

## THE SELF, ITS DERIVATE TERMS, AND RESEARCH

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With the increasing tendency of social scientists to be "self-oriented" in their study of human behavior, a large number of terms has been developed for use in describing and studying the phenomenon of self. Some of these terms are: "self," "concepts of self," "self concept," "self-ideal," "self-adequacy," "self-acceptance," etc. As these terms have become adopted and used by an increasing number of people from a wide variety of theoretical frames of reference, the literature dealing with them has become more and more confused. This paper attempts to re-examine conceptual bases, to point up ambiguities and problems which exist, and to arrive at definitions of these terms consistent with a "self" frame of reference and capable of providing a more adequate base for the planning of research, and thus to facilitate communication among workers in this area.

Although we have, in the following, occasionally pointed to some published research as illustration of what we believe to be errors in conceptualization, we hasten to add that we have done this without malice. Indeed, had we not ourselves fallen so resoundingly into the same pitfalls, we would not have become aware of the problems and embarked upon this paper.

### SELF AND REAL SELF

The word "self" is a generic term referring to a specific human personality and has been indispensable in the historical development of man as a conscious and thinking entity. The assertion that a "self" exists may involve only the assumption that for a given human being, there exist identity (uniqueness) and consciousness of self and environment. If, however, we wish to go beyond this point and describe the characteristics and attributes of a given self, the job becomes a more complex and difficult one, for the self can be observed from many different frames of reference. It may be described from the point of view of innumerable observers, including the individual himself.

No one can ever observe a "real" self—his own or someone else's—directly. It can only be approached through the perceptions of someone. An individual attempting to describe *his own self*, can provide only an approximation of his "real" self; at any given time, only a

part of the "real" self is "visible" to the individual. Another person attempting to describe *someone else's self*, can only approximate the "real" self through inferences based on observed behavior.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to cope with the question of the "real" self, for its very existence is a philosophical question. It is sufficient that the ways in which the self is *perceived* can be studied. This, we think, *is* necessary; for these perceptions are among the most important determinants of behavior.

#### CONCEPTS OF SELF

The number of ways in which the self may be perceived are practically limitless. Individuals may see themselves as men or women, children or adults, Republicans or Democrats. More specifically, a particular individual may see himself as John Smith, owner of a 1956 Dodge, who lives at 627 Edgemere Street, St. Albans, Utah. Descriptions like these serve to distinguish the self as unique from all other selves. But self-description does not stop with this. We are seldom content with description alone. Thus, even more important are the values the individual places upon his various qualities of self. People do not regard themselves as fathers or mothers only, but as "good" fathers and mothers or "bad" ones. They see themselves, not simply as people, but as attractive or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant, fat or thin, happy or sad, adequate or inadequate people.

Each individual, within a comparatively short time after birth, has developed a large number of perceptions about himself. These more or less separate perceptions of self might be termed "concepts of self." They are more or less discrete perceptions of self which the individual regards as part or characteristic of himself. They include all the self-perceptions which the individual has differentiated as descriptive of the self he calls "I" or "me" (32). These concepts are not of equal importance in the peculiar economy of a human being. They vary in at least two important respects.

1. Some are more central, such as conceiving of self as man or woman, and are more resistant to change. Other concepts of self are less strongly defended because they do not seem quite so important in a particular organization, such as being the driver of a 1956 Dodge.

2. Concepts of self will also vary in sharpness or clarity. At any moment we observe a human being, we will find the concepts of self which he holds to vary from those in clear, sharp figure to those so vague and fuzzy as to be inexpressible even by the person himself (15).

The mother in the psychological clinic, for example, may be quite certain that she is Jimmy's mother. Whether she is a "good" mother is a perception far less clear to her. Indeed, it may be this very confusion that causes her difficulty.

