10

Perceiving the Self

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I am me.
In all the world, there is not one exactly like me.
There are people who have some parts like me but no one
adds up exactly like me. Therefore, everything that
comes out of me is authentically mine because I alone
choose it.

—*Virginia Satir*

How people communicate depends to a great extent on how they define themselves (self-concept) and how they evaluate themselves (self-esteem). In this piece on self-perception and communication, communication scholars Ronald Adler and George Rodman explore how people perceive themselves and how those perceptions affect their communication with others.

As adults, this connection may be difficult to recognize, since fully formed self-concepts don't always appear to be terribly vulnerable to communication from others. If someone insults your intelligence, for instance, and you've always thought of yourself as smart, you are not likely to question this concept of yourself. Yet as the authors illustrate, children are not born with a self-concept, and therefore, must use the influence and feedback from others to conceive an understanding of themselves. In this way, people learn to depend upon others to reinforce a certain self-image.

The authors develop an argument for understanding how the communication of others influences how you see yourself. The concept of reflected appraisal describes how you develop an image of yourself from the way you think others view you; in other words, you construct your sense of self through your relationships with other people. Therefore, self-concept comprises the physical and social perceptions that individuals have of themselves that they have gained through their interactions with others. A self-concept tends to be stable but not necessary permanent (West & Turner, 2009). Yet the key point involves the interactive nature of building a self-concept. An individual selectively incorporates the feedback of others; the messages that really count come from significant others, those whose opinions are valued. Sadly enough, you may value the opinions of some people who may not think highly of you; in such cases, you encounter a struggle between accepting yourself or trying to change yourself in order to please another who does not have your best interests at heart.

By first defining the complex nature of the self-concept, Adler and Rodman explain why and how we form the image of ourselves, concluding with the role of personality in shaping both the self-concept and the degree of influence that communication plays in its development and maintenance. As you read this article consider the question: What person or persons have significantly impacted my image of

myself and what messages did I receive that I incorporated into my view of myself?

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SELF-CONCEPT DEFINED

The *self-concept* is a set of relatively stable perceptions each of us holds about ourselves. The self-concept includes our conception about what is unique about us and what makes us both similar to, and different from, others. To put it differently, the self-concept is rather like a mental mirror that reflects how we view ourselves: not only physical features, but also emotional states, talents, likes and dislikes, values, and roles.

We will have more to say about the nature of the self-concept shortly, but first you will find it valuable to gain a personal understanding of how this theoretical construct applies to you. You can do so by answering a simple question: "Who are you?"

How do you define yourself? As a student? A man or woman? By your age? Your religion? Occupation?

There are many ways of identifying yourself. Take a few more minutes and list as many ways as you can to identify who you are. You'll need this list later in this [chapter], so be sure to complete it now. Try to include all the characteristics that describe you:

- your moods or feelings
- your appearance and physical condition
- your social traits
- talents you possess or lack
- your intellectual capacity
- your strong beliefs
- your social roles

Even a list of twenty or thirty terms would be only a partial description. To make this written self-portrait complete, your list would have to be hundreds—or even thousands—of words long.

Of course, not every item on such a list would be equally important. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it could consist of physical appearance, health, friendships, accomplishments, or skills.

You can begin to see how important these elements are by continuing this personal experiment. Pick the ten items from your list that describe the most fundamental aspects of who you are. Rank these ten items so that the most fundamental one is in first place, with the others following in order of declining importance. Now, beginning with the tenth item, imagine what would happen if each characteristic in turn disappeared from your makeup. How would you be different? How would you feel?

For most people, this exercise dramatically illustrates just how fundamental the self-concept is. Even when the item being abandoned is an unpleasant one, it's often hard to give it up. And when they are asked to let go of their most central feelings or thoughts, most people balk. "I wouldn't be *me* without that," they insist. Of course, this proves our point: The self-concept is perhaps our most fundamental possession. Knowing who we are is essential, for without a self-concept it would be impossible to relate to the world.

COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF

So far we've talked about what the self-concept is; but at this point you may be asking what it has to do with the study of human communication. We can begin to answer this question by looking at how you came to possess your own self-concept.

Newborn babies come into the world with very little sense of self. In the first months of life infants have no awareness of their bodies as being separate from the rest of the environment. At eight months of age, for example, a child will be surprised when a toy grabbed from the grip of another child "resists." Not until somewhere between their first and second birthday are most children able to recognize their own reflections in

a mirror. The lack of self-concept in very young children helps explain why toddlers are so difficult to control. Since they lack any sense of individuality, they don't recognize themselves as the target of disapproval by their caretakers. Neither do they experience emotions such as remorse, guilt, or shame that come from being criticized. We can amuse very young children through play; frighten them by speaking loudly and harshly; and comfort them with hugs, songs and soft speech; but we can't influence self-esteem until children have a sense of self.

