



Self and Identity

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For human beings, the self is what happens when “I” encounters “Me.” The central psychological question of selfhood, then, is this: How does a person apprehend and understand who he or she is? Over the past 100 years, psychologists have approached the study of self (and the related concept of identity) in many different ways, but three central metaphors for the self repeatedly emerge. First, the self may be seen as a social actor, who enacts roles and displays traits by performing behaviors in the presence of others. Second, the self is a motivated agent, who acts upon inner desires and formulates goals, values, and plans to guide behavior in the future. Third, the self eventually becomes an autobiographical author, too, who takes stock of life — past, present, and future — to create a story about who I am, how I came to be, and where my life may be going. This module briefly reviews central ideas and research findings on the self as an actor, an agent, and an author, with an emphasis on how these features of selfhood develop over the human life course.

Learning Objectives

- Explain the basic idea of reflexivity in human selfhood—how the “I” encounters and makes sense of itself (the “Me”).
- Describe fundamental distinctions between three different perspectives on the self: the self as actor, agent, and author.
- Describe how a sense of self as a social actor emerges around the age of 2 years and how it develops going forward.
- Describe the development of the self’s sense of motivated agency from the emergence of the child’s theory of mind to the articulation of life goals and values in adolescence and beyond.

- Define the term narrative identity, and explain what psychological and cultural functions narrative identity serves.

Introduction

In the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, the ancient Greeks inscribed the words: “Know thyself.” For at least 2,500 years, and probably longer, human beings have pondered the meaning of the ancient aphorism. Over the past century, psychological scientists have joined the effort. They have formulated many theories and tested countless hypotheses that speak to the central question of human selfhood: *How does a person know who he or she is?*



We work on ourselves as we would any other interesting project. And when we do we generally focus on three psychological categories - The Social Actor, The Motivated Agent, and The Autobiographical Author. [Image: MakuKulden, <https://goo.gl/sMUsn>], CC BY-NC 2.0, <https://goo.gl/VnKlK8>]

what exactly is it that we work on?

The ancient Greeks seemed to realize that the self is inherently **reflexive**—it reflects back on itself. In the disarmingly simple idea made famous by the great psychologist William James (1892/1963), the self is what happens when “I” reflects back upon “Me.” The self is both the I and the Me—it is the knower, and it is what the knower knows when the knower reflects upon itself. When you look back at yourself, what do you see? When you look inside, what do you find? Moreover, when you try to *change* your self in some way, what is it that you are trying to change? The philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) describes the self as a reflexive *project*. In modern life, Taylor argues, we often try to manage, discipline, refine, improve, or develop the self. We *work on* our selves, as we might work on any other interesting project. But

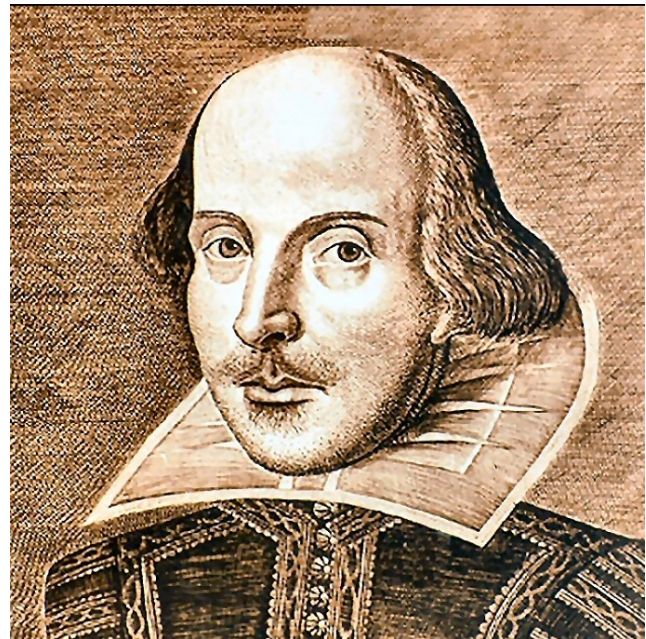
Imagine for a moment that you have decided to improve yourself. You might, say, go on a diet to improve your appearance. Or you might decide to be nicer to your mother, in order to

improve that important social role. Or maybe the problem is at work—you need to find a better job or go back to school to prepare for a different career. Perhaps you just need to work harder. Or get organized. Or recommit yourself to religion. Or maybe the key is to begin thinking about your whole life story in a completely different way, in a way that you hope will bring you more happiness, fulfillment, peace, or excitement.