#### THE SELF CONCEPT

Whereas the "concepts of self" about which we have just been speaking describe isolated aspects of the person, the "self concept" is the organization of all that the individual refers to as "I" or "me" (32). It is himself from his own point of view. The self concept is not a mere conglomeration or addition of isolated concepts of self, but a patterned interrelationship or "gestalt" of all these (6, 27, 28). Like many of the concepts of which it is composed, the self concept has a degree of stability and consistency which gives predictability to the individual and his behavior (37, 38).

The perceptual field of an individual includes much more than his perceptions of self. It includes, for example, perceptions of the objects and events in the world about him, perceptions of his physical being, the goals and values he has differentiated as means of achieving need satisfaction, the techniques which have come to seem appropriate ways of reaching his goals, and perceptions of abstract ideas and concepts. These perceptions, in the same fashion as perceptions of self, will also vary in importance and clarity.

The perceptual field which includes all of an individual's perceptions may be represented by a large circle, A. Within this perceptual field we may think of a second and smaller circle, B, which includes all those perceptions which the person holds about himself, irrespective of their importance or clarity to him at any particular moment. Snygg and Combs (32) have called this the "phenomenal self." Within the phenomenal field we may think of a third, still smaller circle, C, which includes only those aspects which are important or vital to the self. This is the self concept. It is a stable, important and characteristic organization composed of those perceptions which seem to the individual preeminently himself (15, 32).

#### INFERENTIAL NATURE OF THE SELF

Both the self concept and concepts of self are inferences about the self. They are sheer abstractions, or interpretations useful in helping us understand ourselves and to make communication possible. The self as a discrete entity does not exist. Allport warns against reifying

the self, making it into a homunculus to solve all problems without in reality solving any (1, p. 54). Like the concept of the atom or of electricity, the self concept is an inference which enables us to deal with a complex function not directly observable. The fact that it is a product of inference does, however, not make it invalid. To the individual, his perceptions of self, like all his other perceptions, have the feeling of reality. His self concept seems to him to be truly what he is.

The self concept is created by the individual's inferences from his unique experiences. It is derived from observations about his own behavior and the behavior of other people toward him. The child who perceives adults push him away, may come to perceive himself as unliked or unwanted. The adult observing himself to be badly winded while playing with his young son, may revise his self concept with the perception that he no longer has the old pep. Whatever self concept the individual holds, has been acquired from the data of his own observations of behavior.

The outsider hoping to understand the self concept of another individual also attempts to assess it through inference. If each individual behaves in terms of his self concept, then it should be possible for an outsider, by observing the behavior of an individual, to infer the nature of the self concept. This is what each of us does quite automatically in dealing with other people. We infer, from the behavior we see, what other people are thinking and feeling, and adjust our own behavior accordingly. What the layman does as a matter of "common sense," the behavioral scientist seeks to do more exactly and more precisely. The data used by the psychologist in studying the self concept are exactly the same as those used in studying any other human characteristic, namely, the observed behavior of the subject.

#### THE SELF REPORT

The self report is the individual's self-description; it represents what the individual *says* he is. Like any other act, the self report is a *behavior* revealing in larger or smaller degree what is going on within the organism. The self report and the self concept, although often confused, are by no means synonymous. One is a behavior, the other, a perception or inference made from behavior. To treat the two as synonymous is to introduce into our research a large and unknown degree of error.

The self report is valuable as a means of exploring the self concept. Like any other behavior, the self report is a product of the individual's *total* perceptual field. It is a product of *both* the subject's perceptions of self and of not-self, without having a one-to-one relationship to the self concept. Confusion of the self report with the self concept in research has led to similar confusion in thinking and research results, making communication extremely difficult. Confusion of the two terms represents a return to introspection, a technique of observation no more acceptable to phenomenological psychology than to more traditional approaches (2,10).

For research purposes we must know the degree to which the self report can be relied upon as an indication of the self concept. This will depend on at least the following factors:

1. *Clarity of the subject's awareness.* We have already seen that the self concept varies in degrees of clarity, and that some concepts of self at any moment are in clear figure while others may be immersed in ground. Whether or not they may be reported to others will depend in some measure on whether they can truly be called into clear figure at the moment they are asked for. Lack of clarity may also be of a more permanent character; some concepts of self may exist at very low levels of awareness for most of our lives. These correspond to the so-called "unconscious," and attempts to report them to others may be impossible.

