteem: how we cope with successes and failures, comparisons we make, and how we perceive the way others evaluate us. We will also review some of the strategies that people use to promote and protect their self-esteem.

**Theory of Social Comparison**

**Processes:** Idea that people will evaluate how they are doing using subjective standards when objective standards are not available

**Social Comparison:**

Monitoring how one is doing and adjusting one's behavior accordingly in an effort to be liked by important others

**Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (SEM):**

Postulates that a person typically only makes social comparisons when this will improve her or his self-evaluation

## Self-Enhancement

Given how important it is to feel good about ourselves, it is not surprising that we expend tremendous effort engaging in a variety of self-evaluation and self-enhancement strategies. We continuously monitor how we are doing and adjust our behavior accordingly in an effort to be liked by others, particularly those who are important to us (Church et al., 2014). How do we do this? According to Leon Festinger's **theory of social comparison processes** (1954), we first look to unambiguous, objective standards to help determine how we are doing; when such objective measures are unavailable, we resort to subjective social comparison. For instance, if you regularly jog three miles, you can time yourself and track whether or not you are getting faster (or slower!). However, in many important competencies, attributes, and opinions, no objective standards are available. Instead, says Festinger (1954), we will look to others to help with our self-evaluation. Festinger assumed that people are motivated to be accurate in their beliefs and opinions and that **social comparison** can provide us with critical feedback (Wood, 1996). For example, how do you know what to wear when meeting your partner's parents for the first time? You ask your partner. Do you think that President Obama is doing a good job? You may have your own thoughts, but it is quite likely that you'll check around to see what others think—perhaps people in the media, the professor in your history class, your friends—and their opinions will inform your own. You want to hold correct opinions, and social comparison can provide us with important information concerning their accuracy (Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2006; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014).

Who are you most likely to compare yourself to? Our general tendency is to compare ourselves with similar others, such as peers or siblings. But if that comparison results in a lowered self-evaluation—like if your little brother is a superior piano player—then you may avoid comparing yourself to him (Lockwood & Matthews, 2007; Nicholls & Stukas, 2011). According to Tesser's **self-evaluation maintenance model** (SEM), you'll typically only make comparisons when they will improve your self-evaluation; if they will make you look or feel good (Nicholls & Stukas, 2011; Tesser, 1988; Wood, Michela, & Giordano, 2000). SEM theory assumes that (a) people are motivated to maintain or enhance positive self-evaluation, and (b) there are two primary ways that people do this: social comparison and reflection (Tesser, 1988).

In the piano player example, if a close friend outperforms us on a dimension that is relevant to our self-concept, then we may attempt to distance ourselves from the friend and not engage in social comparison (Lockwood & Matthews, 2007). Alternatively, we could practice even more to improve our performance, simply avoid the comparison altogether, or give up the piano. To the extent that piano playing is no longer relevant to the self-concept, the reflection process becomes more important than the comparison process. By reflection, Tesser means that we allow the successes of others to reflect on us, thereby helping us to maintain a positive self-image. If your brother is an outstanding piano player, then by more closely associating with him you can enhance your self-esteem, because his success reflects well on you (Tesser, 1988, 2003).

## SELF-REFLECTION 4.1

### Measuring Your Self-Esteem (Part 1)

As you see in the main text, self-esteem is how we feel about or evaluate our self. One of the most frequently used self-esteem measures is the 10-item scale published by Morris Rosenberg (1965). This scale is primarily used to measure global, as opposed to specific, self-esteem (see text). To get a rough idea as to your self-esteem, take a minute and answer the following questions, and then turn the page to interpret your score.

**TABLE 4.2** Measuring Your Self-Esteem

Item	Response options			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	1	2	3	4
2. At times, I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4
6. I certainly feel useless at times.	1	2	3	4
7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at or on an equal plane with others.	1	2	3	4
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	1	2	3	4
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	1	2	3	4

Source: Adapted from Rosenberg, M. (1989). *Society and the adolescent self-image* (Rev. ed.). Middletown, CT England: Wesleyan University Press.

TURN THE PAGE TO FIND OUR ANSWERS.

## SELF-REFLECTION 4.2

### Measuring Your Self-Esteem (Part 2)

Scoring key: for items 1, 3, 4, 7, and 10, SA = 3, A = 2, D = 1, SD = 0; for items 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9: SA = 0, A = 2, D = 2, SD = 3. To calculate your score, write the number corresponding to your answer to the right of each item. Next add up all of the scores to obtain your total score. The higher the score, the higher your self-esteem is. Your score should fall between 0 and 30. The average score for an adult is about 22, and the majority of people score between 15 and 25. *(Please note that your score is simply a rough estimate and does not constitute a clinical diagnosis.)*

The social comparison and reflection processes are but two of the many strategies people use to manage their self-esteem via self-protection or self-promotion (Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedikides, 2010). **Self-protection** refers to efforts to maintain or defend one's positive self-image, whereas **self-promotion** is focused on enhancing one's self-image (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Higgins, 1997). In the next couple of sections we'll review some common strategies people use in the service of self-protection and/or self-promotion.

#### Social Comparison: Looking Up and Looking Down

An important postulate of SEM is that people manage their social comparisons in order to maintain a positive self-image (Strickhouser & Zell, 2015; Tesser, 2003). We decide who to compare ourselves to based on whether or not the comparison will enhance our self-worth. When people engage in **downward social comparison**, they contrast their own performance, ability, or situation with individuals who did less well, have weaker abilities, or are in worse situations (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Ross & Bowen, 2010). Say you drive a rusty 1988 Volkswagen with numerous dings, scratches, dents, and malfunctioning controls, and occasionally think "I drive such a crappy, ugly car." But then you may remember that your best friend has no car at all, and as a result, you feel a bit better (Buunk & Oldersma, 2001). Even cancer patients may contrast the severity of their disease with that of others who are worse off as a way of feeling better about their own situation (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Another self-enhancing comparison people often make is with their former selves, typically believing that they have improved over the years (Kanten & Teigen, 2008).

