Chapter 4
The Self

Answering the Question “Who Am I?”

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4.1 Compare the way we manage ourselves in different social situations to how others perceive us
4.2 Explain how we arrive at an understanding of our own selves
4.3 Use the personal-versus-social identity continuum to understand how different identities affect our behavior
4.4 Examine the health implications of being unrealistically optimistic about the self
4.5 Determine the factors that impact self-esteem
4.6 Analyze how prejudice and trying to conceal our identity impacts well-being

Facebook is an environment in which many interesting aspects of self and identity can be readily observed. By providing an important outlet for presenting ourselves to others, Facebook may even be regarded as a public forum for creating our identities. Like other social environments, Facebook can be used to carry on conversations with others, express political views, and indicate social preferences (e.g., favorite books, music, and movies). Perhaps without even realizing it, you may use Facebook as a place to document your personal growth. In other words, over time Facebook may reveal a sense of who you are through accumulated postings, including photos of yourself at different stages of life, important events you participated in, or more mundane matters such as the dinner you cooked and ate last night.

As the largest social networking site, Facebook meets the criteria for a genuine social environment (see Figure 4.1). But how do our interactions on Facebook differ from face-to-face interactions? Obviously, with Facebook we can connect with others almost anywhere and anytime. Another noticeable difference is the extra time you can take to compose what you communicate via Facebook. This includes your responses to others’ posts, as well as what you share about yourself. Because we can choose to withhold

Figure 4.1 Online Interaction: It’s There Wherever and Whenever You Want It
Facebook and other social media allow us to interact with others and present ourselves however we want.
The Self: Answering the Question “Who Am I?”

some crucial information about ourselves when communicating on social media, we can attempt to craft how others see us. Generally, people tend to portray themselves in their profiles a little more positively than they are in reality (Toma & Carlson, 2015).

Most people are concerned with how they are perceived by others, whether in social media interactions or face to face. Your ability to control the image you present changes in a social media environment. For example, Facebook friends can post on your “timeline” unless you select the user setting that prevents this. What others post on your Facebook timeline can affect your ability to create the image you might prefer others to see. This could be more of an issue if you have friends who tag you in photos that might not show you in the most attractive light. Also consider that some things you share on Facebook can appear in search engine results, allowing potential employers and others to find information posted about you even if they aren’t actually logged into Facebook.

The manner in which social networking sites allow the sharing of information can also impact other aspects of your life. For instance, on Facebook your privacy may be compromised in ways that allow marketers to target you. Whether you see this as a big problem or a minor inconvenience is determined by how much you value your privacy. Older people want to guard their privacy more than younger ones, who don’t always care as much. If you don’t take the time to get familiar with Facebook’s data policy and adjust user privacy settings, then you shouldn’t be surprised when you receive direct marketing, often with ads based on information you provided about yourself!

The nature of the self—including how we think and feel about ourselves—is an important research topic in social psychology. In this chapter, we will examine a number of related issues such as who is more accurate in predicting our behavior, ourselves or others who know us well, and how we develop self-knowledge. We will also investigate whether the self is a single, stable construct, or if “who we are” differs depending on the social context. In other words, do people experience themselves the same way all the time, or does their experience of themselves depend on what social comparison is evoked in different contexts? A critical aspect of this question is how different audiences and their treatment of us may influence the way we see and evaluate ourselves. We’ll also explore whether one aspect of the self is more true or predictive of behavior than another. Next, we’ll address questions related to self-esteem. What is it, how do we get it, and how do we lose it? How does changing the context—such as moving to a new country—affect our self-esteem? Are there group differences in the average level of self-esteem? Specifically, do men and women differ in their levels of self-esteem?

Finally, we’ll look in depth at the ways people cope when their self is a target of prejudice. We’ll consider the consequences of concealing one’s identity, and what happens when people feel excluded or devalued because of their group membership. This includes the ways in which people’s well-being and their performance of tasks can be affected by potential rejection based on their social identity.

4.1: Self-Presentation: Managing the Self in Different Social Contexts

Objective Compare the way we manage ourselves in different social situations to how others perceive us

William Shakespeare said long ago in his play As You Like It, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” In social psychological terms, this means that all of us are faced with the task of presenting ourselves to a variety of audiences, and we may play different roles (be different selves) in different plays (in different contexts). As we’ve discussed, nowhere is the choice of how to present ourselves
more obvious than on social networking sites, such as Facebook (see Figure 4.2). We can choose to reveal a lot about who we think we are—including photographic evidence of ourselves—or we can, to some extent, limit who has access to such information. How much can we really control what others learn about us and the inferences they draw based on that information? In fact, is it possible that others might know more about us—and be better at predicting our behavior—than we are ourselves?

4.1.1: Self–Other Accuracy in Predicting Our Behavior

There are many reasons for assuming that people know themselves better than anyone else does. After all, each of us has access to our internal mental states (e.g., feelings, thoughts, aspirations, and intentions), which others do not (Pronin & Kruger, 2007; Wilson & Dunn, 2004). For this reason alone, it seems intuitively obvious that we must know ourselves best—but is it true? Research evidence suggests that having access to our intentions, which observers do not have, is one reason why we are sometimes inaccurate about ourselves (Chambers, Epley, Savitsky, & Windschitl, 2008). Consider the following example. My friend Shirley is chronically late for everything. Frequently, she’s more than a half hour late. I simply cannot count on her to be ready when I arrive to pick her up, or for her to arrive on time if we are meeting somewhere. Would she characterize herself that way? Probably not. But, you might ask, how could she not know this about herself? Well, it could be precisely because she knows her intentions—she means to be on time and knows the effort she puts into trying to achieve that goal. That information could lead her to believe she actually is mostly on time! So, in this instance, I might claim that I know her better than she knows herself because I can predict her behavior more accurately, at least in this domain.

Despite such examples, many people strongly believe that they know themselves better than others know them. Ironically, some of those same people claim they know certain others better than those others know themselves (Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001). Part of the problem in determining who is most accurate—ourselves or others who are close to us—has been due to people reporting both their own perceptions and behaviors (see Figure 4.3). As you’ll probably agree, behavioral self-reports are hardly an objective criterion for determining accuracy. Continuing with the example of Shirley, she’d likely admit to being occasionally late, but she would also say that she always tries hard to be on time. She might even recall a few instances when that was true. So how can the self–other accuracy problem be addressed?

Vazire and Mehl (2008) found a clever way to deal with the problem of collecting both self-perceptions and behavior frequencies from the same source. To develop a more objective index of how a person actually behaves on a daily basis, these researchers had participants wear a digital audio recorder with a microphone that recorded the ambient sounds of people’s lives during waking hours. Recordings were automatically made approximately every 12.5 minutes for 4 days. Research assistants later coded the recorded sounds according to the categories shown in Table 4.1. Before
Table 4.1 Who Is More Accurate About Our Behavior: Self or Others?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Aggregated Informants</th>
<th>Single Informant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With other people</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the phone</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking one-on-one</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking in a group</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking to same sex</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking to opposite sex</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughing</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arguing</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the computer</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At work</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending class</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socializing</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuting</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At a coffee shop/bar/restaurant</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Based on research by Vazire & Mehl, 2008.

Level of statistical significance: *p < .05, **p < .01

the participants’ actual behaviors were recorded, they provided self-ratings (predictions) concerning the frequency they expected to perform each behavior (more or less than the average person) on a daily basis. For every participant, the researchers also recruited three informants who knew the participant well (e.g., friends, parents, romantic partners). These informants provided the same type of ratings: They predicted the frequency the participant would engage in each behavior, using the same average person as comparison. As you can see in Table 4.1, sometimes the participants’ own ratings were more strongly related to the frequency of their actual behavior. However, sometimes others’ ratings of the participants were more strongly related to actual behavior. So, at times, other people do seem to “know” us better than we know ourselves.

Although people routinely show biases in their self-perceptions, to what extent are they aware they might be biased? Bollich, Rogers, and Vazire (2015) attempted to answer this difficult question in the following way. Participants were asked to rate themselves on 10 desirable traits (e.g., extraverted, warm, dependable, intelligent, funny, and physically attractive). The researchers then e-mailed several of each participant’s peers to have them rate the person on those same traits. Four days later, participants were asked to indicate whether they had been biased (e.g., more favorable or more unfavorable) when they previously provided trait ratings about themselves.

Virtually everyone reported they had been biased—either positively or negatively—on at least one trait they had previously rated. Further, most of the perceived
bias was indicated by people who admitted they may have been “overly positive” about themselves. When people’s own self-perceptions were correlated with those of their peers’ perceptions of them, little correspondence was found. However, when people’s own ratings and their perceived bias were correlated, a strong relationship was obtained. So, we appear not to be so accurate about ourselves (at least according to our peers). But we tend to recognize when we’ve rated ourselves too highly on positive traits when later given the chance to consider our bias.

4.1.2: Self-Presentation Tactics

What methods do we use when we are trying to affect the impression that others form of us? First of all, people often try to ensure that others form impressions of them based on their most favorable self-aspects; that is, they engage in self-promotion. If we want others to think we’re smart, we can emphasize our intelligence “credentials”—grades obtained, awards won, and degrees sought. If we want others to conclude we are fun, we can tell jokes, or talk about the great parties we’ve attended or hosted. As Figure 4.4 suggests, sometimes these tactics work. If we say we’re really good at something, people will often believe us. Self-promotion may even help convince ourselves that what we say is true!

Considerable research from a self-verification perspective—the processes we use to lead others to agree with our own self-views—suggests that negotiation occurs in attempts to get others to agree with our self-claims (Swann, 2005). For example, while trading self-relevant information with a potential roommate, you might stress the student part of your self-concept. That is, you would probably emphasize your good study habits and pride in your good grades and underplay your fun-loving qualities. This potential roommate might even note that “You don’t sound like you’re very interested in having fun here at college.” To gain that person’s agreement with your most central self-perception—serious student—you may even be willing to entertain a negative assessment of your fun quotient, as long as the other person is willing to go along with your self-assessment of the dimension most critical to you. In
this instance, it may be especially useful for you to downplay your own partying skills so that the other person can achieve distinctiveness on this dimension. Indeed, in this interaction, the potential roommate might wish to emphasize his or her party side. Through this sort of self-presentational exchange process, you may “buy” the roommate’s self-assessment as a party type, to the extent that it helps you to “sell” your own self-assessment as an excellent student.

According to the self-verification view, we may still wish to have other people—particularly those closest to us—see us as we see ourselves, even if it means potentially receiving information that is negative about ourselves (Swann & Bosson, 2010). Suppose you are certain that you lack athletic ability, are shy, or lack math skills. Even though these attributes might be seen as relatively negative compared to their alternatives—athletic star, extroverted, or math whiz—you might prefer to have people see you consistent with how you see yourself. Research has revealed that, when given a choice, we prefer to be with other people who verify our views about ourselves rather than with those who fail to verify our dearly held self-views—even if those are not so flattering (Chen, Chen, & Shaw, 2004). However, there are real limits to this effect. As Swann and Bosson (2010) note, people who fear they are low in physical attractiveness do not appreciate close others who verify this self-view!

We can also choose to create a favorable self-presentation by conveying our positive regard for others. It is most assuredly true that we like to feel that others respect us, and we really like those who convey this to us (Tyler & Blader, 2000). To achieve this end, you can present yourself to others as someone who particularly values or respects them. In general, when we want to make a good impression on others, it can be useful to employ ingratiation tactics. Although, as suggested in the cartoon shown in Figure 4.5, it is possible to overdo it. For the most part, though, we can make others like us by praising them. This is generally quite effective unless people suspect our sincerity (Vonk, 1999). To achieve the same effect as ingratiation, we can be self-deprecating—imply that we are not as good as the other person, by communicating admiration or by simply lowering an audience’s expectations of our abilities.