How do we develop the kind of rich, multidimensional self-concept described in the preceding section? Our identity comes almost exclusively from communication with others. As psychologists Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg put it:

> The self is essentially a social product arising out of experience with people.... We learn the most significant and fundamental facts about ourselves from..."reflected appraisals," inferences about ourselves made as a consequence of the ways we perceive others behaving toward us.

The term *reflected appraisal*, coined by Harry Stack Sullivan, is a good one, for it metaphorically describes the fact that we develop an image of ourselves from the way we think others view us. This notion of the "looking-glass self" was first introduced in 1902 by Charles H. Cooley, who suggested that we put ourselves in the position of other people and then, in our mind's eye, view ourselves as we imagine they see us.

As we learn to speak and understand language, verbal messages—both positive and negative—also contribute to the developing self-concept. These messages continue later in life, especially when they come from what social scientists term *significant others*—people whose opinions we especially value. A teacher from long ago, a special friend or relative, or perhaps a barely known acquaintance who you respect can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself. To see the importance of significant others, ask yourself how you arrived at your opinion of you as a student...as a person attractive to the opposite sex...as a competent worker...and you will see that these self-evaluations were probably influenced by the way others regarded you.

Research supports the importance of reflected appraisals. One study identified the relationship between adult attitudes toward children and the children's self-concepts. The researcher first established that parents and teachers expect children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to do better academically than socioeconomically disadvantaged youngsters. In other words, parents and teachers have higher expectations for socioeconomically advantaged students. Interestingly, when children from a higher socioeconomic class performed poorly in school their self-esteem dropped; but children from less advantaged backgrounds did not lose self-esteem. Why was there this difference? Because the parents and teachers sent messages about their disappointment to the higher status children, whereas no such messages went to their less-advantaged counterparts.

Later in life the influence of significant others is less powerful. The evaluations of others still influence beliefs about the self in some areas, such as physical attractiveness and popularity. In other areas, however, the looking glass of the self-concept has become distorted, so that it shapes the input of others to make it conform with our existing beliefs. For example, if your self-concept includes the element "poor student," you might respond to a high grade by thinking "I was just lucky" or "The professor must be an easy grader."

You might argue that not every part of one's self-concept is shaped by others, insisting there are certain objective facts that are recognizable by self-observation. After all, nobody needs to tell you that you are taller than others, speak with an accent, can run quickly, and so on. These facts are obvious.

Though it's true that some features of the self are immediately apparent, the *significance* we attach to them—the rank we assign them in the hierarchy of our list and the interpretation we give them—depends greatly on the opinions of others. After all, there are many of your features that are readily observable, yet you don't find them important at all because nobody has regarded them as significant.

Recently we heard a woman in her eighties describing her youth. "When I was a girl," she declared, "we didn't worry about weight. Some people were skinny and others were plump, and we pretty much accepted the bodies God gave us." Compare this attitude with what you find today: It's seldom that you pick up a popular magazine or visit a bookstore without reading about the latest diet fads, and television ads are filled with scenes of slender, happy people. As a result, you'll find many people who complain about their need to "lose a few pounds." The reason for such concern has more to do with the attention paid to slimness these days than with any increase in the number of people in the population who are overweight. Furthermore, the interpretation of characteristics such as weight depends on the way people important to us regard them. We generally see fat as undesirable because others tell us it is. In a society where obesity is the ideal (and there are such societies), a heavy person would feel beautiful. In the same way, the fact that one is single or married, solitary or sociable, aggressive or passive, takes on meaning depending on the interpretation society attaches to those traits. Thus, the importance of a given characteristic in your self-concept has as much to do with the significance you and others attach to it as with the existence of the characteristic....

THE SELF-CONCEPT, PERSONALITY, AND COMMUNICATION

While the self-concept is an internal image we hold of ourselves, the personality is the view others hold of us. We use the notion of *personality* to describe a relatively consistent set of traits people exhibit across a variety of situations. We use the notion of personality to characterize others as friendly or aloof, energetic or lazy, smart or stupid, and in literally thousands of other ways. In fact, one survey revealed almost 18,000 trait words in the English language that can be used to describe a personality. People do seem to possess some innate personality traits. Psychologist Jerome Kagan reports that ten percent of all children appear to be born with a biological disposition toward shyness. Babies who stop playing when a stranger enters the room, for example, are more likely than others to be reticent and introverted as adolescents. Likewise, Kagan found that another ten percent of infants seem to be born with especially sociable dispositions. Research with twins also suggests that personality may be at least partially a matter of physical destiny. Biologically identical twins are much more similar in sociability than are fraternal twins. These similarities are apparent not only in infancy but also when the twins have grown to adulthood, and are noticeable even when the siblings have had different experiences.