In contrast to downward comparison, you may instead engage in **upward social comparison**, in which you evaluate your performance, ability, or situation with a superior person's (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012; Tesser, 1988). Perhaps you look at the "A" a classmate received on an exam and compare it to your "B." Or maybe you notice how

#### Self-Protection:

Efforts intended to maintain or defend one's positive self-image

#### Self-Promotion:

Efforts designed to enhance one's self-image

#### Downward Social Comparison:

Contrasting one's own performance, ability, or situation with individuals who did less well, have weaker abilities, or are in worse situations

#### Upward Social Comparison:

Contrasting one's performance, ability, or situation with individuals who performed better, have stronger abilities, or are in better situations

an acquaintance keeps beating you at Wii tennis. Using these comparisons to motivate yourself to work hard and perform better would be a beneficial result of upward comparison (Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons, & Kuyper, 1999). In this case, your motive is neither accurate self-evaluation nor self-enhancement but rather self-improvement. In contrast, a negative result of such upward comparison occurs when you allow the comparison to demoralize you by focusing your thoughts on what you haven't achieved (Dunn, Ruedy, & Schweitzer, 2012). Both upward and downward social comparisons are most useful when you compare yourself to people who are similar to you on relevant characteristics (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). For instance, you may be better off contrasting your cycling prowess with your brother's rather than Lance Armstrong's.

A related tactic people can use to improve their self-esteem is to engage in **counterfactual thinking** or imagining what *could* have happened (Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Petrocelli, Percy, Sherman, & Tormala, 2011). Victoria Medvec and her colleagues studied silver and bronze medalists' reactions to their event placements in the 1992 Summer Olympic games and the 1994 Empire State Games. Who do you think would feel better after completing an important competition, the bronze medal winners who placed third or silver medal winners who placed second? Using videotapes of the award ceremonies and interviews with winners, they found that bronze medalists were *more* satisfied with their medals than were silver medalists, despite the fact that silver medalists had obviously performed better than their counterparts. Why? Well, bronze medalists primarily focused on the counterfactual that they *almost* received no medal at all (almost came in fourth), and that increased their satisfaction with their achievement. In contrast, silver medalists thought more about a different alternative outcome—that they *almost* won the gold medal—and as result were more disappointed (Medvec et al., 1995).

### False Consensus and False Uniqueness

Would you prefer to be like most other people or different from them? It probably depends on what aspects of yourself you are thinking about. In some domains—such as opinions and behaviors—people would rather that others see the world in the same way that they do, but in others—such as personal abilities—we prefer to stand out. Oftentimes people believe that their opinions or behaviors are more common than they actually are, and thus exhibit the **false consensus effect** (Mullen, 1985; H. S. Park, 2012; L. Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). In one study, students were asked to wear a sandwich board sign displaying either “Repent” or “Eat at Joe’s” for 30 minutes. Whether they said yes or no, each estimated how many other students were likely to agree to the same request. Most of the participants *overestimated* the number of students who would make the same decision that they did. This was especially true for those who agreed to wear the “Eat at Joe’s” sign: Only 30% of the students actually agreed to carry it, but they predicted that 57% of other students would (L. Ross et al., 1977).

**Counterfactual Thinking:** Imagining what *could* have happened (but did not)

**False Consensus Effect:** Believing that one's opinions or behaviors are more common than they actually are

People demonstrate the false consensus effect in many arenas of life, including adolescents' predictions of peer substance use and adults' estimates of how others will respond to particular behavioral experiences or how many showers others will take during a shower ban (Henry, Kobus, & Schoeny, 2011; Kammrath, 2011; Monin & Norton, 2003), and are especially likely to do so when in an opinion minority (Marks & Miller, 1987). For instance, Whitley (1998) found that sexually active college women overestimated the level of sexual activity of other college women, as compared to the estimates of nonsexually active women. Believing that other people hold the same opinions or engage in the same behaviors can maintain our self-esteem (Marks & Miller, 1987), and avoiding discussion of topics on which there is potential disagreement may help us maintain this belief (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010).

Although we often find comfort when we think others are similar to us, there are times when we'd prefer to stand out from the crowd. This primarily occurs with respect to one's abilities or competencies, because we'd like to think that we are uncommonly talented. As in the case with false consensus, we are often mistaken about how we compare to others, except that here we inaccurately believe that we are *different* from them. For instance, people who engage in socially desirable behaviors, like giving blood, may underestimate how many others would do the same (Goethals, 1986). When we hold incorrect beliefs about how different we are, we demonstrate the **false uniqueness effect**, and as with the false consensus effect, this tendency serves to enhance our self-esteem (Goethals, 1986; Monin & Norton, 2003; H. S. Park, 2012). Both the false consensus and false uniqueness effects stem in part from our lack of knowledge of the true attitudes or attributes of others.

Are you more or less socially skilled than the average person? More ethical? A better driver? Well, most people believe that they are more ethical and are better-than-average drivers, even if they have a history of auto accidents (Guerin, 1994; Lovett, 1997). In fact, you probably think that you are better-than-average on most desirable characteristics, which is called the **better-than-average effect** (see Research box 4.1) (Gilovich, 1991; Guenther & Alicke, 2010). This effect is also known in the United States as the Lake Wobegon effect, because in Lake Wobegon, the fictional community invented by Garrison Keilor, "the women are strong and the men are good-looking and all the children are above average." When do people prefer to see themselves as distinct versus similar to others? It depends on the desirability of the behavior in question. If the behavior is seen as positive, then people overestimate their uniqueness; however, for our negative behaviors, we'd rather believe that many others do them as well (Marks, 1984).