Self-presentations are not always completely honest. They are at times strategic, and as discussed in Chapter 3, sometimes deceptive. Research indicates that college students report telling lies to other people about twice a day (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996)—frequently to help protect the other person but sometimes to advance their own interests. Consistent with the former possibility, people who tell more lies tend to be more popular. In a study addressing the honesty of self-presentations on the Internet, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) concluded that people often attempt to balance the desire to present an authentic sense of self with some “self-deceptive white lies.” That is, people’s profiles online reflect, to some degree, their “ideal self” rather than their “actual self.” Thus, as shown in Figure 4.6, there can be a discrepancy between how we might like to see ourselves and what we are actually like. However, the extent of to which people self-enhance on Facebook (versus other online networking sites) is somewhat limited because people are aware that their Facebook friends know them offline and might realize when they are not telling the truth (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).
Chapter 4

4.2: Self-Knowledge: Determining Who We Are

Objective

Explain how we arrive at an understanding of our own selves.

We now turn to some of the ways we use to gain self-knowledge. One straightforward method is to try to directly analyze ourselves. Another method is to try to see ourselves as we think others see us—to take an observer’s perspective on the self. We will first consider the consequences of both these approaches, and then explore what social psychological research says about how to know ourselves better.

4.2.1: Introspection: Looking Inward to Discover the Causes of Our Own Behavior

People often assume that introspection—privately thinking about the factors that made us who we are—is a useful way to learn about the self. In a host of self-help books that sell millions of copies per year (see Figure 4.7), we are told time and again that the best way to get to know ourselves is by looking inward. Indeed, many people in our society believe that the more we introspect—particularly the more we examine the reasons why we act as we do—the greater the self-understanding we will achieve. Is this really the best way to arrive at an accurate understanding of ourselves?

First of all, considerable social psychological research has revealed that we do not always know or have conscious access to the reasons for our actions. However, we can certainly generate—after the fact—what might seem to be logical theories of why we acted as we did (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Because we often genuinely don’t know why we feel a particular way, generating reasons (which might be inaccurate) could cause us to arrive at false conclusions.

In a series of introspection studies, Wilson and Kraft (1993) illustrated how this effect can happen. Participants were asked to describe their feelings about a wide range of topics, from “why I feel...”

Key Points

- Facebook is an important medium through which we present ourselves to others. Like offline communication, people attempt to portray themselves on Facebook a little more positively than they are in reality.
- Even though we have access to information (intentions, goals) that others do not, that information itself may bias our own behavioral self-reports. Research that independently recorded people’s actual behavior revealed that sometimes others can predict our own behavior better than we can, but sometimes the reverse is true.
- We can choose various self-presentational strategies—including self-promotion, self-deprecation, and ingratiation tactics—as means of making a positive impression on others. We can also agree with others’ preferred self-presentations so that they will in turn agree with our own self-views, as a means of achieving self-verification.
- Sometimes we are less than perfectly honest with other people, and this is often rewarded with greater popularity. On many social networking sites, we tend to present ourselves in terms of our “ideal” self rather than our “actual” self, although this discrepancy is relatively small on Facebook because we know our friends there offline first.

Figure 4.7 Self-Help Books Recommend Introspection

Many popular books imply that the route to self-knowledge lies in introspection, but recent research reveals that such self-reflection can be misleading. Depending on the nature of the factors that are actually driving our behavior, introspection may misdirect us about why we respond as we do.
as I do about my romantic partner” to “why I like one type of jam over another.” After introspecting about the reasons for their feelings, people changed their attitudes, at least temporarily, to match their stated reasons. As you might imagine, this can lead to incorrect inferences because the original feelings—based on other factors entirely—are still there. So, thinking about reasons for our actions can misdirect our quest for self-knowledge when our behavior is really driven by our feelings.

Another way in which introspection might be rather misleading to us is when we attempt to predict our future feelings in response to some event, what researchers call “affective forecasting.” Try imagining how you would feel living in a new city, being fired from your job, or living with another person for many years. When we are not in these specific circumstances, we might not be able to accurately predict how we would respond when we are in them, and this applies to both positive and negative future circumstances.

Why is it we have so much difficulty predicting our future responses? When we think about something terrible happening to us and try to predict how we would feel 1 year after the event, we are likely to focus exclusively on the awfulness of that event and neglect all the other factors that will almost certainly contribute to our happiness level as the year progresses (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000). Consequently, people tend to predict that they would feel much worse than they actually would when the future arrives. Likewise, for positive events, if we focus on only that great future event, we will mispredict our happiness as being considerably higher than the actual moderate feelings that are likely 1 year later. In the case of predicting our responses to such positive events in the future, miscalculation would occur because we are unlikely to consider the daily hassles we are also likely to experience in the future, and those would most definitely moderate how we actually feel.

Let’s consider another important way in which introspection can lead us astray. Think now about whether spending money on a gift for someone else or spending that same amount of money on something for yourself would make you happier. If you are like most people, you are likely to think that buying something cool for yourself would make you happier than using your money to buy something for someone else. But, yet, recent research has revealed exactly the opposite—that spending money on others makes us happier than spending money on ourselves! In a nationally representative sample of Americans, Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) asked respondents to rate how happy they were and to indicate how much of their monthly income they spend on expenses and gifts for themselves versus gifts for others and donations to charity. Overall, of course, people spent more on themselves than on others, but the important question is which actually predicts respondents’ happiness? These researchers found that personal spending was unrelated to happiness, but that more spending on others predicted greater happiness. This was true regardless of people’s level of annual income—so whether you are rich or poor, there seems to be a happiness bonus for giving to others that has been observed across very different cultures (Aknin et al., 2013).

But, you might say, this was a correlational study and therefore we can’t be sure that spending on others causally drove respondents’ happiness. So, Dunn et al. (2008) performed a simple but telling experiment. They had psychology students rate their happiness in the morning and then they were given either $5 or $20 that they had to spend by 5 p.m. that same day. Half of the participants were told to spend that money on a personal bill or gift for themselves, while the other half were told to spend the money on a charitable donation or gift for someone else. Which group was happier at the end of the day?

Regardless of the amount of money they were given to spend, participants reported significantly greater happiness when they spent their windfall on others compared to those who spent it on themselves. This experiment provides clear evidence that how we choose to spend our money is more important for our happiness—and in a counterintuitive direction—than is how much money we make. However, new participants who were asked to simply estimate which condition would bring them greater happiness
overwhelmingly thought that spending the money on themselves would make them happier than would spending it on others. And, those who simply estimated how they would feel reported that receiving $20 would bring greater happiness than receiving the $5. But, neither of these self-predictions turned out to be true! What this means is that we often don’t know how events will affect us and simply introspecting about it will not help us learn how events actually do affect our emotions and behavior.

4.2.2: The Self from the Observer’s Standpoint

As we saw in an earlier section of this chapter, sometimes other people are more accurate in predicting our behavior than we are. So, one way that we can attempt to learn about ourselves is by taking an “observer” perspective on own past. Because actors and observers differ in their focus of attention, and observers are less likely to be swayed by knowing our intentions and so forth, they could potentially have greater insight into when we will behave as we have done in the past. In contrast, as actors, we direct our attention outwardly, and tend to attribute behavior more to situational causes (e.g., it was the traffic that made me late, or the phone rang just as I was going out). Observers, though, focus their attention directly on the actor and they tend to attribute more dispositional causes for the same behavior (see Chapter 3 for more on actor-observer differences). Therefore, if we take an observer’s perspective on ourselves, we should be more likely to characterize ourselves in dispositional or trait terms.

Pronin and Ross (2006) found this to be true when people were asked to describe themselves as they were 5 years ago or as they are today. The self in the present was seen as varying with different situations and was characterized less frequently in terms of general dispositions or traits than was the past self. As shown in Figure 4.8, this was the case regardless of the actual age of the participants (and therefore the length of their pasts). Both middle-aged and college-aged participants saw themselves in terms of consistent traits (as observers tend to) when they were describing themselves in the past compared to when they were describing their present selves.

How might considering ourselves from an observer’s perspective change the way we characterize ourselves and therefore provide self-insight? Pronin and Ross (2006) used different types of acting techniques as a method for examining how considering ourselves from an observer’s perspective changes how we characterize ourselves. The participants were divided into two groups and given “acting” instructions using one of two methods. In the “method-acting” condition, they were told that the goal was to “feel as if you are this other person.” In the “standard-acting” condition, they were told that the goal was to “put on a performance so that you appear to others as though you are this person.” After practicing various scenes using their assigned method, the participants were then told to enact a family dinner when they were 14 years old. In this case, everyone played their past self from one of two perspectives: One group was told to play their past self from the perspective of someone experiencing it, and the other group was told to play their past self as if they were an outside observer. Again, the number of consistent dispositions or traits used to describe their 14-year-old self was the central measure of interest: Did taking an observer stance on the self lead to greater trait consistency perceptions of the self? The answer was a clear yes. Those who performed with the method-actor technique were more actor-like and perceived themselves as more variable, whereas those who played themselves from a more “observer-acting” perspective perceived themselves in terms of consistent traits. So, when we try to
learn about the self from the vantage point of another, we are more likely to see ourselves as observers do—in terms of consistent behavioral tendencies. So, one way to gain self-insight is to try to see ourselves as others do, and consider the possibility that they are more right than we are!

But, is all introspection inevitably misleading? No. It depends on what we introspect about. When the behavior in question is actually based on a conscious decision-making process—and is not based on unconscious emotional factors—thinking about those reasons might well lead to accurate self-judgments. On the other hand, when we fail to take into account factors that really do influence how we feel (e.g., giving to others can make us happy), introspection is unlikely to lead to accurate self-inferences. So, while looking inward can be helpful, it may lead us astray under plenty of circumstances. When asked, people can easily generate reasons for why they do what they do, but those reasons may be based on self-theories about the causes of behavior, and, as we saw with the effects of spending money on ourselves versus others, those theories may not be correct! By relying on such theories, we may remain unaware of the real reasons, for example, emotional factors, that cause our behavior. It is also the case that most of us may not have very good theories about how thinking about emotional events will affect us. For example, research (Koo, Algoe, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008) has revealed that rather than thinking about positive outcomes that have happened to us, if instead we think about how those same positive outcomes might not have happened to us at all, we will feel happier. So, it is fair to say that gaining insight into one’s own emotions, motivations, and behaviors can be tricky indeed.

**Key Points**

- One common method by which we attempt to gain self-knowledge is through introspection—looking inwardly to assess and understand why we do what we do.
- When it comes to self-queries about why we acted as we did, mistaken results can occur if we do not have conscious access to the factors that actually influenced our responses, although after the fact we can and do construct explanations that seem plausible to us.
- When it comes to predicting how we might feel in the future, we fail to take into account other events that will moderate how we will feel besides the extreme and isolated event being judged.
- Most people believe that spending money on themselves will make them happier than spending the same amount on others. But, research demonstrates that the opposite is true. What this means is we often don’t know how our actions will affect us and introspecting about it won’t help.
- One way self-reflection can be helpful is to take an observer’s stand point on our behavior. Doing so leads us to see ourselves in more trait-like consistent terms, as observers tend to do.

### 4.3: Personal Identity Versus Social Identity

**Objective**  
Use the personal-versus-social identity continuum to understand how different identities affect our behavior

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we can perceive ourselves differently at any given moment in time, depending on where we are on the personal-versus-social identity continuum. At the personal end of this continuum, we think of ourselves primarily as individuals. At the social end, we think of ourselves as members of specific social groups. We do not experience all aspects of our self-concept simultaneously; where we place ourselves on this continuum at any given moment will influence how we think about ourselves. This momentary salience—the part of our
identity that is the focus of our attention—can affect much in terms of how we perceive ourselves, and respond to others.