2. *Lack of adequate symbols for expression.* Closely related to the problem of clarity is the question of the possession of the necessary symbols in which self concepts may be adequately expressed. Self descriptions can only be reported in words. But words are notoriously inadequate, and may not mean the same things to others as they mean to us. The degree to which the self report approaches the self concept is thus open to all the errors of any human communication.

3. *Social expectancy.* In our society it is customary, indeed practically necessary, for the individual to hide his true concepts of self even if he is able to report them accurately. Though a person may think of himself as very charming or as very stupid, he certainly would be most unlikely to express such feelings even under the most favorable circumstances. We can never quite escape the effects of our society, no matter how hard we may try. We are always aware of the expectancies of others toward us, and the things we say about ourselves are always more or less affected by this fact. Perhaps in psychotherapy, when a strong relationship with an accepting counselor has

developed, the client may be able to report his feelings and attitudes toward himself with a lower degree of distortion. This seldom occurs elsewhere in life, however.

4. *Cooperation of the subject.* The accuracy of the self report depends greatly on the motivation of the subject. If he wishes to hide an aspect of self, he can well do so. He does not even have to reveal his lack of cooperation, if indeed he is aware of a decision not to cooperate. But even with the best of intentions to cooperate, a subject may be quite unable to give the desired information accurately for reasons of which he himself is not clearly aware.

5. *Freedom from threat and personal adequacy.* In general, the more adequate the individual feels, the more likely his self report will approach an accurate description of the self concept, other factors being equal. The more threatened, inadequate, or maladjusted the individual, the more vulnerable will be his concepts of self and the greater the necessity for him to defend the self.

Some experimenters have attempted to circumvent the difficulties of the self report by various methods of forcing choices or of requiring subjects to categorize statements about themselves. Most notable of these methods is the Stephenson Q technique which has been used for a number of researches on the self concept (13, 19, 29, 30, 34, 35, 37). This technique requires the subject to sort a large number of statements about self into a series of "more or less so" piles. While such techniques force the subject to consider a number of self descriptions he might otherwise avoid, most of the variables described above continue to operate, for the most part uncontrolled. Sophisticated statistical manipulation cannot overcome inadequacies of basic conceptualization.

Although the self report is quite different from the self concept, a surprising number of researches purporting to deal with the self concept have turned out, on closer examination, to be experiments on the self report (3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 17, 19, 21). Thus some, very valuable studies run the risk of being rejected because they are mislabeled rather than being accepted for the valuable contributions they make.

#### THE SELF IDEAL

It has become generally accepted that an individual's perception of himself as an adequate or inadequate person—his confidence in his own ability to satisfy his basic needs—is extremely important in

determining his reaction to people and situations. At first glance the fact that an individual may see himself as inadequate would seem to require that he have differentiated certain goals for himself which he defines as "adequate" and "satisfactory". The aggregate of these characteristics of self which the person feels are necessary to attain adequacy (sometimes, perhaps unfortunately, perfection) has been termed the "self ideal" (9, 14, 20, 22, 25), and it has been assumed that the discrepancy between a person's "self concept" and his "self ideal" would provide a relatively objective measure of "adequacy" or "inadequacy" (8, 20, 22).

Estimates of the self ideal have usually been based on responses by the subject to questions of the same general type as are used in paper and pencil personality inventories. Sometimes the individual has been asked to describe or rank personal characteristics and goals which are representative of his ideal self, or to describe as satisfactory or unsatisfactory certain words and phrases (9, 14, 20, 22).

Description of the self ideal runs into much the same difficulties as the self report. It cannot be accepted at face value. We must try to find out not only *what* the individual says, but *why* he says it under the conditions of the specific observation. Acceptance of a person's responses at face value can quickly lead to misinformation, ambiguous research findings, and further confusion. Yet a number of studies have accepted the subject's description of the "person I would like to be" as the self ideal (9, 14, 20, 22, 27).