### Self-Serving Judgments

When you do well on a psychology exam, what is the reason? Did you work hard? Or are you simply smart? What if you fail? Were the professor's questions incomprehensible? Or were you deathly sick the night before? People often answer questions like these with judgments that enhance their self-esteem (Gilovich, 1991; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004). If, like many of us, you take credit for your successes but blame outside

#### **False Uniqueness Effect:**

Holding incorrect beliefs about how different one is from others

#### **Better-Than-Average Effect:**

Judging that one is above average on most desirable characteristics



## RESEARCH BOX 4.1

### THE BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE EFFECT

**Hypothesis:** Participants will rate themselves as better or higher than their college peers across a range of personality traits.

**Research Method:** As part of a larger testing situation, participants rated themselves or their average college peer on twenty-three traits, including cooperativeness, intelligence, truthfulness, kindness, attractiveness, and athleticism. Participants in a control condition did not complete these ratings. Eight weeks later, participants who initially rated themselves now rated the average peer, and those who initially rated their average peer now rated themselves. Control participants rated both themselves and their average peer.

**Results:** The results confirmed the hypothesis. Regardless of whether participants rated themselves before, after, or simultaneously with the ratings of their peers, their self-ratings were typically higher than their peer ratings.

**Conclusion:** College students continue to believe that they are better than the average college student.

Source: Adapted from Guenther, C. L., & Alicke, M. D. (2010). Deconstructing the better-than-average effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99, 755–770.

factors for your failures, you are demonstrating one type of self-serving belief known as the **self-serving attributional bias** or, more simply, the self-serving bias (Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008). Attributions are explanations that people give for their own or others' behavior; when you attribute your high grade to hard work, you are claiming that your grade was a result of your personal effort. The self-serving bias helps us maintain our self-esteem by bolstering us when things go well and buffering us against negative events by blaming outside factors. Basically, you feel good when you succeed, *and* you feel good when you fail (because it wasn't your fault).

### The Bias Blind Spot: Being Biased About Being Biased

One of the most interesting self-serving biases is the bias people have about being biased. While acknowledging that the average American exhibits many of the biases described in this section, people tend to believe *they* and they alone are somehow immune to those very same biases, including the self-serving bias! Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) found

#### **Self-Serving Attributional Bias:**

Taking credit for one's successes but blaming outside factors for one's failures

that people exhibit this **bias blind spot** for several different types of cognitive biases. Instances of this blindness often occur in the context of negotiations, wherein the conflicting parties are unable to identify their own biases but are quick to do so in their adversaries (Frantz, 2006). Even when people admit to having biases in theory, they tend to deny them in specific situations (West, Meserve, & Stanovich, 2012).

### ***Think Again!***

1. *How is self-esteem different from self-concept?*
2. *What are two ways do you enhance your self-esteem?*
3. *What is the bias blind spot? Do you think you have this bias?*

## **SELF-PRESENTATION: DISPLAYING ONESELF**

We've already seen that the self-concept is the sum total of what you believe about yourself—your attributes, qualities, competencies, and so forth—and how self-esteem represents your evaluation of your self-concept. There is a third aspect to the self that is also important in building and shaping who we are: our **interpersonal self**, which is the self we present to others (Burusic & Ribar, 2014). We manage our self-image and protect our self-esteem through tactical self-presentation or impression management. **Impression management** represents our efforts to project the image that we wish others to have of us (Bourdage, Wiltshire, & Lee, 2015; Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Nguyen, 2013; Schlenker, 2000). The specific tactics that we choose will partially depend on how we imagine other people perceive and judge us, which in turn can affect our sense of self. We engage in self-presentational strategies so that others will see us as we see ourselves, which of course requires that we attempt to take the perspective of others to gain insight into our self-presentation (Leary & Allen, 2011). There are several goals of self-presentation: We want others to like us, to see us as competent, and to verify or affirm the self (Jones, 1990; Swann, 1990; Uziel, 2010).

### **Self-Monitoring**

When you walk into class or a party, how much do you think about the impressions you are making on others? Do you wonder how others perceive your actions and appearance? If you do this a lot, then you are probably high in **self-monitoring**. Self-monitoring is the extent to which people chronically think about how they appear to others and, as a consequence, change their appearance and behavior to fit the circumstances (Abell & Brewer, 2014; Choi, Moon, & Chun, 2015; Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). People who are

#### **Bias Blind Spot:**

Believing that one is immune to cognitive biases that affect others

#### **Interpersonal Self:**

Way we present ourselves to other people

#### **Impression Management:**

Efforts to project the image of the self that a person wants others to have

#### **Self-Monitoring:**

Extent to which people chronically think about how they appear to others and, as a consequence, change their appearance and behavior to fit the circumstances

low in self-monitoring tend to be less concerned about others' perceptions of them and usually act in similar ways across situations (Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011). For instance, do you know someone who behaves in pretty much the same way no matter what setting she is in—perhaps is loud, profane, unkempt, and dressed in a baseball cap, T-shirt, and jeans regardless of the situation? She would be a low self-monitor. Compare her with a high self-monitor, who carefully selects his clothing and hairstyle to match social situations and tries hard to fit in with whomever he is with.

A high self-monitor tends to express different attitudes to different audiences—even if it entails endorsing attitudes that he doesn't hold—and is more likely to mimic the behavior of others (Estow, Jamieson, & Yates, 2007; Leary & Allen, 2011). In contrast to low self-monitors, high self-monitors are more likely to act in accordance with social norms and are better able to read and respond to the interpersonal cues and emotions of others (Fuglestad & Snyder, 2010; Snyder, 1974). Differences between high and low self-monitors extend to romantic relationships—where the former focus more on surface characteristics such as physical attractiveness—and advertising—where image-oriented ads appeal to those at the high end of the scale (Snyder & DeBono, 1985). Some of my students have argued that self-monitoring is undesirable because it is overly conformist. However, they backpedal a bit when they realize how frequently they self-monitor and how important matching the behavior of others and fitting in are.