When our personal identity is salient and we think of ourselves as unique individuals, this results in self-descriptions that emphasize how we differ from other individuals. For example, you might describe yourself as fun when thinking of yourself at the personal identity level—to emphasize your self-perception as having more of this attribute than other individuals you are using as the comparison. Personal identity self-description can be thought of as an intragroup comparison—involving comparisons with other individuals who share our group membership. For this reason, when describing the personal self, which group is the referent can affect the content of our self-descriptions (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994; Reynolds et al., 2010). Consider how you might characterize yourself if you were asked to describe how you are different from others. You could describe yourself as particularly liberal if you were comparing yourself to your parents, but if you were indicating how you are different from other college students you might say that you are rather conservative. The point is that even for personal identity, the content we generate to describe ourselves depends on some comparison, and this can result in us thinking about and describing ourselves differently—in this example as either liberal or conservative—depending on the comparative context.

At the social identity end of the continuum, perceiving ourselves as members of a group means we emphasize what we share with other group members. We describe ourselves in terms of the attributes that differentiate our group from another comparison group. Descriptions of the self at the social identity level are intergroup comparisons in nature—they involve contrasts between groups. For example, when your social identity as a fraternity or sorority group member is salient, you may ascribe traits to yourself that you share with other members of your group. Attributes of athleticism and self-motivation might, for example, differentiate your group from other fraternities or sororities that you see as being more studious and scholarly than your group. For many people, their gender group is another important social identity and, when salient, can affect self-perceptions. So, if you are female and your gender is salient, you might perceive the attributes that you believe you share with other women (e.g., warm and caring) and that you perceive as differentiating women from men as self-descriptive. Likewise, if you are male, when gender is salient, you might think of yourself (i.e., self-stereotype) in terms of attributes that are believed to characterize men and that differentiate them from women (e.g., independent, strong).

What’s important to note here is that when you think of yourself as an individual, the content of your self-description is likely to differ from when you are thinking of yourself as a member of a category that you share with others. Of course, most of us are members of a variety of different groups (e.g., gender, occupation, age, sexual orientation, nationality, sports teams), but all of these will not be salient at the same time, and they may differ considerably in how important they are to us. But, when a particular social identity is salient, people are likely to act in ways that reflect that aspect of their self-concept. So a number of situational factors may alter how we define ourselves, and the actions that stem from those self-definitions will differ accordingly. Figure 4.9 summarizes the processes involved and consequences of experiencing the self in personal rather than social identity terms.

Because, at any given time, we can define ourselves differently, this means we have many “selves.” Can we say that one of these is the “true” self—either the personal self or any one of a person’s potential social identities? Not really. All of these could be correct portraits of the self and accurately predict behavior, depending on the context and comparison dimension (Oakes & Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds et al., 2010). Note, too, how some ways of thinking about ourselves could even imply behaviors that are opposite to those that would result from other self-descriptions (e.g., fun versus scholarly; liberal versus conservative).
Despite such potential variability in self-definition, most of us manage to maintain a coherent image of ourselves, while recognizing that we may define ourselves and behave differently in different situations. This can occur either because the domains in which we see ourselves as inconsistent are deemed to be relatively unimportant, or they simply are not salient when we think of ourselves in terms of any particular identity (Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004). We’ll have more to say below on how people manage conflict among the different aspects of the self.

4.3.1: Who I Think I Am Depends on the Social Context

People do describe themselves differently depending on whether the question they are asked implies a specific situation or is more open-ended. This effect was illustrated by Mendoza-Denton, Ayduk, Mischel, Shoda, and Testa (2001). In their study, participants were given one of two different types of sentence completion tasks. When the prompt was open-ended, such as “I am a(n) . . . person,” self-definition as an individual is implied. In this condition, participants’ responses were primarily trait-like and global (e.g., “I am an ambitious person”). When, however, the prompt implied particular settings, “I am a(n) . . . when . . . ” then the responses were more contingent on the situation considered by the participant (e.g., “I am an ambitious person when a professor provides me with a challenge”).

People also differ across time and place in the extent to which they emphasize the personal self and its uniqueness from others. For example, a recent analysis of the names given to the 325 million American babies born between 1880 and 2007 indicates that parents have increasingly, across time, given their children less common names, with this trend escalating particularly after 1980 (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010). Presumably, it is easier to—and there’s a greater expectancy that you will—distinguish yourself from others when you have a unique name that you do not share with them. This shift away from common given names, which was observed across all ethnic groups, has been reflected in an increasing emphasis on individualism across this century, with Americans increasingly endorsing individualistic traits for themselves (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

How might the social context serve to cue social identities that differentially emphasize the personal self and individualism? Research has revealed that bilingual
Asian students living in Hong Kong answer the question, “Who am I?” when it is asked in English in terms of personal traits that differentiate them from others, reflecting an individualistic self-construal. However, when they are asked the same question in Chinese, these bilingual students describe themselves in terms of group memberships that they share with others, reflecting a more interdependent self-construal (Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997). Thus, important differences in self-descriptions emerge primarily when a particular group identity is activated, as it was in this example, when thinking of the self in English versus Chinese.

Such context shifts in self-definition can influence how we categorize ourselves in relation to other people, and this in turn, can affect how we respond to others (Ryan, David, & Reynolds, 2004). When participants categorize a person in need as a fellow university student—so that person is seen as a member of the same category as the participant—then men and women were equally likely to display high levels of care-oriented responses toward that person. In contrast, when participants categorized themselves in terms of their gender, then women displayed significantly more care-oriented responses than did men. In fact, men reduced their care-oriented responses to the person in need in the gender salient condition compared to the shared university-identity condition. Thus gender differences in caring responses toward another individual depend on gender being a salient category. Of course, gender is a powerful social category that is likely to be activated a great deal of the time (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). This means it is likely to influence perceptions of the self and our responses to others with some frequency.

Not only must gender be salient for gender differences in self-construal or how we characterize ourselves to emerge, but research (Guimond et al., 2007) has also revealed that how we perceive ourselves depends on which gender group is the comparison. In a five-nation study, these investigators found that only when men and women were asked to compare themselves to members of the other gender group (an intergroup comparison was made) did they display the expected gender difference in rated self-insecurity. That is, when women compared themselves to men they said they were insecure, and when men compared themselves to women they said they were not insecure. In this case, people saw themselves as consistent with their own gender group’s stereotype. However as shown in Figure 4.10, when the same self-judgments were made in an intragroup group context—where women compared their standing on this trait to other women and men compared their standing to other men—no gender differences in perceived insecurity of the self were found. So, how we see ourselves—in terms of what traits we have—depends on the comparison we use when assessing ourselves.

**Figure 4.10 Measuring Gendered Self-Perceptions Around the World**

In a cross-cultural study of 950 participants from five nations (France, Belgium, Malaysia, The Netherlands, and USA), gender differences in perceiving the self as insecure were present only when people compared themselves to members of the other gender group; no significant gender difference was found when the self was compared to members of their own gender group.

*In all 5 countries, there was a significant gender difference in rating the self as insecure only when the comparison was intergroup, but not when it was intragroup.*

**WHEN AND WHY SOME ASPECTS OF THE SELF ARE MORE SALIENT THAN OTHERS.** What determines which aspect of the self will be most influential at any given moment? This is an important question precisely because the self-aspect that is salient can have a major impact on our self-perceptions and behavior.

First, one aspect of the self might be especially relevant to a particular context (e.g., thinking of ourselves as fun when at a party but as hard working when we are at work). Second, features of the context can make one aspect of the self highly distinctive, with that aspect of identity forming the basis of self-perception. Suppose an office has only one woman among several men. In this context, the woman’s gender distinguishes her from her colleagues and is therefore likely to be frequently salient. Thus the lone woman is particularly likely to feel “like a
woman,” and she may be treated based on the stereotype of that group (Fuegen & Biernat, 2002; Yoder & Berendsen, 2001). Similarly, African American students at predominantly Caucasian universities where other minority group members are rare are likely to think of themselves in terms of their race (Pollak & Niemann, 1998; Postmes & Branscombe, 2002).

Third, some people may be more ready to categorize themselves in terms of a particular personal trait (e.g., intelligence) or social identity (e.g., gender) because of its importance to the self. People who are highly identified with their national group (e.g., Americans) are more reactive to threat to that identity than are people who are less identified (Branscombe & Wann, 1994).

Fourth, other people, including how they refer to us linguistically, can cue us to think of ourselves in personal-versus-social identity terms. Aspects of the self-concept that are referred to as nouns (e.g., woman, student) are particularly likely to activate social identities (Simon, 2004). Nouns suggest discrete categories, which trigger perceptions of members of those categories as sharing a fundamental nature or essence that is different from members of other categories (Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). In contrast, aspects of the self that are referred to with either adjectives or verbs (e.g., athletic, taller, extremely supportive) reference perceived differences between people within a category (Turner & Onorato, 1999) and are especially likely to elicit self-perceptions at the personal identity level.

EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES WHEN CHOICES ARE MADE BY DIFFERENT SELVES. Have you ever had the experience of buying something new and later, after getting it home, you think, “What on earth was I thinking when I selected that?” Well, you are not alone! Research by LeBoeuf, Shafir, and Bayuk (2010) has illuminated this postconsumer regret process, explaining it in terms of different salient selves at the time the purchase is made and when you later experience it. Let’s see how this process could play out with your student identity.

While most students come to college to develop their intellectual skills, this stage of life also involves developing the social side of oneself. To test whether the salience of these differing aspects of an identity affects the choices we make, LeBoeuf et al. (2010) first made one of these aspects of the student identity salient by asking participants to take a survey about world issues (the “Scholar” identity condition) or about campus socializing (the “Socialite” condition). Participants were then given an opportunity to choose from different consumer items—magazines in this study. When the scholar aspect of their identity was salient, the students chose more scholarly publications (e.g., The Economist, Wall Street Journal), but selected more social publications (e.g., Cosmopolitan, Sports Illustrated) in the Socialite condition. In a subsequent study, the same pattern of results was obtained when Chinese Americans first thought of themselves in terms of their Chinese identity (“think of your favorite Chinese holiday”) or their American identity (“think of your favorite American holiday”). In this case, those whose American self-aspect was salient chose cars that were more unique in color, whereas those whose Chinese self-aspect was salient chose more traditional car colors. These studies illustrate that the aspect of ourselves that is salient can affect our consumer choices.

But, what about the issue of satisfaction (or regret) over the choices we have already made? Does the degree of satisfaction we experience depend on there being a match between the self-aspect that is salient when the choice is made and the self-aspect that is salient when the choice is experienced or evaluated? To answer this question, LeBoeuf et al. (2010) again made their participants’ student identity—either the scholarly or socializing aspect—salient. This was again done simply by giving participants a survey about “world issues” to activate the scholarly self, or a survey about “campus life” to activate the socialite self. At this point, participants were asked to choose a film to watch. Once the film choice was made, but before watching the film clip, their original or the other self-aspect was made salient—students were reminded
of their scholarly self by asking about their interest in attending graduate school or their socialite self by asking about their interest in various university sports teams.

As can be seen in Figure 4.11, participants who watched the film that they chose when the same identity aspect was salient, enjoyed the experience, liked the film, and did not regret their choice, whereas those whose identities in each time period were inconsistent with each other did not enjoy the experience, disliked the film more, and regretted their choice. These findings indicate that our choices and experiences stemming from them can depend on which aspect of our selves is salient, and they go some way toward explaining that question we have to occasionally ask ourselves—“what was I thinking when I selected that option?”

