

Self-Concept From a Developmental Perspective

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Self-concept refers to individuals' perceptions of who they are (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Conceptually distinct from self-esteem, self-concept addresses how individuals describe themselves in specific areas whereas self-esteem addresses how individuals generally feel (positively or negatively) about themselves. Self-concept is multifaceted and consists of individuals' beliefs about themselves academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Self-concept refers to both how people think about themselves in general and in specific areas (Swann et al., 2007).

In "Principles of Psychology," published in 1892, William James made two essential contributions to the study of the self (Harter, 2006). First, James described two selves, the I-self and the Me-self. The I-self observes and the Me-self is observed. When people are asked about themselves, the part of the self doing the thinking is the I-self and the description is the Me-self. Second, James described three different selves, the material self, social self, and spiritual self (Twenge & Campbell, 2017). The material self includes physical things like one's body, clothing, and other material possessions. The social self includes our relationships with others whereas, the spiritual self includes personality and morality. The contributions by James provide the foundation for current understanding and research on self-concept.

Since then, the way self-concept has been *conceptualized* has remained inherently multifaceted but also hierarchical. Namely, Shavelson et al. (1976) portrayed general self-concept as being "fed" by people's view of themselves in multiple areas. Namely, a person's overall self-concept is informed based their view of themselves emotionally (in the moment), physically (regarding their appearance and abilities), socially (based on family and peers) and academically (across subjects like math, history and sciences). This hierarchical perspective of self-concept

highlights two nuanced notions. Again, that self-concept is not a monolithic construct and that individuals based their view of themselves on a range of different personal “sub-concepts”.

Although the internal processes that James and others emphasized were foundational to the study of the self, the symbolic interactionists also contributed to the study of the self (Harter, 2006). Symbolic interactionists, such as Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Morris Rosenberg, focused on the contributions of social interactions to the development of the self. Cooley suggested that the self developed from watching others' reactions (i.e., the looking glass self). Whereas Mead suggested that the self developed from internalizing others' attitudes (i.e., the generalized other).

As toddlers and children in early childhood (2- to 6-year-olds), individuals describe themselves in concrete terms (Harter, 2006). For example, toddlers will describe a behavior such as being able to run fast rather than describing themselves as athletic. Descriptions of behaviors are often accompanied by examples of the behavior. For example, toddlers will describe themselves as being a fast runner, then run across the room to demonstrate their ability. During this period, self-concept is more idealistic than realistic and has only one emotional dimension, being good or bad at an activity, but not both.

In middle and late childhood (6- to 12-year-olds), individuals describe themselves based on characteristics rather than in concrete terms (Harter, 2006). The descriptions also begin to include an interpersonal dimension where individuals also include how they relate to their peers. By the time individuals reach the late childhood, their descriptions also incorporate multiple emotional dimensions. In other words, being simultaneously good and bad at something.

In adolescence (12- to 18-year olds), paired with development in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, self-concept increases in complexity (Harter, 2006). Adolescents describe themselves

as not only having multiple characteristics, but also having different selves in multiple contexts such as with friends and parents. One of the key tasks of adolescence is to combine the multiple selves into an integrated self-concept (Diehl & Hay, 2011).

Self-concept research has primarily focused on childhood and adolescence. However, in adulthood (18-year-olds and older), self-concept integration and psychological well-being are positively associated (Diehl & Hay, 2011). In other words, greater self-concept integration is associated with greater psychological well-being. Self-concept in adulthood is generally considered to be stable.

Conceptualizations of the self may vary across cultures and more research is needed to assess similarities and differences in self-concept based on culture. It's worth pointing out that the majority of the research on the development of self-concept over time is based on a minority of samples (i.e.: North America and Europe which comprise less than 20% of the world's population). Moreover, research on self-concept includes related areas of self-concept clarity (the degree certainty that people hold of their view of themselves) and self-continuity (how stable a person's feels their sense of self is). Finally, a better understanding is needed of the interconnections between self-concept and individual's sense of self-esteem (Swann et al., 2007).

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