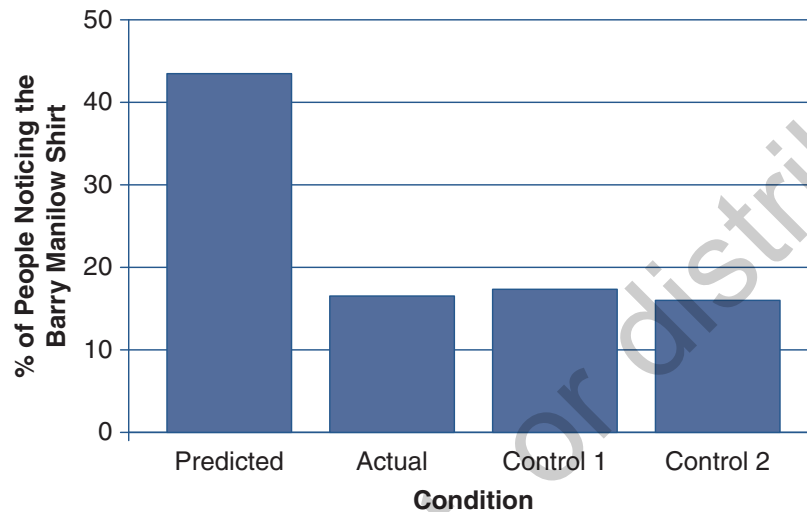
### The Spotlight Effect and the Illusion of Transparency

How would you feel if you were asked, while wearing a T-shirt with a large headshot of Justin Bieber, to enter a room with 6 college students, all of whom could potentially notice your shirt (and are unlikely to be Bieber fans)? Perhaps a bit embarrassed? How many of them would likely remember who was on your shirt? Well, if you were like the participants in a set of studies by Gilovich, Medvec, and Savitsky (2000), you'd think that more people took note of it than actually did. Irrespective of our dispositional self-monitoring level, many of us overestimate the extent to which other people are observing and noticing us—something called the **spotlight effect** (Gilovich et al., 2000; Lawson, 2010). In one study, participants wore a T-shirt displaying the somewhat embarrassing image of Barry Manilow when they entered a room of college students (See Figure 4.4). Participants later estimated that 46% of observers would remember the celebrity on the T-shirt, when in fact only 23% did. People similarly exaggerate how many others notice when they wear a nonembarrassing shirt or make positive or negative contributions to a group discussion or engage in another social blunder (Epley, Savitsky, & Gilovich, 2002; Gilovich et al., 2000). In effect, people tend to think they are in a veritable social spotlight.

A related phenomenon occurs with respect to how strongly we believe that others can “read” our emotions or detect lies that we utter merely by looking at our facial expressions. Social psychologists call this the **illusion of transparency** (Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998; Holder & Hawkins, 2007). For example, participants in one study were asked to hide

**Spotlight Effect:**  
Overestimation of the extent to which other people are observing and noticing one

**Illusion of Transparency:**  
Incorrect belief that others can “read” our emotions or detect our lies merely by looking at our facial expressions

**FIGURE 4.4** The Spotlight Effect

Source: Adapted from Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (2000). The spotlight effect in social judgment: An egocentric bias in estimates of the salience of one's own actions and appearance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 211–222.

their expressions of disgust while drinking unpleasant fluids and subsequently overestimated how many observers accurately perceived their true reaction (Brown & Stopa, 2007; Gilovich et al., 1998; MacInnis, Mackinnon, & MacIntyre, 2010). Both the spotlight effect and the illusion of transparency illustrate the fact that accurately understanding how other people perceive us can be challenging (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999).

### Getting Them to Like Me: Ingratiation

People often say “flattery will get you nowhere.” However, contrary to this common cliché, flattery will get you everywhere, unless it is too obvious (Westphal & Stern, 2007)! One of the best ways to get people to like you is to make them believe that you like them, and flattery is one strategy for accomplishing that (see Table 4.3) (Seiter, 2007). **Ingratiation** refers to attempts to get particular persons to like us, and ingratiation tactics include flattery, providing favors and gifts, agreeing with them, emphasizing that person's positive qualities, and acting modestly (Jones, 1990; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). As Jones (1990) noted, we like people who like us. At times we may even go as far as to change our reported attitudes so that we appear to agree with those of an attractive member of the opposite sex who we expect to meet shortly (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998; Zanna & Pack, 1975).

#### Ingratiation:

Attempts to get particular persons to like us

**TABLE 4.3** Strategies of Self-Presentation

Name	Examples
Self-monitoring	Changing one's behavior and attitudes to fit in
Ingratiation	Flattery, giving gifts, doing favors, opinion agreement
Self-promotion	Demonstrating competence, claiming competence
Self-handicapping	Creating obstacles to provide excuses for failure

Ingratiation techniques can backfire, however, if they are seen as blatant attempts to gain favor (Brodsky & Cannon, 2006). Therefore, in order to be successful, ingratiation has to be conducted illicitly, so as not to be too obvious (Tal-Or, 2010b). There is a paradoxical aspect to ingratiation: Sometimes the very people we want to impress are high status individuals who are particularly attuned to attempts to garner favor (Jones, 1990). They are particularly skilled at recognizing when others try to ingratiate themselves. Fortunately, the target of ingratiation is more likely to believe that ingratiation tactics—such as compliments—are authentic or accurate than are neutral third parties (Varma, Toh, & Pichler, 2006). As you can see, ingratiation tactics are especially suited to obtaining the first self-presentational goal: to be seen as likable.

### Getting Them to Appreciate Me: Self-Promotion

Although it is important to be liked, there are times when we prefer to be seen as competent—as a capable student, barista, professor, and so forth (Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, 2010). Self-promotion refers to efforts designed to convince others of one's competence (Cialdini et al., 1976; Jones, 1990). As with ingratiation, there are a number of self-promotional tactics that may be employed. One is to demonstrate competence by performing the requisite behavior in front of those we want to impress (e.g., come watch me teach!). For example, study participants expecting to be contestants on a *Jeopardy* game show chose to sit in a more visible, prominent seat when they believed they would perform well—that they would know the answers—as compared to those who were less confident (Akimoto, Sanbonmatsu, & Ho, 2000). Another is simply by stating it: “I am a good teacher”—of course, be sure that you can back up your claim to competence! A third is by referring to other sources of objective information (“just look at my teaching evaluations and my teaching award!”) (Cialdini et al., 1976; Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy, 2006; Tal-Or, 2010a).