4.3.2: Who I Am Depends on Others’ Treatment

How others treat us, and how we believe they will treat us in the future, have important implications for how we think about ourselves. When it comes to the self, no one is truly an island. If we expect that others will reject us because of some aspect of ourselves, there are a few response options available to us (Tajfel, 1978). To the extent that it is possible to change an aspect of ourselves and avoid being rejected, we could potentially choose to do that. In fact, we could choose to only change that particular feature when we anticipate being in the presence of others who will reject us because of it. In other words, for some aspects of ourselves, we can attempt to hide them from disapproving others. For example, the U.S. military policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” implied there are group identities we can choose to reveal or not. However this option will be practically impossible for some social identities. We can’t easily hide or change our race, gender, or age. In some cases, even if we could alter the part of the self that brings rejection, we may rebel against those rejecting us by making that feature even more self-defining. That is, we may emphasize that feature as a method of contrasting ourselves from those who reject us—in effect, we

**Figure 4.11** When Choices Are Made by Different Salient Selves

Participants who made film choices when one aspect of their identity was salient, but another aspect of their identity was salient at the time they experienced the film, were less positive about the experience than when the identities matched at both time periods. Because identity salience can fluctuate, this is one reason why we can come to regret choices that looked good to us earlier.
can publicly communicate that we value something different than those who might judge us negatively because of it.

This point was illustrated in research conducted by Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Spears (2001). These researchers studied young people who elect to get body piercings in visible parts of the body other than earlobes (e.g., navel, tongue, eyebrow), a practice that has gained in popularity. How we dress and alter our bodies can be conceptualized as important identity markers—ways of communicating to the world who we are. Although some identity markers may bring acceptance into peer groups, they may be perceived by other groups as weird or antinormative. Today, getting body piercings and tattoos may be comparable to the wearing of blue jeans and men having long hair in the 1960s. These identity markers were the visible indicator of a “hippie” identity, reflecting a self-perception as a rebel against the establishment. Like their 1960s counterparts, today’s young people who opt for visible body piercings and tattoos may be engaged in a similar form of rebel identity construction.

People who get such visible markings often know that they are likely to be discriminated against because of them. This expectation can lead to stronger self-definition in terms of a social identity that is actively rejecting the dominant culture’s standards of beauty. An expectation of rejection and devaluation on the part of the culture as a whole can result in increasingly strong identification with a newly forming cultural group. Those with body piercings who were led to expect rejection from the mainstream, identified more strongly with other people who have body piercings than did those who were led to expect acceptance from the mainstream (Jetten et al., 2001). As Figure 4.12 illustrates, people with lots of body piercings and tattoos seem to be communicating that “we are different from the mainstream.” If the practice of getting body piercings ultimately becomes diffused throughout the culture—as happened when everyone started wearing blue jeans—then those who are attempting to convey their collective difference from the mainstream may be compelled to become increasingly more extreme to achieve the same identity end. For more information about the importance of group identities for psychological well-being, see our special feature, “What Research Tells Us About…The Importance of Belonging and Group Ties.”

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**Figure 4.12 Claiming an Identity That Is “Nonmainstream”**

Many forms of body adornment and body modification are visual indicators of how we see ourselves—our identities. These people may be conveying to the “mainstream” that they are not one of them, and that they want to “fit in” with their peer group.
What Research Tells Us About…
The Importance of Belonging and Group Ties

Feeling that you belong, by being part of groups that you value is critical for psychological and physical health. For example, research following adolescents from age 13 through adulthood (ages 25–27) has found that being close with one’s peer “pack” in adolescence predicts greater overall physical health across time, even when controlling for a variety of factors associated with health (Allen, Uchino, & Hafen, 2015). Indeed, feeling you don’t belong with your peer group is associated with abnormal patterns of brain activation (elevated amygdala responses), a clear marker of stress (Berns et al., 2005) that is referred to as “the pain of independence.”

Are the benefits of group ties for health limited to those who are young? Recent research with elderly adults (age 60 and older) provides evidence of their importance for cognitive health—measures assessing memory and intellectual ability—and emotional health in terms of lowering anxiety (Gleibs et al., 2011; Haslam, Cruwys, Milne, Kan, & Haslam, 2016). In fact, interventions among depressed older adults show that joining groups can reduce the incidence of depression relapse. Using a large nationally representative sample of British adults, Cruwys et al. (2013) showed that people who were depressed and who belonged to no groups had a 41 percent likelihood of relapse over a 4-year period. If, however, they joined one group their risk of depression relapse was reduced by 24 percent and if they joined three groups their relapse risk dropped by 63 percent.

Does belonging to and feeling you belong to social groups—by promoting positive social identities—have implications for people’s self-esteem? Is it primarily group memberships that people identify with that are psychologically important to them—because they define the self—that have the power to boost self-esteem? A series of recent studies with respondents from around the world indicate that this is the case. Among adolescents in both Germany and Israel, having multiple social identifications (e.g., as students, with their family group, with their nation) was positively related to level of personal self-esteem (Benish-Weisman, Daniel, Schiefer, Mollering, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). Moreover, it was social identification that increased self-esteem across time, rather than people with higher self-esteem increasingly valuing their group memberships.

In a series of studies using a wide variety of groups—British school children, residents in a homeless shelter in Australia, elderly persons in China—it was found that the number of group memberships that are important to those respondents predicted their level of self-satisfaction (Jetten et al., 2015). To test whether it is merely having more interpersonal friendships rather than more important group memberships that predict personal self-esteem, these researchers undertook a complete social network analysis—where the number of friendship ties between all members of a school population were calculated. How well connected each boy in the network was to others through friendship ties was compared to how many important groups each student belonged to in terms of their ability to predict the boys’ level of personal self-esteem. The number of important group memberships predicted self-esteem, while the number of interpersonal ties in the network made no additional contribution. This suggests that it is group memberships that provide people with meaning and the basis for self-definition, which builds personal self-esteem.

Among university students, many do form strong identification with and value their university sports teams, their gender group, and national identity. Jetten et al. (2015) found that among American students personal self-esteem was greater as they highly identified with more of those groups. As Figure 4.13 reveals, not feeling highly identified with any of those groups was associated with lower self-esteem, while increasingly identifying with more of them resulted in higher self-esteem. By locating the self in the greater social world, defining the self in terms of these valued groups provides a basis for feeling good about the self as a worthy individual.

Figure 4.13 Personal Self-Esteem Is Higher When More Groups Are Highly Identified With

American university students who highly identified with more of their social groups such as their gender, university sports team, and nationality reported increasingly greater personal self-esteem.
4.3.3: The Self Across Time: Past and Future Selves

Sometimes people think about the ways they have developed and changed across time. Studies of autobiographical memory (Wilson & Ross, 2001) have revealed that by strategically comparing our present selves with our past selves, we can feel good about ourselves by perceiving improvement over time. To illustrate this, Ross and Wilson (2003) performed a series of studies in which they asked people to describe a “past self”—either a self that was perceived to be far in the past or one that was more recent. Criticism of the “distant” past self was greater than the self that was perceived as “nearer” to the present. These researchers argued that by derogating our distant past selves, we can feel like we have really grown (i.e., are better now). In contrast, when people feel close in time to some self-failure, the current self is seen less positively than when that same failure is seen as far in the distant past. Consistent with this self-protective idea, when people are asked to write about two memorable life experiences—one in which they were blameworthy and one in which they were praiseworthy—people generated more recent praiseworthy events but described blameworthy events that are further in their past (Escobedo & Adolphs, 2010).

What about self comparisons in the other direction—are there emotional consequences of thinking about future possible selves? Thinking about a positively valued possible self can inspire people to forego current activities that are enjoyable but will not help, or might even hinder, bringing about this improved future self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In this instance, we may forego immediately enjoyable activities to achieve the goal of becoming our desired possible self.

Think about what may be required to attain a valued future self or add a new identity. You may have to give up fun time in order to attain the status of being a college graduate, complete years of schooling and long internships to become a doctor, or put in many grueling hours in law school and study for state bar exams to become a lawyer. Lockwood and Kunda (1999) found that role models—other people we wish to imitate or be like—can inspire us to invest in such long-term achievements, but we must see the possible self that the role model represents as being potentially attainable. Receiving parental support for hoped-for future possible academic selves can also help us believe we can attain it (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014). The image of a possible future self has been found to influence people’s motivation to study harder, give up smoking, or invest in parenting classes, when a new and improved self is imagined as likely to result from such changes. We may suffer in the present as long as we believe a more desired future possible self is achievable. The photo in Figure 4.14 shows the joy that can be experienced when a new identity—as a college graduate—is attained.

People also consider how to avoid negative and feared future possible selves, for example, when we are making New Year’s resolutions. Polivy and Herman (2000) suggest that envisioning the self-changes required to avoid these outcomes can induce feelings of control and optimism, but failing to keep those resolutions is a common experience and repeated failures can lead to unhappiness. When people feel they want to change but cannot succeed in doing so, they may be tempted to reduce this uncomfortable state of self-awareness by distracting themselves—either in mundane ways such as getting lost in a novel or in more damaging ways such as consuming heavy amounts of alcohol (Baumeister, 1991).

4.3.4: Why Self-Control Can Be Difficult to Achieve

People often want to change themselves by, for example, quitting smoking, going on a diet, or studying more effectively—but they may find it difficult to stick with such long-range goals. Instead, people often succumb to the lure of an immediate reward and break with their prior commitment. In other words, we fail to control ourselves in some meaningful way.
Chapter 4

How does the way we think about ourselves affect our success in endeavors that require self-control—refraining from actions we might enjoy more—but performing actions we prefer not to if they help us move toward key goals? How difficult is it to maintain our resolve and stick to long-term goals, even though short-term outcomes might be more immediately gratifying? Some researchers have suggested that the act of controlling ourselves is taxing and makes exercising subsequent self-control more difficult. Vohs and Heatherton (2000) have claimed that we have a limited ability to regulate ourselves, and if we use our control resources on unimportant tasks, there will be less available for the important ones. People who are first required to control themselves in some way (e.g., not think about a particular topic, engage in two tasks simultaneously, or control their emotional expression), do less well on later self-control tasks than those who have not had to recently control themselves.

Consider Vohs and Heatherton’s study of chronic dieters who have a long history of attempting to resist temptation in the interests of achieving long-term weight loss. When these participants were first placed close to a dish of appealing candy, their ability to self-regulate on a second task was reduced—so they ate more ice cream than those who did not have to first control themselves. So, not only is controlling ourselves sometimes difficult to do in the first place, but after doing so successfully, it can impair our ability to do so again. This means that having to make choices between desirable items (e.g., among consumer goods when shopping)—because you have to stay on a budget—can reduce our ability to engage in self-control at a later time (Vohs et al., 2014).

To the extent that self-control is a finite resource, ego depletion—the diminished capacity to exert subsequent self-control after previously doing so—might be expected in many domains requiring self-regulation. A meta-analysis of studies in which ego depletion has occurred (due to effort to exert self-control on a prior task) reports effects on a wide variety of outcomes (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010). Prior efforts to exert self-control had negative consequences for subsequent self-control efforts including greater subjective fatigue, perceived difficulty of achieving self-control, and lowered blood glucose levels. Ego depletion was least likely to impair subsequent

Figure 4.14 Will You Be Celebrating Your New College Graduate Self Soon?
Achieving some possible selves can be hard work, but well worth the effort!

How does the way we think about ourselves affect our success in endeavors that require self-control—refraining from actions we might enjoy more—but performing actions we prefer not to if they help us move toward key goals? How difficult is it to maintain our resolve and stick to long-term goals, even though short-term outcomes might be more immediately gratifying? Some researchers have suggested that the act of controlling ourselves is taxing and makes exercising subsequent self-control more difficult. Vohs and Heatherton (2000) have claimed that we have a limited ability to regulate ourselves, and if we use our control resources on unimportant tasks, there will be less available for the important ones. People who are first required to control themselves in some way (e.g., not think about a particular topic, engage in two tasks simultaneously, or control their emotional expression), do less well on later self-control tasks than those who have not had to recently control themselves.