Another difficulty is that the individual may never have formulated a clear self ideal. When we ask him to report his self ideal, we may thus be forcing him to invent for us a concept which does not normally exist in his economy in a meaningful way. A person may learn to see himself as very inadequate without ever developing a clear picture of what constitutes adequacy. Indeed, this would seem to be true of most persons who suffer from strong feelings of basic inadequacy. Their inability to differentiate clear and realistic goals is familiar to clinicians and counselors everywhere. Much of the distress of the client in psychotherapy seems to occur precisely because of this inability. He feels that what he *is*, is unsatisfactory; his attempts to define criteria of satisfaction for himself reveal less a self ideal than confusion and lack of clear differentiation.

Finally, an individual's perception of himself as adequate or inadequate, and his differentiation of the qualities which would be ideal for him, involves a great deal more than static or cross-sectional

descriptions of self and ideal. Adequacy is a dynamic function. The apparent difference between an individual's self concept and his self ideal, statically described, may be less important than his satisfaction with his current movement toward improvement and his confidence in being able to bridge the gap between "what is" and "what should be." It is quite possible, for example, that two individuals might describe their selves and ideals in very similar terms, yet would differ greatly in their feelings of adequacy to progress toward their goals. Both may see themselves as lacking in a particular area; one may consider this an exciting problem to be solved; the other, a forbidding and insurmountable obstacle. These differences are *perceived* distances between self and ideal. They are distances as the behavior, rather than the observer, sees them; they are "psychological" distances. The observer can only make inferences about these "perceived distances" from the behavior which he observes. He cannot subtract the one set of statements from the other!

The use of the term self ideal, then, and attempts to arrive at objective measurement of this concept, are subject to a number of limitations which have not always been observed. The self ideal involves important dynamic as well as static elements, and can only be studied under the conditions which are common to all phenomenological observations. The term must be recognized as referring to a highly abstract construct, which may or may not have its counterpart in the perceptual field of the individual.

#### THE SELF AND ADJUSTMENT

A large number of terms have been developed to indicate good adjustment from various points of view. "Self-acceptance," "self-adequacy," and "the non-threatened personality" are perhaps the most representative (12, 15, 29, 32).

Unfortunately, these terms are sometimes used to refer to an individual as *totally* self-acceptant, or *totally* adequate, or *completely* non-threatened, conditions which represent ultimate desirable goals along various dimensions of self-perception. These ultimate goals, like most ultimates, represent static conditions which can *never be achieved*. Life is a dynamic process, and individuals continue to strive for growth and self-enhancement. Allport has expressed this function as follows:

Here seems to be the central characteristic of propiate striving: its goals are, strictly speaking, unattainable. Propiate striving confers unity upon personality, but it is never the unity of fulfillment, or repose, or of reduced tension. The de-

voted parent never loses concern for his child; the devotee of democracy adopts a lifelong assignment in his human relationships. The scientist, by the very nature of his commitment, creates more and more questions, never fewer. Indeed the measure of our intellectual maturity, one philosopher suggests, is our capacity to feel less and less satisfied with our answers to better and better problems (1, p. 67).

Furthermore, the terms self-acceptant, adequate, and non-threatened, are used in so many ways as to be more confusing than helpful. Actually each describes the same state, yet stresses a different aspect of the field. Let us look at each term briefly.

*Self-acceptance.* This term, as used by Rogers (29), Maslow (23), Snygg and Combs (32), Murphy (25), and others, (5 18, 24, 25, 31, 36), refers to the ability of the individual to accept into awareness facts about himself with a minimum of defense or distortion. It is related to the *accuracy* of observation and self-awareness, and does not imply approval or disapproval of self. Thus, a well-adjusted, self-accepting individual may be able to say of himself, "Yes, indeed, I have a very bad habit of interrupting people sometimes," and this unflattering judgement can be made without the necessity for defending himself or denying the existence of the perception.