Self-promotion becomes particularly important when you are trying to obtain a job, a raise, or entry into college or graduate school (See the Social Psychology Applied to

Work: Managing Impressions text box). Obviously, it is important to convince a potential employer that you are competent, and self-promotional strategies have been shown to accomplish that (Stevens & Kristof, 1995). As with ingratiation, there is a paradox of self-promotion: Truly competent people don't need to claim it, because their performance should be sufficient to demonstrate their competence (Jones, 1990). In fact, self-promotion can sometimes backfire, especially for women, for whom norms of modesty are more salient (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, 1998). Earlier we mentioned that people can use modesty as an ingratiation tactic ("I owe all of my teaching proficiency to my graduate mentors and colleagues!"). However, too much modesty might actually mask your competence—and if the modesty is seen as false, then liking may decrease along with perceived competence.

## SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPLIED TO WORK

### MANAGING IMPRESSIONS

As you know, people strive to ensure that others have favorable opinions of them. One domain of life in which positive impressions are particularly important is work—otherwise we wouldn't be able to obtain, keep, or advance in our jobs. Social psychologists and others have extensively investigated how people attempt to manage the impressions they make during interviews as well as on the job (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009; Bourdage et al., 2015; Cialdini, Petrova, & Goldstein, 2004; Ingold, Kleinmann, König, & Melchers, 2015; Jones & Pittman, 1982). There are many strategies people may use to manage impressions, including providing answers that are more socially desirable than their true answers (e.g., stating that they like working in teams even if

they don't because they think the interviewer wants to hear this) or claiming skills and/or experiences that they do not have (Levashina & Campion, 2007; Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2015; Tsai, Huang, Wu, & Lo, 2010; Weiss & Feldman, 2006).

For instance, using three measures of faking, O'Connell, Kung, and Tristan (2011) found that job applicants were more deceptive than existing employees and that they also gave significantly more positive self-reports than did employees (see this chapter's *Doing Research* text box). Levashina and Campion (2007) developed an Interview Faking Behavior Scale that could accurately reveal when individuals were faking answers during interviews. They

learned that more deception occurs when people are asked about hypothetical situations (e.g., “Suppose you have a great idea, but there is opposition to it among your colleagues. What would you do to persuade your colleagues to ‘see things your way’?”) than past behavior (e.g., “Describe a time when you had a great idea, but there was opposition to it. How did you do persuade your colleagues to ‘see things your way’?”). Moreover, participants tended to fake their answers more when the interviewers did not engage in follow-up questioning after receiving the initial answers.

People of course differ in the extent to which they actively manage impressions. For example, it won’t surprise you that individuals who are relatively high on an honesty-humility personality dimension are less likely to engage in impression management (Bourdage et al., 2015). Extraverts have a greater tendency to self-promote and attempt to ingratiate

themselves than do introverts, and more agreeable individuals also engage in ingratiation. Other research has shown that people who are actively managing impressions are also more prone to misrepresenting themselves on personality scales (Ingold et al., 2015). Guadagno and Cialdini (2007) conducted a qualitative review of the literature and concluded that men and women seem to manage their self-presentations generally in line with traditional gender roles. Hogue, Levashina, and Hang (2013) provide empirical evidence that men and women who are high in Machiavellianism (the desire to further self-interest regardless of the cost) more intensively attempt to ingratiate themselves than women low in it. Individuals who are concerned that their group membership may lead to negative impressions, such as gays and lesbians (Jones & King, 2014) and Asian Americans (Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014), often actively seek to manage their self-presentations.

### I Failed But I Am Still Competent! Self-Handicapping

Most of us are concerned that a personal failure will be perceived as lack of competence, which can in turn damage self-esteem. One common way to ward off such threats to self-esteem is to have excuses ready to be rolled out. However, simply making excuses itself can be damaging, especially if used too often. Some people go one step further than making excuses, and that is to actually create obstacles to success so that, if failure occurs, they can protect their self by attributing the failure to something other than their own ability or competence (Jones & Berglas, 1978). This tactic, called **self-handicapping**, involves arranging events that may in fact reduce the likelihood of success but also serve to protect one’s self-esteem by deflecting responsibility

#### **Self-Handicapping:**

Arranging events that may reduce one’s likelihood of success but also protect one’s self-esteem by serving as excuses for possible failure

(Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011; Jones & Berglas, 1978; Park & Brown, 2014). For instance, partying the night before an exam gives a person an excuse for failing to perform well. Essentially one can say—both to oneself and others—that “I could have done better if I had stayed home and studied.”

Self-handicapping provides automatic cover for possible failure and the appearance of incompetence (Rhodewalt, 1990). Several years ago during a discussion of self-handicapping, one of my students (I’ll call her Julie) described how, as an outstanding clarinet player about to compete in the finals of a state competition, she decided not to practice the entire week before the event! Julie explained that she was worried that she would lose the competition and that she couldn’t cope with that failure. By not practicing, she would have a good way to explain her poor performance that wouldn’t challenge her competence. The key component of effective self-handicapping is that it essentially prevents attributions of incompetence by providing an external reason for the failure (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011).

There are many ways people self-handicap, including not studying, not preparing for competition or not practicing a task, using alcohol or drugs, or giving an opponent a head start in a race or some other advantage (Higgins & Harris, 1988; Rhodewalt, Saltzman, & Wittmer, 1984). There is an obvious downside to self-handicapping: Performance may in fact worsen and failure may become more likely. That is, by engaging in self-handicapping people may prevent the very success they hope for (McCrea & Hirt, 2001). Having an excuse for failure may protect self-esteem, but it is unlikely to boost it the way that success could.