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self-control when the initial control effort was shorter rather than longer, when participants had received training in self-regulation, and a rest period occurs between the initial and subsequent self-control tasks. Self-control can also be increased by thinking abstractly about our goals (Fujita & Han, 2009); that is, we have to remind ourselves of our overall goals and plan (e.g., desire to lose weight) rather than the details of what we are doing right now (e.g., not diving into that chocolate cake). To sum up, the ability to control our selves—either to avoid doing what we no longer want to do or staying focused and doing more of what we do want—can be increased, but it appears to take practice, and many factors can undermine development of this skill!

Key Points

- **Social identity theory** indicates that we can think about ourselves differently depending on which aspect of self is salient along the personal versus social identity continuum. At the personal end of this continuum, we think of ourselves primarily as individuals. At the social end, we think of ourselves as members of specific social groups. The salience of these different aspects of the self can vary with the social context. When the personal self is salient, our behavior is based on intragroup contrasts—comparisons with other ingroup members. When the social self is salient, behavior reflects intergroup comparisons (contrast with the outgroup). People have multiple social identities, each of which could have rather different implications for behavior, depending on which is activated in a particular context.
- The context that we find ourselves in can alter the aspect of the self that is salient. Gender differences in self-construal will be exhibited most when our gender group identity is salient, and they may be absent entirely when another group identity is salient. For example, gender differences in perceived insecurity of the self across five different nations are observed when the self is compared to members of the other gender group but not when the self is compared to members of one’s own gender group.
- Several different factors can influence what aspect of the self is salient and influence our behavior. When the context makes one aspect particularly relevant, when the context makes one distinct from others, and when one is of greater importance to us, and others’ treatment of us or language use.
- We can regret or be unsatisfied with choices we make when a different self-aspect is salient when we consume the goods compared to when they were selected.
- One response to perceived rejection by others is to emphasize the aspect of one’s identity that differentiates the self from those rejecting us. To create a self-perception as a rebel one can take on a feature that differentiates members of one’s peer group from the mainstream.
- Feeling that you belong, by being part of groups that you value is critical for psychological and physical health. **Social network analysis**—where ties among all members of a population are assessed—has revealed that what is important for students’ well-being is not the number of friends they have but how many groups they belong to that they perceive as important.
- **Autobiographical memory** concerns how we think about ourselves across time. This can be influenced by our motivation to protect ourselves such that we see a negative self as more distant than a positive self. **Possible selves** or those we might become too have motivational properties; they can lead us to forgo immediate rewards in order to become a desired future self. **Role models** can inspire us toward long-term achievements, but we must see that possible self as attainable.
- Groups provide meaning to us and are a basis for self-definition. Images of future possible selves can inspire us to make difficult changes in the present to achieve this more desirable self. **Self-control** has been conceptualized as a limited resource and **ego depletion** following efforts to self-regulate can make it more difficult to exert self-control subsequently. Self-control is most likely to be achieved when we focus on our abstract goals rather than the details of what we are doing right now.

### 4.4: Social Comparison: How We Evaluate Ourselves

**Objective** Examine the health implications of being unrealistically optimistic about the self

How do we evaluate ourselves and decide whether we’re good or bad in various domains, what our best and worst traits are, and how likable we are to others? Social
psychologists believe that all human judgment is relative to some comparison standard (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). So, how we think and feel about ourselves will depend on the standard of comparison we use. To take a simple example, if you compare your ability to complete a puzzle to a child’s ability to solve it, you’ll probably feel pretty good about your ability. This would represent a downward social comparison—where your own performance is compared with someone who is less capable than yourself. On the other hand, if you compare your performance on the same task to a puzzle expert you might not fare so well and not feel so good about yourself. This is the nature of upward social comparisons, which tend to be threatening to our self-image. Clearly, being able to evaluate ourselves positively depends on choosing the right standard of comparison!

You might be wondering why we compare ourselves to other people. Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory suggests that we compare ourselves to others because for many domains and attributes, there is no objective yardstick to evaluate ourselves against; other people are therefore highly informative. Are we brilliant or average? Charming or not charming? We can’t tell by looking into a mirror or introspecting, but perhaps we can acquire useful information about these and many other questions by comparing ourselves to other people. Indeed, feeling uncertain about ourselves is one of the central conditions that lead people to engage in social comparison and otherwise assess the extent to which we are meeting cultural norms (Wood, 1989; van den Bos, 2009).

To whom do we compare ourselves, or how do we decide what standard of comparison to use? It depends on our motive for the comparison. Do we want an accurate assessment of ourselves, or do we want to simply feel good about ourselves? In general, the desire to see ourselves positively appears to be more powerful than either the desire to accurately assess ourselves or to verify strongly held beliefs about ourselves (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). But, suppose, for the moment, that we really do want an accurate assessment. Festinger (1954) originally suggested we can gauge our abilities most accurately by comparing our performance with someone who is similar to us. But what determines similarity? Do we base it on age, gender, nationality, occupation, year in school, or something else entirely? In general, similarity tends to be based on broad social categories, such as gender, race, age, or experience in a particular task domain (Goethals & Darley, 1977; Wood, 1989).

Often, by using comparisons with others who share a social category with us, we can judge ourselves more positively than when we compare ourselves with others who are members of a different social category (especially if that category is more advantaged than our own). This is partly because there are different performance expectations for members of different categories in particular domains (e.g., children versus adults, men versus women). To the extent that the context encourages us to categorize ourselves as a member of a category with relatively low expectations in a particular domain, we will be able to conclude that we measure up rather well. For example, a woman could console herself by thinking that her salary is “pretty good for a woman,” while she would feel considerably worse if she compared her salary to that of men, who on average, are paid more (Reskin & Padavic, 1994; Vasquez, 2001). Self-judgments are often less negative when the standards of our ingroup are used (Biernat, Eidelman, & Fuegen, 2002). Indeed, such ingroup comparisons may protect members of disadvantaged groups from painful social comparisons with members of more advantaged groups (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major, 1994).

Some suggest that the goal of perceiving the self positively is the “master motive” of human beings (Baumeister, 1998). How we achieve the generally positive self-perception that most of us have of ourselves depends on how we categorize ourselves in relation to comparison others (Wood & Wilson, 2003). Such self-categorization influences how particular comparisons affect us by influencing the meaning of the comparison. Two influential perspectives on the self—the self-evaluation maintenance model and social identity theory—both build on Festinger’s (1954) original social comparison theory to describe the consequences of social comparison in different contexts.
Self-evaluation maintenance (Tesser, 1988) applies when we categorize the self at the personal level, and we compare ourselves as an individual to another individual. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) applies when we categorize ourselves at the group level (e.g., as a woman), and the comparison other is categorized as sharing the same category as ourselves. When the context encourages comparison at the group level, the same other person will be responded to differently than when the context suggests a comparison between individuals. For example, another member of our gender group who performs poorly might be embarrassing to our gender identity when we categorize ourselves as also belonging to that group. In contrast, that same poor performing ingroup member could be flattering if we were to compare ourselves personally to that other individual.

Let’s consider first what happens in an interpersonal comparison context. When someone with whom you compare yourself outperforms you in an area that is important to you, you may be motivated to distance yourself from the person because this information evokes a relatively painful interpersonal comparison. After all, this other person has done better than you have on something that matters to you. Conversely, when you compare yourself to another person who performs even worse than you, then you will be more likely to align yourself with that other person because the comparison is positive. By performing worse than you, this person makes you look good by comparison. Such psychological movement toward and away from a comparison other who performs better or worse than us illustrates an important means by which positive self-evaluations are maintained when our personal identities are salient.

So, will we always dislike others who do better than us? No—it depends on how we categorize ourselves in relation to the other. According to social identity theory, we are motivated to perceive our groups positively, and this should especially be the case for those who most strongly value a particular social identity. Other people, when categorized as a member of the same group as ourselves, can help make our group more positive when they perform well. Therefore when we think of ourselves at the social identity level, say in terms of a sports team, then a strong performing teammate will enhance our group’s identity instead of threatening it.

Therefore, either disliking or liking of the same high performing other person can occur, depending on whether you think of that person as another individual or as someone who shares your group identity. The other’s excellent performance has negative implications for you when you compare yourself to her or him as an individual, but positive implications for you when you compare members of your group to those of another group.

To test this idea that different responses to a person can occur, Schmitt, Silvia, and Branscombe (2000) first selected participants for whom the performance dimension was relevant to the self; that is, they selected participants who said that being creative was important to them. Responses to another person who performs better or equally poorly as the self should depend on how you categorize yourself—at the individual level or at the social identity level. As shown in Figure 4.15, when participants believed their performance as an individual would be compared to the other person, they liked the poor performing target more than the high performing target who represented a threat to their positive personal self-image. In contrast, when participants categorized themselves in terms of the gender group that they shared with that person and the expected comparison was intergroup in nature (between women and men), then the high performing other woman was evaluated more positively than the similar-to-self poor performing other. Why? Because this talented person made the participants’ group—women—look good. Because different contexts can induce us to categorize ourselves as an individual or as a member of a group, it has important implications for the effects that upward and downward social comparisons will have on self-evaluation.
4.4.1: Self-Serving Biases and Unrealistic Optimism

Most people want to feel positively about themselves, and there are a number of strategies that can be used to ensure we see ourselves favorably much of the time. Many of us show the above average effect—we think we are better than the average person on almost every dimension imaginable (Alicke, Vredenburg, Hiatt, & Govorun, 2001; Klar, 2002). Even people who are known to be objectively low on certain traits show self-enhancement! For example, people convicted of violence and theft-related crimes rate themselves as better than the average community member in terms of morality, kindness to others, generosity, trustworthiness, and honesty (Sedikides, Meek, Alicke, & Taylor, 2014). These and other findings make clear that people’s tendency to see themselves as better than others (in terms of both their traits and abilities) is motivated; indeed the extent to which people do so predicts increases in self-esteem across time (Zuckerman & O’Loughlin, 2006).

Even when we are directly provided with negative social feedback that contradicts our typically rosy view of ourselves, people show evidence of forgetting such instances and emphasizing information that supports their favored positive self-perceptions (Sanitioso & Wlodarski, 2004). Likewise, information that might imply we are responsible for negative outcomes is assessed critically, and our ability to refute such arguments appears to be rather remarkable (Greenwald, 2002).

In contrast to our resistance to accepting responsibility for negative outcomes, we easily accept information that suggests we are responsible for our successes. Not only do people show self-serving biases for their personal outcomes, but they do so also for their group’s achievements. Fans of sports teams often believe that their presence and cheering was responsible for their team’s success (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). It turns out that, on the whole, we are unrealistically optimistic, and this has implications for our mental and physical health. A classic paper by Taylor and Brown (1988) documented the many forms of positive illusions that people hold. By illusion, we do not mean grandiose beliefs about the self—as might be found in some forms of psychopathology. Rather, “unrealistic optimism,” for example, involves seeing our own chances for success in life as slightly higher than our peers’ chances. Of course, it cannot be true that all of us have higher likelihoods of successful life outcomes than our peers—we are not living in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, so we can’t all be “above average.”

Figure 4.15  How Much Do We Like Another Who Performs Better or Worse Than the Self?