Some experimenters, however, have equated self-acceptance with self-approval or liking (9, 18, 31). To do this would lead to the ridiculous conclusion that a person who says of himself accurately, "I am a very cruel person most of the time, and I like myself this way very much," is a well-adjusted person! The truly well-adjusted person may confess to an overall feeling of satisfaction, but probably has no great feeling of like or dislike of self.

*Self-adequacy.* This is another characteristic of the individual self concept. It is an over-all evaluation of self, at all levels of awareness. It is the individual's judgment of his present and future ability to achieve basic need-satisfaction. An individual always has as a goal a greater degree of adequacy—this is part of the dynamic process of living. To the degree that he sees himself as adequate, however, he can select among the goals he perceives, or reject them, or try and fail, without disorganization and self-defeating reactions. He feels adequate to achieve enhancement through goals which are realistically available in terms of immediate or predicted situations. His feeling of adequacy, then, does not depend on the restrictions of his immediate environment

Objective appraisal of an individual's success as culturally defined, or his brilliance in contributing to art, science, or literature, does not provide in itself satisfactory evidence of an individual's self-adequacy.

Adequacy is an attribute of his own perception of himself. Two people may be equally convinced that they are unable to deal with mathematical problems; for one, this is a realistic and matter-of-fact situation which he can use effectively in decision-making, and has relatively little relevance to his feeling of worth-whileness; for the other, it may be further evidence of personal inadequacy, a weakness which is not acceptable to him. Adequacy or inadequacy are *personal* perceptions of events.

*Non-threatened-personality.* Generally speaking, the "adequate" person is also "non-threatened." There is a reciprocal relationship between self-adequacy and perceived threat on the part of an individual. Threat occurs when a person sees himself as basically inadequate to satisfy need. The result is a narrowing and distortion of perception so that he is not able to admit into clear awareness those aspects of self and environment which contribute to the threat, nor to relate these meaningfully and realistically to other perceptions of self and environment. Threat produces defense. The self concept, as it exists at the time, is defended more vigorously and is less capable of change and growth. To speak of a non-threatened person, then, is another way of referring to one who is self-acceptant and who perceives himself as a basically adequate person.

One of the problems involved here is that the term "threat" has been used differently in different frames of reference. Traditionally, we have spoken of one person as threatening another; here the emphasis is on the purpose of the threatener. In self-theory, however, threat exists only as it is perceived by the individual. Thus, when an experiment is set up to provide a threatening situation, some subjects may respond with effective and well-organized behavior. Instead of the threat they may have perceived a potentially rewarding situation and felt relatively adequate to deal with it. The ambiguous results achieved in some research on "stress" and "threat" may well stem from the differences in the ways individuals perceived the experimental situation (13, 16).

#### PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Phenomenological research, like any other research, begins with careful observation. From such observations it develops inferences as to the perceptions of the subject, which inferences are checked against further observations of behavior. By such a repeated process of observation, inference, prediction, observation, inference, etc., the psychologist using a perceptual frame of reference is able to explore

the dynamics of the subject's behavior. Phenomenological research, however, involves the observer in a much more active role than traditional approaches. In perceptual research, he is not a passive but an active instrument of observation (33). This more active role affords vast opportunities to explore the private world of the behavior, on the one hand, but calls for far greater control and discipline of the observer himself, on the other hand.

The first essential to moving forward in this type of research, it seems to us, is to achieve clarity and precision of our fundamental concepts. Confusion in our concepts can only lead to similar confusion in our research endeavors. Without clear understanding of the problems we seek to explore, we run the risk of becoming the victims of our own perceptions.

#### SUMMARY

With the ever-increasing use of perceptual approaches to personality study there is need for rigorous examination of basic premises and conceptualizations. The authors discuss a number of self-oriented terms commonly employed in the literature, point out some common pitfalls in their use, and suggest some steps toward clearer, more precise use of these terms. Among the terms described are: self, self concept, self report, self-ideal, self-acceptance, self-adequacy, and non-threatened self.

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