In sum, an important aspect of the self is the interpersonal self—the one we present to others (Baumeister et al., 2007). Self-presentational concerns influence many of our social interactions: We strategically manage our impressions so that others will like us and think we are competent. We engage in a variety of tactics to do this, including self-monitoring, ingratiation, self-promotion, and self-handicapping. However, our impression management must be done in ways that are not too transparent, or they may backfire. In the next section we’ll elaborate on another important aspect of the self: how we control our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

### ***Think Again!***

1. *What are high and low self-monitoring? Are you high or low? Why do you think that?*
2. *What is the illusion of transparency?*
3. *When have you self-handicapped? Why did you do it?*



## SELF-REGULATION: CONTROLLING ONESELF

Have you ever made a New Year's resolution to start a new, good habit (such as exercising) or stopping an old, bad habit (like eating fast food) that you have been unable to maintain? If so, you are not unusual, and you are likely to do it again! According to one study, some 60% of people who failed to achieve their New Year's goal will try again the following year (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Initiating and maintaining self-related goals can indeed be challenging.

So far in this chapter we have described the self-concept as the set of beliefs about the self, self-esteem as the evaluation of the self-concept, and self-presentation as those efforts to project a particular image of the self to others. There is one more key aspect of the self that binds the first two together and impacts the third: self-regulation. **Self-regulation** is the capacity of the self to control our internal states and responses, including thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Baumeister et al., 2007; Blair, Ursache, Vernon-Feagans, & Greenberg, 2015; Vohs & Schmeichel, 2007). Successful self-regulation is under the purview of the executive self and requires the ability to think about and plan the future, which may be one of the characteristics that separates humans from other animals (Baumeister et al., 2007). Failure of self-regulation is implicated in many important social ills, including alcoholism, drug dependence, smoking cigarettes, obesity, personal financial problems, procrastination, low achievement in school, and much criminal behavior (Baumeister et al., 2007; de Ridder, Kuijer, & Ouweland, 2007; Ferrari, 2001; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Wilson, Petaja, Stevens, Mitchell, & Peterson, 2011). For example, inability to curb one's alcohol consumption can result in addiction, and difficulty avoiding spending money can lead to insufficient saving, excessive credit card debt, and even bankruptcy (D'Lima, Pearson, & Kelley, 2012; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

One prominent model postulates that successful self-regulation depends on the availability of **willpower** or mental energy needed to change the activities of the self to meet desired standards (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Resisting temptation, curbing impulses, and other forms of self-regulation tap this limited mental energy or resource pool, in effect depleting it and preventing it from being used for other purposes (Hung & Labroo, 2011; Job, Walton, Bernecker, & Dweck, 2015). The notion that willpower can be used up or depleted was tested in a study in which participants who had skipped a meal were seated at a table that contained freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and other chocolates as well as a plate of radishes (Baumeister et al., 1998). They were instructed to eat either the chocolates or the radishes. After five minutes had elapsed, the participants were asked to solve a challenging puzzle (that was actually unsolvable, although they did not know this). The researchers wanted to see how long participants would persist at solving the puzzle, and compared the length of time they worked before giving up to a control group that had skipped the eating stage and immediately proceeded to the puzzle task. Baumeister et al. (1998) expected that participants who had resisted the chocolate would give up on the puzzle more quickly than the other participants.

### Self-Regulation:

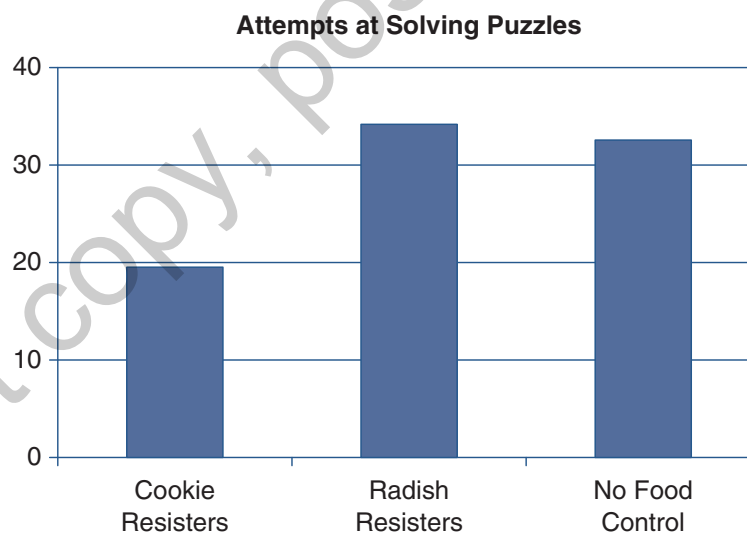
The capacity to control one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior

**Willpower:** Mental energy needed to change the activities of the self to meet the desired standards

Consistent with the willpower-as-resource model, the chocolate resisters worked only about half as long as the radish resisters or the control group (See Figure 4.5). Essentially, the chocolate resisters depleted their store of willpower while controlling the urge to eat the chocolate, and therefore had less mental energy to devote to solving the impossible puzzle (Baumeister et al., 1998). Baumeister and others have conducted a large number of studies encompassing many different behaviors and have consistently found that willpower functions very much like a limited resource (Ciarocco, Echevarria, & Lewandowski, 2012; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

Another important feature of willpower is that it seems to function like a muscle in the sense that it can be strengthened with practice (Baumeister et al., 2007; Hung & Labroo, 2011). In fact, like physical strength, willpower is more likely to be depleted at night following a busy day versus the morning after a restful night's sleep. Finally, people differ in their capacity for self-control, and persons who have greater self-control tend to earn higher grades in school, reported better mental health, higher self-esteem, better interpersonal relationships, fewer impulse control problems, and better job performance (Hennecke & Freund, 2010; Porath & Bateman, 2006; Tangney et al., 2004).

**FIGURE 4.5** The Limits of Willpower



Consistent with the willpower as resource model, participants who were asked to resist eating chocolate worked only about half as hard at solving problems than did the radish resisters or the control group. Essentially, the chocolate resisters depleted their store of willpower while controlling the urge to eat the chocolate, and therefore had less mental energy to devote to solving the impossible puzzle.