Research indicates that liking depends on whether the context is interpersonal, where the personal self is at stake, or intergroup, with the social self at stake. As illustrated here, a low performing other is liked best in an interpersonal context and a high performing other is liked best in an intergroup context.
4.5: Self-Esteem: Attitudes Toward Ourselves

**Objective**  Determine the factors that impact self-esteem

For the most part, self-esteem has been conceptualized by social psychologists as the overall attitude people hold toward themselves. What kind of attitude do you have toward yourself—is it positive or negative? Is your attitude toward yourself stable, or do you think your self-esteem varies across time and settings? Evidence concerning the average level of self-esteem in American high school students suggests that it has been gradually increasing over time (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Relative to students in the 1970s, high school students in 2006 report on average liking themselves considerably more.
But, are there points at which self-esteem changes for most everyone? How about the self-esteem of students who attend university? New research following students over the 4 years of college indicates that self-esteem drops during the first year, substantially for most students (Chung et al., 2014). This drop during the first year is followed by an increase in self-esteem that continues through the end of college. This post-first year increase is a function of performance: Those who get better grades in college tend to increase in self-esteem across time more than those who receive worse grades. Further, students are fairly accurate in their perceptions of whether their self-esteem changed across the college years—and about which direction. So, as you will see, while self-esteem is often thought of as, and measured, like a stable trait, it can and does change in response to life events.

4.5.1: The Measurement of Self-Esteem

The most common method of measuring personal self-esteem as an overall assessment of self-evaluation is with the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) scale. As shown in Figure 4.16, the items on this scale are quite transparent. On this measure, people are asked to rate their own explicit attitude toward themselves. Given that most people can guess what is being assessed with these items, it is not surprising that scores on this scale correlate very highly with responses to the single item, “I have high self-esteem” (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). There are also more specific measures of self-esteem that are used to assess self-esteem in particular domains, such as academics, personal relationships, appearance, and athletics, with scores on these more specific types of self-esteem being predicted by performance indicators in those domains (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007).

As Figure 4.17 illustrates, people’s self-esteem is often visibly responsive to life events. When we reflect on our achievements, self-esteem increases and focusing on our failures typically hurts self-esteem (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008). For example, when people are reminded of the ways they fall short of their ideals, self-esteem decreases (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994). When people with low self-esteem receive negative feedback, their self-esteem suffers further declines (DeHart & Pelham, 2007). Being ostracized, excluded, or ignored by other people can be psychologically painful and cause reductions in self-esteem (DeWall et al., 2010; Williams, 2001).

Several research groups have attempted to measure self-esteem with greater subtlety (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Self-esteem scores based on explicit measures such as the Rosenberg scale could be biased by self-presentation concerns. Responses also might be guided by norms—for example, people may report high levels of

**Figure 4.16 Measuring Self-Esteem: The Rosenberg Scale**

Each of the items with an asterisk is reverse-scored, and then an average of all 10 items is computed so that higher numbers indicate greater self-esteem.

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.*
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.*
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.*
9. I certainly feel useless at times.*
10. At times I think I am no good at all.*
self-esteem because they think that is “normal” and what others do. To bypass such normative and conscious strategic concerns, researchers have developed a number of ways of assessing self-esteem implicitly by assessing automatic associations between the self and positive or negative concepts. The most common of the implicit self-esteem measures assessing self-feelings of which we are not consciously aware is the Implicit Associations Test (Greenwald & Nosek, 2008; Ranganath, Smith, & Nosek, 2008). Responses on these two types of measures of self-esteem—implicit and explicit—are often not correlated with each other, which is consistent with the assumption that they are capturing different processes. An important question is whether implicit self-esteem changes with the circumstances, as we know explicit self-esteem does. To test this idea, Dijksterhuis (2004) used the logic of classical conditioning procedures to determine whether implicit self-esteem can be improved without the participant’s conscious awareness. After repeatedly pairing representations of the self (I or me) with positive trait terms (e.g., nice, smart, warm) that were presented subliminally (too quickly for participants to consciously recognize them), implicit self-esteem was found to be significantly higher for these participants than for those in a control group who were not exposed to such self-positive trait pairings. Furthermore, this subliminal conditioning procedure prevented participants from suffering a self-esteem reduction when they were later given negative false feedback about their intelligence. Therefore, and consistent with research on explicit self-esteem (studies using the Rosenberg scale) that shows people with high self-esteem are less vulnerable to threat following a failure experience, this subliminal training procedure appears to provide similar self-protection at the implicit level when faced with a threat to the self.

Consistent with this analysis concerning nonconscious influences on self-esteem, DeHart, Pelham, and Tennen (2006) found that young adults whose parents were consistently nurturing of them reported higher implicit self-esteem than those whose parents were less nurturing. Conversely, young adults whose parents were overprotective of them showed lower implicit self-esteem than those whose parents displayed trust in them during their teenage years. Such implicit messages—based on our experiences with our parents—may lay the foundation for implicit associations between the self and positive attributes, or the self and negative attributes.
Chapter 4

Much in American culture encourages people to think positively about themselves. When you are facing a big challenge, do you follow the advice that Norman Vincent Peale offered in his (1952) book *The Power of Positive Thinking*? The advice was simple enough—“tell yourself that you can do anything, and you will”; “tell yourself that you’re great, and you will be.” Who practices this advice? And, does doing so work?

To address these questions, Wood, Perunovic, and Lee (2009) first simply asked college students when and how often they use positive self-talk (e.g., “I will win”; “I will beat this illness”). Only 3 percent of their sample said they “never” do this, while 8 percent said they do so “almost daily,” with the majority somewhere in between. As might be expected, their participants were most likely to say they use positive self-talk before undertaking a challenge (e.g., before an exam or before giving a presentation). Wood et al. (2009) suggested that for people with high self-esteem, such self-talk represents a confirmation of their already positive self-views. But for people with low self-esteem, positive self-talk might simply serve to remind them that they might not measure up. These researchers had high and low self-esteem people focus on how “I am a lovable person” and other statements of that sort. After this task, participants’ happiness with themselves was assessed. For those low in self-esteem, this treatment did not appear to work; they remained less happy with themselves than high self-esteem people. So, positive self-talk may not be as beneficial as once believed—at least among those who need it most.

4.5.2: How Migration Affects Self-Esteem

Each year millions of students leave their home state or country to attend university elsewhere. You might be one of them. How does such a move affect psychological well-being, including self-esteem? Research examining the well-being of domestic and international students who have moved within or to the United States finds that adjustment among international students initially is lower than that of domestic students but that both groups improve over a 6-month period (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002). Improvements in well-being were due to two factors: increasing self-efficacy—the sense that one is capable of getting things done, and social support—both from those at home and positive interactions with peers at the new location. Other research with international students has found that self-esteem improves to the extent that they form a new minority identity shared with others who have also undergone the same migration experience—that of “International Student” (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2002). Developing this new identity is particularly important for the well-being of students who, after arriving in the United States, perceive themselves as discriminated against because they are “foreigners.”

Is the self-esteem of students affected when they move to a location where their ethnic group is the majority or to one where their ethnic group is a minority? Recent research has addressed this question with Asian and European American students.
who moved from California to Hawaii (Xu, Farver, & Pauker, 2015). In their home state of California, European Americans are the numeric majority and Asian Americans the minority, while this is reversed in Hawaii with Asian Americans the numeric majority and European Americans the minority. How is the self-esteem of these two ethnic groups affected by this numeric change? European Americans’ self-esteem levels were lower after their first year in Hawaii where their ethnic group was a minority, suggesting that the change from majority to minority may have challenged their views about themselves. In contrast, for Asian Americans, although their ethnic identity became less salient by the move from a minority to majority context, their self-esteem was unchanged.

People also migrate from one country to another not just for a few years as a student, but with the goal of permanently relocating, often becoming citizens of the new country. Indeed, there has been an ongoing mass migration of people from Syria and other locations in the Middle East and North Africa into Europe over the past several years. As shown in Figure 4.19, both adults and children brave treacherous travels on the sea to reach safety. It will no doubt take considerable time for their well-being to improve, given the trauma many have already experienced. But, what are the well-being consequences of immigrating to another country—not as refugees who are fleeing from terrifying conditions, but when this migration is freely chosen? Despite the millions of people who immigrate to another country every year, little research has examined the self-esteem of immigrants both before and after doing so. One valuable study that did so (Lonnqvist, Leikas, Mahonen, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015) found that immigrants from Russia to Finland showed reductions in self-esteem from preimmigration to 3 years postimmigration. Like the student migrants discussed previously, these immigrants had higher self-esteem to the extent that they experienced high social support and high self-efficacy. This research reveals that changing circumstances—even when those are chosen—can have implications for our self-esteem.

Figure 4.19 Syrian Refugees Struggling to Survive: The Humanitarian Crisis

Research indicates that migration—even when freely chosen—can present difficulties for well-being. However, the current crisis and mass migration from Syria and other Middle Eastern locations entails considerable trauma.
4.5.3: Do Women and Men Differ in Their Level of Self-Esteem?

Who do you think, on average, has higher or lower self-esteem—women or men? Many people might guess that men have higher self-esteem overall than women. Why would that be? To the extent that self-esteem is affected by how important others see us and the treatment we receive from them (Mead, 1934), then we might expect that women will have lower self-esteem overall compared to men. Because women have historically occupied lower status social positions and are frequently targets of prejudice, these could have negative consequences for their self-esteem. Self-esteem in girls and women may reflect their devalued status in the larger society, with many feeling that they just cannot measure up to societal standards.

In a 14-nation study, Williams and Best (1990) assessed the self-concepts of women and men. In nations such as India and Malaysia, where women are expected to remain in the home in their roles as wives and mothers, women had the most negative self-concepts. In contrast, in nations such as England and Finland, where women are more active in the labor force and the status difference between women and men is less, members of each gender tend to perceive themselves equally favorably. This research suggests that when women are excluded from important life arenas, they will have worse self-concepts than men. Longitudinal research with employed women in the United States too finds that women in jobs in which gender discrimination is most frequent exhibit increasingly poorer well-being (Pavalko, Mossakowski, & Hamilton, 2003). Harm to women—as a function of employment in a discriminatory work environment—was observed over time in comparison to their health status before such employment began.

A meta-analysis comparing the global self-esteem of women and men in 226 samples collected in the United States and Canada from 1982 to 1992 likewise found that men have reliably higher self-esteem than women (Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999). Although the size of the effect obtained across all these studies was not large, as Prentice and Miller (1992) point out, sometimes small differences between groups can be quite impressive. Precisely because there are substantial differences within each gender group in level of self-esteem, being able to detect reliable group differences in self-esteem both within and across nations is remarkable. Major et al. (1999) found that the self-esteem difference between men and women was less among those in the professional class and greatest among those in the middle and lower classes. Again, those women who have attained culturally desirable positions suffer less self-esteem loss than those who are more likely to experience the greatest devaluation. Indeed, recent longitudinal research has noted that the substantial gender difference in self-esteem that they observed during the adult working years begins to decline at about 65 years of age, with the gender groups converging in old age (Orth, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010).

So, is the common sense notion that overall self-esteem suffers for groups that are devalued in a given society correct after all? The research findings offer a straightforward answer for gender: Yes. Likewise, for many other devalued groups, perceiving discrimination has a significant negative effect on a variety of indicators of health (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). How badly self-esteem suffers depends on how much discrimination and devaluation the group that is the subject of such treatment experiences (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006). In the special feature, “What Research Tells Us About…Perceived Discrimination and Self-Esteem,” we’ll see that the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem, and other forms of well-being, differ depending on what group is the target. All devalued groups do not suffer to the same extent.
What Research Tells Us About...

Perceived Discrimination and Self-Esteem

What are the emotional consequences of perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination? This question has been addressed in many investigations—both in correlational studies that assess this relationship in a wide variety of groups around the world, and in experiments that permit causal inferences about the effects of different types of attributions made for an identical negative outcome.