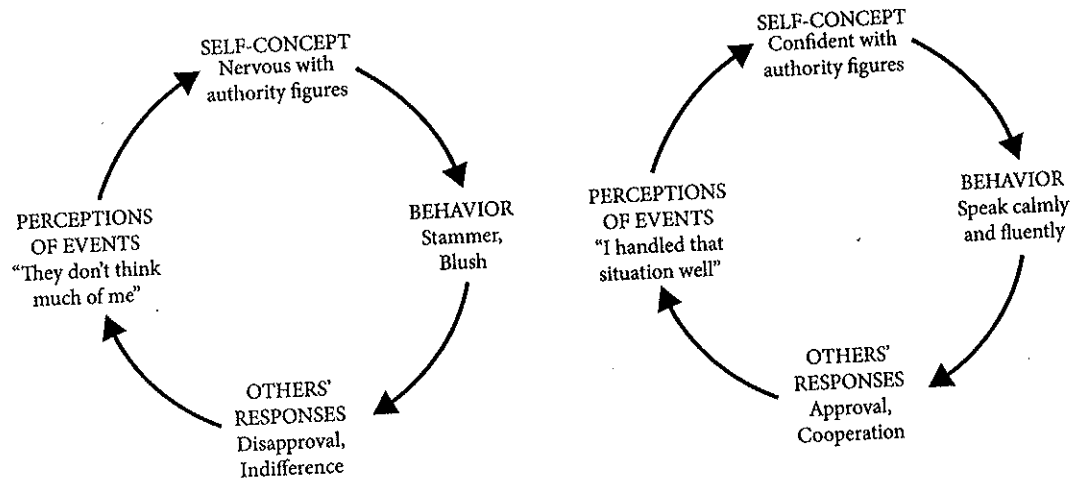

Figure 10-1
The Self-Concept Communications: A Cyclic Process

Despite its common use, "personality" is often an oversimplification. Much of our behavior isn't consistent. Rather, it varies from one situation to another. You may be quiet around strangers and gregarious with friends and family. You might be optimistic about your schoolwork or career and pessimistic about your romantic prospects. The term "easygoing" might describe your behavior at home, while you might be a fanatic at work. This kind of diversity isn't only common; it's often desirable. The argumentative style you use with friends wouldn't be well received by the judge in traffic court when you appeal a citation. Likewise, the affectionate behavior you enjoy with a romantic partner at home probably wouldn't be appropriate in public.... [A] wide range of behaviors is an important ingredient of communication competence. In this sense, a consistent personality can be more of a drawback than an asset—unless that personality is "flexible."

Figure 10-1 pictures the relationships between the self-concept and behavior. It illustrates how the self-concept both shapes much of our communication behavior and is affected by it. We can begin to examine the process by considering the self-concept you bring to an event. Suppose, for example, that one element of your self-concept is "nervous with authority figures." That image probably comes from the evaluations of significant others in the past—perhaps teachers or former employers. If you view yourself as nervous with authority figures like these, you will probably behave in nervous ways when you encounter them in the future—in a teacher-student conference or a job interview. That nervous behavior is likely to influence how others view your personality, which in turn will shape how they respond to you—probably in ways that reinforce the self-concept you brought to the event. Finally, the responses of others will affect the way you interpret future events: other job interviews, meeting with professors, and so on. This cycle illustrates the chicken-and-egg nature of the self-concept, which is shaped by significant others in the past, helps to govern your present behavior, and influences the way others view you.

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QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Number a piece of paper from 1 to 10. Then answer this question: Who am I? List the characteristics that you think define you. Then, take a moment to rank the top three that you think are most important or crucial to your self concept. Why are these most important to you? What feedback have you received from others on these characteristics?

2. Identify three people who have contributed to the development of your self-concept, positively or negatively, through the process of reflected appraisal. Why are these persons important to you? What have they helped you to understand about yourself? How did their communication affect your self-concept?
3. Relying on the authors' suggestions, develop a list of the many ways you identify yourself. Star the ones that are most important to you. Identify three characteristics you would like to add to this list in the next few years and note one way to work on each of those characteristics.
4. How have you contributed to the self-concept of another person? What messages have you conveyed that influenced how that person developed a self-concept?