Source: Adapted from Study 1, Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D. M. (1998). Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1252–1265.

Effective self-regulation is viewed as an important ingredient to successfully negotiating the journey from childhood to stable, healthy adulthood. This intuitive notion is supported by extensive research by the personality psychologist Walter Mischel and his collaborators (Mischel & Ayduk, 2011). Mischel assessed the self-regulatory capacities of about 500 four- and five-year olds by offering them the opportunity to either immediately eat one treat, such as a cookie or marshmallow, or waiting—and delaying their gratification—until a short while later and receiving two treats instead. Mischel followed these children into adulthood and found that the effective self-regulators had higher SAT scores, were better able to deal with a variety of stressors, more likely to plan and to set personal goals, and were rated as higher in rationality and social competence than the less effective ones (Mischel & Ayduk, 2011).

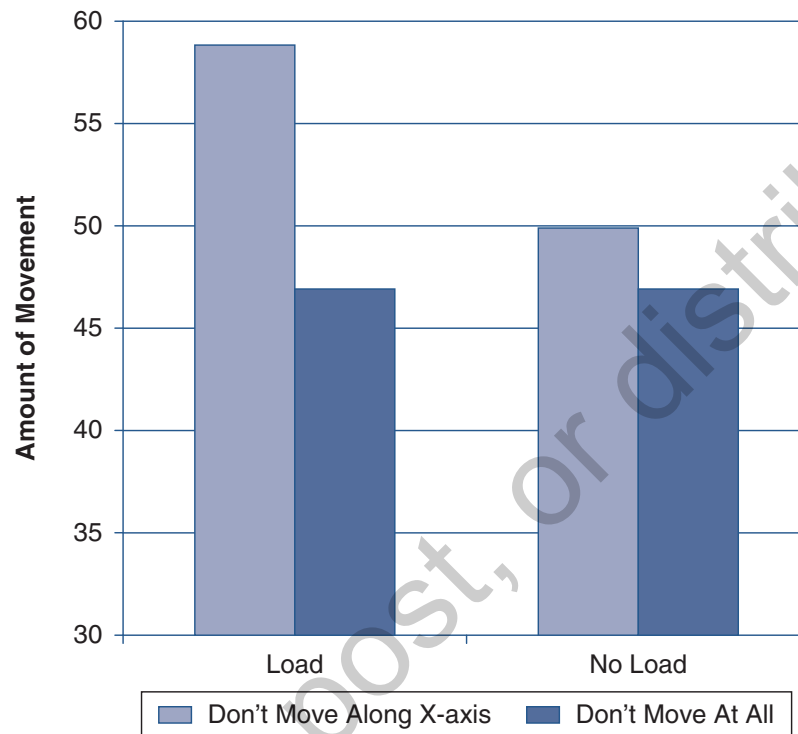
### Self-Control Failure and Ironic Processes

Imagine a white bear. Think about what it would look like, what it eats, how its fur would feel, its weight, its sharp teeth, and so forth. Now set the timer on your cell phone for one minute and try to stop thinking about that white bear until the alarm sounds. Can you do it? Well, if you are like the participants in a study by Wegner and colleagues, trying NOT to think of the white bear will result in more thoughts of a white bear when compared to a control group that was not asked to stop thinking about it (Koster, Soetens, Braet, & De Raedt, 2008; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). The upshot of this is that conscious attempts to control one's thoughts by avoiding a given topic can lead, ironically, to increased thoughts about that topic. That is, intended thought *suppression* can lead to apparent thought *production*. This **ironic process of mental control** produces the very thoughts or behavior that you are trying not to produce (Miklowitz, Alatiq, Geddes, Goodwin, & Williams, 2010; Wegner et al., 1987).

Try not to think of a gray elephant, and you are more likely to think about a gray elephant. Why? The reason is that two tasks must be performed to effectively suppress a thought or behavior. One is an automatic process that monitors whatever it is that has been deliberately banished from consciousness—the monitoring occurs so that it can warn consciousness that the thought is emerging. The second process is more controlled and involves attempts to distract thoughts away from the undesirable topic toward some competing topic, such as a vision of a bright green parrot. The reason this happens is that the monitoring process requires that you think about the green parrot to be certain that you are not thinking about it. In order to be certain that you are not thinking about something, you need to “check” up on that very thing—to monitor it—to be sure that you are not thinking about it! In a sense these two systems are competing, and the automatic process sometimes will “win” by facilitating the intrusion of the unwanted thoughts into consciousness. Difficulty with thought suppression is particularly likely under conditions of cognitive load, when consciousness is attempting to multitask, such as when you are trying to recite the alphabet backwards or memorize a twelve-digit number (see Figure 4.6) (Miklowitz et al., 2010).

#### **Ironic Process of Mental Control:**

Trying to control one's thoughts or behavior in a way that produces the very thoughts or behavior that one is trying to avoid

**FIGURE 4.6** Processes of Ironic Control

Participants instructed to prevent a pendulum from swinging along the X-axis were less successful in holding it still than were participants simply asked to hold it steady, especially under cognitive load—again, demonstrating that initiating a particular goal consciously may generate the opposite behavior than what was intended.

Source: Adapted from Study 2, Wegner, D. M., Ansfield, M., & Pilloff, D. (1998). The putt and the pendulum: Ironic effects of the mental control of action. *Psychological Science*, 9, 196–199.

### **Think Again!**

1. What are self-regulation and willpower?
2. What is an ironic process? What are its two components?
3. The next time you have a song “stuck” in your head, try to suppress it. Describe the experience.