Why should we expect that perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination will negatively affect well-being? First of all, discrimination is often experienced as a form of exclusion, frequently from important life domains (i.e., good jobs, better housing). Second, discrimination conveys devaluing and disrespect within society more broadly, and we know that inclusion and feeling valued are important conditions for humans to thrive. Third, perceiving discrimination threatens feelings of control and can create a sense of powerlessness—it communicates that you will not have the same opportunities for success in life as others. For all these reasons, the self-esteem and well-being costs more generally should be especially negative for disadvantaged groups, explaining why harm to well-being is greater for the former than the latter.

A meta-analysis that has integrated the results of hundreds of studies involving 144,246 people found that perceived discrimination is negative for all sorts of indicators of psychological well-being, including self-esteem (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). As you might have expected, the effect is significantly more negative for disadvantaged groups compared to advantaged groups. Many different types of disadvantaged groups were studied and the effect of perceived discrimination on their self-esteem was more negative for some than others. Can you guess for which forms of discrimination—racism, sexism, sexual orientation, physical illness or disability, mental illness, HIV+, or weight—self-esteem might be more negative? Table 4.2 presents the standardized effect sizes (which are correlations, weighted by sample size) across studies for the relationship found between perceived discrimination and self-esteem, as well as other indicators of psychological distress.

Shown here are the standardized effect sizes (correlations, weighted by sample size) across a variety of studies conducted. For all of these groups, the effect of perceived discrimination on self-esteem and other indicators of psychological distress is significant and negative. That means the more members of these groups perceive discrimination, the worse their well-being. However, as you can see, for some groups the relationship was much more strongly negative than for others.

The harm to well-being of perceived discrimination shown here may reflect in part the negative effect of experiencing discrimination—the worse treatment received—rather than the perception of one’s outcomes being due to discrimination. To separate the effects of objective encounters with discrimination from the subjective interpretation of the cause of that experience, experiments that control actual discrimination by giving everyone the same treatment and then varies the interpretation people give to it permits us to learn the causal effect of perceiving our negative outcomes as stemming from discrimination. There are two types of experiments that have been done to address this issue, and as you’ll see they result in dramatically different effects. Let’s see how they are done and what we’ve learned from them.

Suppose you receive negative feedback from another person about your job interview performance, or otherwise receive some undesirable treatment. It is possible to make several different types of attributions for such unfavorable outcomes. Research investigating this issue can vary aspects of the situation to make discrimination plausible—because the interviewer is prejudiced against your racial group, or make it seem like you lacked the needed ability so not passing the interview would be seen as deserved. Neither of these attributions (to discrimination or personal deservingness) is particularly great for self-esteem. Both reflect something about you that is stable and difficult to change (your group membership and your ability). Based on a meta-analysis of experiments concerning single outcomes like this, across 54 samples there was no overall negative effect of attributing the negative outcome to discrimination versus personal deservingness (Schmitt et al., 2014).

The second type of experiment that has been conducted, however, revealed different results. In these studies, the negative outcome always happens too, but perceptions of how widespread discrimination is more generally have been manipulated. That is, if the person treating you badly is thought to be like many other interviewers you might encounter (e.g., they are all sexist), then discrimination may be seen as pervasive, but if the interviewer you encountered is the only one who is sexist, then discrimination against your group may be seen as a relatively rare occurrence. For these studies, there was a substantial negative effect on a variety of indicators of well-being of attributing one’s negative outcome to discrimination when it conveyed a message that discrimination is pervasive. Such instances communicate that your identity is not valued and you can expect more outcomes like this, which is why it causes significant harm to well-being. What is fundamentally important for whether psychological well-being will be harmed is how likely it is that you can expect to encounter discriminatory treatment in the future. Such an interpretation of negative outcomes is more likely for disadvantaged than advantaged groups, explaining why harm to well-being is greater for the former than the latter.
Chapter 4

4.6: The Self as a Target of Prejudice

Objective  Analyze how prejudice and trying to conceal our identity impacts well-being

Although the experience of not getting what you want is generally negative, how you explain such undesirable outcomes has important implications for how people feel about themselves, and by extension, how people cope. As you saw in the prior section, attributions affect the meaning derived from events; as a result, some attributions for a negative outcome are more psychologically harmful than others and undermine self-esteem (Weiner, 1985). We now consider the consequences of concealing or not concealing one’s identity for a person’s self-esteem, and then turn to the behavioral consequences of perceiving the self as a target of prejudice.

### Table 4.2  The Relationship Between Perceived Discrimination and Psychological Well-Being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Discrimination</th>
<th>Self-Esteem</th>
<th>Psychological Distress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>−.13</td>
<td>−.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td>−.09</td>
<td>−.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>−.17</td>
<td>−.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Illness/Disability</td>
<td>−.54</td>
<td>−.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>−.31</td>
<td>−.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>−.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV+</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>−.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (age, unemployment)</td>
<td>−.21</td>
<td>−.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Points**

- Self-esteem is our overall attitude toward ourselves. Self-esteem is most frequently measured with explicit items that directly assess our perceived level of self-esteem. Other implicit measures of self-esteem assess how strong the positive or negative association between ourselves and stimuli associated with us are, including trait terms. People may not be aware of their implicit self-esteem.
- Self-esteem is responsive to life experiences, and more specific forms of self-esteem depend on how we perform in those domains. Even implicit self-esteem can change with circumstances.
- People often engage in positive self-talk, especially when preparing for a challenge. Research has found that such positive self-talk in low self-esteem people is not effective in improving feelings about themselves.
- Migration—either to attend university elsewhere or to immigrate to another country—can initially have a negative effect on self-esteem. Over time, however, self-esteem may improve, particularly when they receive social support and feel self-efficacy.
- There is a small but reliable gender difference in self-esteem. Women’s self-esteem is worse than men’s to the extent that they live in a nation with more exclusion of women from public life compared to women who live in a nation with higher labor force participation by women. Among those U.S. women who work in occupations in which discrimination is frequent and pervasive, lower self-esteem is more prevalent than among women in occupations in which discrimination is encountered less often.
- Meta-analysis reveals that perceived discrimination is more harmful for the self-esteem of disadvantaged groups than advantaged groups. Experiments that vary the perception that discrimination against one’s group is pervasive rather than rare reveal a negative causal effect of seeing discrimination as pervasive so difficult to avoid.
4.6.1: Concealing Our Identity: How Well-Being Can Suffer

For some identities that we might possess, negative treatment is widely and routinely experienced. For example, gay men and lesbians often face violence because of their sexual orientation, those with mental and physical disabilities may experience public shaming, as do people who are overweight, and employment and other forms of discrimination are frequent among those who are HIV infected or have other chronic health conditions such as traumatic brain injury. For some of these identities, people may be tempted to hide, or not reveal, “who they are” in order to avoid such prejudicial treatment (Pachankis, 2007). But choosing not to reveal, or repeatedly having to decide to do so or not, can be a substantial burden in its own right (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). In addition, while discrimination personally may be avoided with this strategy, awareness of societal devaluation of one’s group will not be. To the extent that harm to well-being is a result of this broader perception, people with concealable stigmatized identities might exhibit lower self-esteem and greater psychological distress than those with stigmatized identities that are not readily concealed. A meta-analysis examining the effects of concealability of a stigmatized identity has revealed more negative effects on well-being compared to identities such as gender and race that are not concealable (Schmitt et al., 2014). In fact, the long-term consequences of hiding one’s sexual identity was poignantly revealed in a study of HIV infected gay men. These men were more likely to acquire other infections and died earlier than those with the same physical condition but who did not hide their sexual orientation (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996). Avoiding discrimination with successful concealment can come at quite a cost—negative health and well-being stemming from loneliness and not being able to connect with others like oneself.

Suppose you were to interact with someone who you knew did not like your academic major and actually preferred to interact with someone from another major. If you were induced to hide your major when interacting with this person, would you feel you might not be “true to yourself” and instead be “inauthentic” compared to if you revealed your identity—even knowing it would be disliked? This is precisely the situation that Newheiser and Barreto (2014) created in order to examine the interactional consequences of hiding one’s true identity. As shown in Figure 4.20, participants in this experiment who hid their stigmatized identity did report worrying more that they wouldn’t be able to be themselves and felt more inauthentic compared to participants who revealed their disliked identity. Moreover, after actually interacting with the other person, observers who were blind to what condition participants had been in perceived the individuals who hid their identity as disclosing less about themselves and perceived the overall interaction as less positive than when the individuals had revealed their true identity. This suggests that while we may hide a stigmatized identity to belong, doing so may actually heighten our sense that we don’t belong and set us up for awkward social interactions.

**Figure 4.20** To Hide Who You Are, or Be the Real You?

When a stigmatized identity was hidden, participants who did so felt greater authenticity concerns about themselves than those who were not induced to hide their identity. Observers of their interaction with another person saw the “hiding” others as disclosing less about themselves and had a less positive impression of the interaction than when the “true” identity had been revealed.
4.6.2: Overcoming the Effects of Stereotype Threat

Perceiving the self as a target of prejudice not only harms psychological well-being, it can also interfere with people’s ability to acquire new skills. Several studies have found that when people fear that others will discover their devalued group membership, as might be the case for concealable stigmas, such fear can negatively affect people’s ability to learn and can affect task performance (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990; Lord & Saenz, 1985; Schmader, 2010).

How might these performance deficits in those with a stigmatized self be prevented? Research suggests that a critical issue is the extent to which people can affirm themselves in other ways. Martens, Johns, Greenberg, and Schimel (2006) examined whether first having people affirm their most valued attribute, perhaps a talent for art or another accomplishment, would eliminate cognitive deficits in those who were later reminded of their stigmatized group membership; this was exactly what they found. Thus, it is the extent to which a negative stereotype may define a person’s entire worth that leads to underperformance, and re-affirming the individual’s worth can provide protection. Another important way that underperformance effects may be overcome includes making salient the stereotype-defying accomplishments of an important role model who shares one’s stigmatized group membership. In a test of whether the election of Barack Obama as U.S. president could have a beneficial effect on African Americans’ verbal test performance, Marx, Ko and Friedman (2009) gave a random selection of Americans a difficult verbal test before and immediately after exposure to these accomplishments. While the test performance of Caucasian and Af-

Figure 4.21  Stereotype-Defying Accomplishments of Another Who Shares One’s Stigmatized Identity Improves Test Performance

Making salient the achievements of a famous fellow ingroup member improved verbal test scores in a random sample of African Americans.
rican Americans before Obama received the Democratic nomination differed (with African Americans scoring less well than Caucasians), after exposure to the achievements of this famous fellow ingroup member, African Americans’ performance on this difficult verbal test improved; in fact, following Barack Obama’s election, no racial difference in test performance was observed. So, making salient the stereotype-defying accomplishments of another person who shares one’s stigmatized group, as shown in Figure 4.21, can powerfully counter vulnerability to performance deficits.

Stereotype threat, which is a particular kind of social identity threat, occurs when people believe they might be judged in light of a negative stereotype about their social identity or that they may inadvertently act in some way to confirm a negative stereotype of their group (Logel et al., 2009; Steele, 1997; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). When people value their ability in a certain domain (e.g., math), but it is one in which their group is stereotyped as performing poorly (e.g., women), stereotype threat can occur. When those who are vulnerable to this threat are reminded in either an overt or subtle way that the stereotype might apply to them, then performance in that domain can be undermined. Consider the experience of the women engineering students studied by Logel et al. (2009). When these women were exposed to a sexist man, their subsequent performance on a math test was undermined, although their performance on an English test was unaffected. Interacting with the sexist man made their identity as women salient, and while trying to counteract this threat by suppressing thoughts of gender stereotypes, they inadvertently confirmed the stereotype about women’s poor math ability.