### Confirming the Self: Self-Verification

The final “self” concept that we will discuss in this chapter is based in a motive related to self-regulation and self-concept: what is called the need for self-consistency or self-verification. In the chapter on persuasion we’ll describe consistency theory in more detail; for now suffice it to say that people often seek feedback from others that is consistent with their self-concept. That is, they wish to confirm or verify what they believe is true about themselves, a tendency called **self-verification** (North & Swann, 2009a; Swann, 1990; Valentiner, Hiraoka, & Skowronski, 2014). According to Swann (1990), people want to maximize their perceptions of control and predictability with respect to themselves and their situation, and doing so involves confirming one’s beliefs about the self. Perhaps, paradoxically, people don’t just want others to verify their positive attributes, but they also seek feedback consistent with their self-identified negative attributes (Swann, 1990; Valentiner, Skowronski, McGrath, Smith, & Renner, 2011). For instance, in one study participants who held negative self-views chose to interact with individuals who had negatively evaluated them rather than others who had given them a positive evaluation (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Note how this motivation differs from that for accurate self-knowledge and for self-enhancing information: Seeking true accuracy would require soliciting and being open to feedback that may not be consistent with one’s self-view, whereas self-enhancing implies searching for and/or attending to only positive feedback (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). In contrast, self-verification invokes strategies designed to reinforce one’s self-concept, whether or not it results in accurate self-knowledge or unflattering evaluation (Swann, 1990; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, 2008). Despite the fact that self-verification can provide individuals with negative feedback, this and other drawbacks are often outweighed by the benefits of self-verification (North & Swann, 2009b). By way of example, people tend to seek romantic partners who help verify their self-concepts, including their less desirable features (Swann et al., 2008).

**Self-Verification:**  
Seeking information that will confirm one’s self-concept

### A Clash of Motives?

As you can see from the preceding paragraph, the motives of accuracy, enhancement, and verification may be at loggerheads: Efforts to satisfy one of them may prevent the satisfaction of the others (Kwang & Swann, 2010). For instance, in one study, when given the option of choosing what feedback to receive, participants preferred self-enhancing to self-verifying feedback and were least interested in obtaining self-evaluative information (Sedikides, 1993). In other words, feeling good about oneself was more important than confirming the self, and obtaining accurate feedback was least important. Although direct research examining conflicts among these three motives is sparse, what is available suggests that self-enhancement may be one of the most fundamental of all motives (Anseel & Lievens, 2006).

---

## FINAL THOUGHTS: THE PARADOX OF THE SELF

As you can see from reading this chapter, the seemingly simple question, “what is the self?” is actually quite complex. The self is not one “thing.” Instead it is a nexus of motives, cognitions, and other features that intersect, overlap, and interact in complicated and fascinating ways. We learn about our selves in several ways, including introspection and by the self-perception process of observing how we behave. The self presents a bit of a paradox: It is defined as the experience of the self, suggesting that it is independent, stable, and coherent. However, research shows that it is also dependent on and tied closely

to other people— at least how we perceive our relationships with others and how we think they view us—and other people play a particularly large role in self-evaluation. Moreover, our many selves differ from each other and may vary across situations as we engage in self-monitoring and impression management. The self is the product of all of these activities and is continually evolving even as we try to hold it steady. Finally, the self lies at the core of several of the fundamental issues of social psychology, including the extent to which we have free will and the rationality of our thought processes.

---

## CORE CONCEPTS

- The self is the psychological apparatus that gives a person the capacity to consciously think about him or herself and includes self-concept, self-esteem, the interpersonal self, and the executive self. The self-concept is composed of the characteristics that we believe we possess. Schemas are cognitive structures that organize knowledge about the world, including ourselves. Self-discrepancy theory states that we possess actual, ideal, and ought selves that vary in how different they are from each other.
- Introspection or looking within is limited because we often are unaware of our mental processes, even if we know their outcomes, and also because it can change how we feel. Self-perception involves looking at ourselves the way someone else might but applies primarily to when we are uncertain about how we feel. The facial feedback hypothesis states that facial expressions and movements can alter rather than merely reflect what we feel.
- Self-reports are commonly used in social psychology research but may be biased, because some people tend toward extreme responding, are more likely to agree than disagree, and/or are affected by other factors like context and question wording. Surveys are advantageous because they are relatively cheap, easy to

construct, and facilitate gathering large quantities of data quickly. However, if researchers are interested uncovering cause and effect, then they should opt for controlled experimentation.

- People are intrinsically motivated when they engage in the activity for its own sake but are extrinsically motivated when they do so for reasons other than for its own sake. Overjustification occurs when external rewards undermine our intrinsic motivation. Self-esteem or our evaluation of how we are doing is closely linked to the quality of our relationships with other people or the extent to which they like and accept us—which is called the sociometer hypothesis.
- Strategic self-presentation can serve self-enhancement, and people differ in the extent to which they self-monitor or carefully regulate the impressions they make. Self-evaluation maintenance

explains how we make comparisons only when those comparisons are likely to boost our self-esteem. Strategies that we use to self-enhance include comparing ourselves to people who are doing better or worse, making self-serving judgments, ingratiating ourselves to others, self-promotion, and self-handicapping. People often feel like others are paying more attention to them than they in fact are, that others can “see” how they feel and that they are unbiased and better than most people: They may self-handicap by creating obstacles to performing well on task.

- Self-regulation is another key component of the self and may be compromised because our willpower is a limited resource and may be thwarted when people ironically end up doing the opposite of what they intended.

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## THINK FURTHER!

- What is the self? Does the definition in this chapter make sense to you? Are there any problems or disadvantages to defining it this way?
- Define and give examples of self-concept, self-esteem, the interpersonal self, and the executive self.
- Define and then sketch out your actual, ideal, and ought selves. What feelings are typically triggered by wide discrepancies between the selves? Do you experience any of these feelings?
- Compare and contrast introspection and self-perception as ways of learning about the self. If you could only use one strategy to understand who you are, which would you choose and why?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to using self-reports to investigate social psychological phenomena? If you decided to use self-reports for a research project, how would you determine whether or not your participants were demonstrating response effects?
- Willpower is often described as analogous to a muscle that can be strengthened with practice. Explain what this means. Pick an activity over which you wish you had more control. How might you practice to strengthen your willpower here?