Such stereotype threat effects are fairly difficult to control. For example, simply telling women before they take a math test that men do better on math than women do (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999) or having African Americans indicate their race before taking a difficult verbal test (Steele & Aronson, 1995) is sufficient to evoke stereotype threat and hurt their performance. Indeed, because women are negatively stereotyped as being worse at math than men, women tend to perform more poorly when they simply take a difficult math test in the presence of men, whereas they tend to perform better when the same test is taken only in the presence of other women (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000).

Consider the dilemma of women who have taken a lot of math classes and who perceive math to be an important aspect of their self-concept. What if they also value their identity as women? When they find themselves exposed to information that suggests there are reliable sex differences in math ability, with men doing better than women, these women are likely to experience threat. How then do they manage to cope with such threat, without simultaneously distancing from either the math domain or their group as a whole? Pronin, Steele, and Ross (2004) found that high-math-identified women distanced themselves only from gender stereotypic dimensions that are deemed to be incompatible with math success (e.g., leaving work to raise children, being flirtatious) but they did not do so for gender stereotypic dimensions deemed to be irrelevant to math success (e.g., being empathic, being fashion conscious). Only in the stereotype threat condition did this reduced identification occur, suggesting it was a motivated process designed to alleviate the threat experienced.

Why do stereotype threat-based performance decrements occur? Some researchers suggest that anxiety is evoked in women, African Americans, and Latinos when their group membership is portrayed as predictive of poor performance (Osborne, 2001). Some studies have, however, failed to find increased self-reported anxiety among stigmatized group members experiencing stereotype threat (Aronson et al., 1999). This could be because members of stigmatized groups are reluctant to admit their feelings of anxiety, or it may be that they do not actually realize they are feeling anxious so they cannot accurately report those feelings.

Research that has examined nonverbal measures of anxiety illustrates how anxiety does play a crucial role in stereotype threat effects. In a clever test of the hypothesis
that anxiety causes stereotype threat performance deficits, Bosson, Haymovitz, and Pinel (2004) first either reminded or did not remind gay and straight participants of their category membership before videotaping their interactions with young children in a nursery school. Participants were first asked to indicate their sexual orientation on a form just before they interacted with the children. After this subtle reminder that their sexual orientation group is stereotyped as one that is dangerous to children, the gay participants’ childcare skills (as rated by judges unaware of the hypotheses and procedure) suffered compared to when they were not so reminded of their category membership and its associated stereotype. This same group membership reminder had no effect on the straight participants, because there is no associated stereotype of danger to children. Consequently, straight participants were not at risk of potentially confirming a negative stereotype in the performance situation they faced.

Was increased anxiety in the gay men the cause of the reduction in their rated childcare skills? On standard self-report measures of anxiety and evaluation apprehension, the answer would seem to be no—Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, (2004) did not obtain differences in these self-reports as a function of either sexual orientation or stereotype threat condition. Importantly, however, independent judges’ ratings of nonverbal anxiety—as indicated by various behaviors indicating discomfort during the interaction with the children—were affected by sexual orientation and stereotype threat. Among the gay men who were reminded of their category membership, their anxiety was discernible in their nonverbal behavior compared to the gay men who were not experiencing stereotype threat. That is, although the gay men experiencing stereotype threat did not rate themselves as more anxious, they were visibly more fidgety; they averted their eyes more, and otherwise exhibited signs of discomfort more than gay men not experiencing stereotype threat. And, this nonverbal anxiety disrupted their interactions with the children. However among heterosexual men, reminders of their category membership tended to result in fewer nonverbal symptoms of anxiety compared to when their category was not made relevant.

Is it only for groups that are historically devalued in the culture as a whole that stereotype threat effects have been observed? No. Such effects occur with men, who are not a devalued group as a whole but who are stereotyped as being less emotional than women (Leyens, Désert, Croizet, & Darcis, 2000). When men were reminded of

### Key Points

- People with some identities receive negative treatment and this may tempt them to “hide” who they are. Concealing a stigmatized identity may help people avoid overt forms of discrimination, but awareness of societal devaluation is still likely. Concealable stigmatized identities have more negative effects on well-being compared to stigmatized identities that are not concealable.
- Hiding an identity that you anticipate being disliked by another can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and less positive social interactions.
- The fear of confirming others’ negative stereotypes about one’s group identity can disrupt performance. Affirming another aspect of the self or exposure to a stereotype-defying role model who shares one’s stigma can result in improved performance.
- **Stereotype threat** effects occur in capable people in a domain they value. They have been observed in historically devalued group members (African Americans, women) and in dominant groups (Caucasians, men) when they believe they might negatively compare on an important dimension with members of another group.
- Stereotype threat effects are difficult to control, and they can be induced easily. Simply requiring people to indicate their group membership before taking a test in a domain in which they are vulnerable is enough to undermine performance.
- When people experience stereotype threat, they can distance themselves from the negative part of the stereotype about one’s group.
- Anxiety appears to be one mechanism by which stereotype threat effects occur. However self-report measures of anxiety often fail to reveal its importance, although nonverbal indicators of anxiety do predict performance disruption.
the stereotype concerning their emotional deficits, their performance on a task requiring them to identify emotions suffered. In an even more dramatic way, Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, and Darley (1999) illustrated a similar point. In their research, Caucasian men who expected to be compared to African American men performed more poorly on an athletic performance task when they believed it reflected “natural athletic ability.” The reverse occurred when Caucasian men believed the exact same task reflected “sports intelligence,” which is a dimension on which they expect to excel as compared with African American men. Likewise, although there is no stereotype that Caucasians perform poorly on math, when they are threatened by a potentially negative comparison to Asians who are stereotyped as performing better than Caucasians, then they show math performance deficiencies (Aronson et al., 1999). Thus expecting to do poorly in comparison to another group can undermine performance, even in members of historically advantaged groups. While we will examine related issues on the effects of stereotyping on its targets in Chapter 6, the research we have reviewed here on stereotype threat effects illustrates the importance of group membership for the experience of threat to the self, and how such threat can easily disrupt performance.

**Summary and Review**

Sometimes close others can be better at predicting our behavior than we ourselves are. That is because observers and actors attend to different behavioral features. Sometimes people put information about themselves on Facebook that is a little more positive than they really are. When people are asked if their self-descriptions might be biased, the more positive their ratings were, initially, the more they perceived the possibility of bias.

We face many audiences and how we present ourselves to others can vary. We might attempt to engage in self-promotion—present our most favorable aspects—on some occasions and on others we may be motivated to present ourselves in ways that induce others to agree with our own self-views. That is, we may engage in self-verification, even if it means having others agree with the negative qualities we believe we possess. We may also create a favorable self-presentation by using ingratiating tactics that convey respect for others, or occasionally self-depreciate to communicate admiration for the other by comparison.

Self-knowledge is sought through two primary methods—introspection and considering ourselves from others’ vantage point. Introspection is tricky because we often don’t have conscious access to the emotional factors that affect our behavioral choices, or to what actually brings us happiness. We also may have difficulty predicting how we will feel in the future because we neglect to consider other events that will also occur besides the focal ones considered. When we think of ourselves by taking an observer’s perspective, we see the self in more trait terms and less responsive to situations, as observers do.

How we think about ourselves varies depending on where we are on personal-versus-social identity continua at any given moment in time. At the personal identity level we can think of ourselves in terms of attributes that differentiate ourselves from other individuals, and therefore will be based on intragroup comparison. At the social identity level, perceptions of ourselves are based on attributes that are shared with other group members; perception of the self at the social identity level stems from intergroup comparison processes.

Self-definitions can vary across situations, with each being valid predictors of behavior in those settings. How we conceptualize ourselves can also depend on how others expect us to be and how we believe they will treat us. Across time, Americans have increasingly come to define themselves in terms of individualistic traits. Context shifts that change whether or not we define ourselves in terms of our gender can result in gender differences in self-construal appearing or disappearing. What aspect of the self is influential at any moment in time depends on: context, distinctiveness of the attribute, importance of the identity, and how others refer to us.

Different aspects of the self may be salient when a selection is made and when it is experienced or consumed. Dissatisfaction and regret are higher when the self-aspects are inconsistent with each other when the choice is made and when it is experienced. When other people reject us because of some aspect of our identity, people often rebel against those doing the rejecting and make that feature even more self-defining. Today, people who get body piercings and tattoos are attempting to communicate their difference from the “mainstream.”

Other future possible selves, besides who we are currently, can motivate us to attempt self-change. Role models can represent future possible selves that we can attain.
When people compare their present self to their past self, the further in the past that self is the more we downgrade it relative to our present self. This approach to autobiographical memory allows us to feel good about our current self. Dreaded possible selves can lead us to give up certain behaviors (e.g., smoking), while desired possible selves can lead us to work long hours to attain them.

Self-control is necessary if we are to forego immediate pleasures in exchange for long-term goals. How the self is construed affects our ability to resist temptation. Self-control may be a resource that can be temporarily used up—ego depletion—which makes it more difficult to self-regulate. Subsequent self-control can be more difficult when the initial control effort was longer, when no rest period is given, or when people lack training in self-regulation.

How we feel about ourselves can be assessed directly and explicitly, or with more implicit or indirect methods. Both explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem are responsive to life events. Positive self-talk (thinking about how “I’m a lovable person”) is not necessarily beneficial for low self-esteem people.

Social comparison is a vital means by which we judge ourselves. Upward social comparisons at the personal level can be painful, and downward social comparisons at this level of identity can be comforting. The reverse is true when ones social identity is salient—we dislike another ingroup member who performs poorly but respond positively to an ingroup member who performs better than us because that person makes our group look good.

Most people show self-serving biases, such as the above average effect, where we see ourselves more positively (and less negatively) than we see most other people. We consistently hold positive illusions about ourselves and are unrealistically optimistic about our ability to avoid negative outcomes. Americans’ optimistic expectations for themselves have been rising. Such unrealistic optimism makes us feel more positive and healthy.

When we migrate from one state or country to another, psychological well-being is often affected. Initially, students who migrate show lower self-esteem, but improvements over time are a function of self-efficacy and social support. Women do, on average, have lower self-esteem than men. This is particularly the case in nations where women do not participate in the labor force, and in the United States among middle-class and lower-class women who work in environments in which gender-based devaluation is most frequent.

There are emotional costs of perceiving oneself as a target of discrimination. A meta-analysis of the hundreds of studies assessing perceived discrimination and self-esteem showed that it is more negative for disadvantaged groups than advantaged groups. Experiments have revealed that when the self is seen as a target of pervasive discrimination, it is more harmful for self-esteem than when it is seen as reflecting an isolated outcome.

For some socially devalued identities, people may attempt to hide or not reveal it to avoid prejudicial treatment. People with concealable stigmatized identities have lower self-esteem than people whose stigmatized identities cannot be concealed. Hiding an important identity can make people feel inauthentic and decrease forms of self-disclosure that makes interaction more positive.

Stereotype threat effects can occur in historically devalued groups when they are simply reminded of their group membership and fear they might confirm negative stereotypes about their group. Stereotype threat can undermine performance in dominant group members as well, when they fear a negative comparison with members of another group that is expected to outperform them. This undermining of performance only occurs on dimensions relevant to the stereotype. Stereotype threat performance decrements can be prevented by (1) affirming the self in another way, (2) exposure to a stereotype-defying role model, and (3) distancing from aspects of the stereotype that are incompatible with high performance. Anxiety, at least nonverbal indicators of it, plays a role in the emergence of stereotype threat-based performance deficits. Members of any group can be vulnerable to performing less favorably when a salient comparison group is expected to perform better at a task. Stereotype threat research reveals how our group memberships can affect our self-concepts and performance on tasks we care deeply about.