Although there are many different ways you might reflect upon and try to improve the self, it turns out that many, if not most, of them fall roughly into three broad psychological categories (McAdams & Cox, 2010). The I may encounter the Me as (a) a social actor, (b) a motivated agent, or (c) an autobiographical author.

The Social Actor

Shakespeare tapped into a deep truth about human nature when he famously wrote, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” He was wrong about the “merely,” however, for there is nothing more important for human adaptation than the manner in which we perform our roles as actors in the everyday theatre of social life. What Shakespeare may have sensed but could not have fully understood is that human beings evolved to live in social groups. Beginning with Darwin (1872/1965) and running through contemporary conceptions of human evolution, scientists have portrayed human nature as profoundly *social* (Wilson, 2012). For a few million years, *Homo sapiens* and their evolutionary forerunners have survived and flourished



In some ways people are just like actors on stage. We play roles and follow scripts every day. [Image: Brian, <https://goo.gl/z0VI3t>, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://goo.gl/i4GXf5>]

by virtue of their ability to live and work together in complex social groups, cooperating with each other to solve problems and overcome threats and competing with each other in the face of limited resources. As social animals, human beings strive to *get along* and *get ahead* in the presence of each other (Hogan, 1982). Evolution has prepared us to care deeply about social acceptance and social status, for those unfortunate individuals who do not get along well in social groups or who fail to attain a requisite status among their peers have typically

been severely compromised when it comes to survival and reproduction. It makes consummate evolutionary sense, therefore, that the human "I" should apprehend the "Me" first and foremost as a *social actor*.

For human beings, the sense of the self as a social actor begins to emerge around the age of 18 months. Numerous studies have shown that by the time they reach their second birthday most toddlers recognize themselves in mirrors and other reflecting devices (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Rochat, 2003). What they see is an embodied actor who moves through space and time. Many children begin to use words such as "me" and "mine" in the second year of life, suggesting that the I now has linguistic labels that can be applied reflexively to itself: I call myself "me." Around the same time, children also begin to express social emotions such as embarrassment, shame, guilt, and pride (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). These emotions tell the social actor how well he or she is performing in the group. When I do things that win the approval of others, I feel proud of myself. When I fail in the presence of others, I may feel embarrassment or shame. When I violate a social rule, I may experience guilt, which may motivate me to make amends.

Many of the classic psychological theories of human selfhood point to the second year of life as a key developmental period. For example, Freud (1923/1961) and his followers in the psychoanalytic tradition traced the emergence of an autonomous *ego* back to the second year. Freud used the term "ego" (in German *das Ich*, which also translates into "the I") to refer to an executive self in the personality. Erikson (1963) argued that experiences of trust and interpersonal attachment in the first year of life help to consolidate the autonomy of the ego in the second. Coming from a more sociological perspective, Mead (1934) suggested that the I comes to know the Me through reflection, which may begin quite literally with mirrors but later involves the reflected appraisals of others. I come to know who I am as a social actor, Mead argued, by noting how *other people* in my social world react to my performances. In the development of the self as a social actor, other people function like mirrors—they reflect who I am back to me.

Research has shown that when young children begin to make attributions about themselves, they start simple (Harter, 2006). At age 4, Jessica knows that she has dark hair, knows that she lives in a white house, and describes herself to others in terms of simple behavioral *traits*. She may say that she is "nice," or "helpful," or that she is "a good girl most of the time." By the time, she hits fifth grade (age 10), Jessica sees herself in more complex ways, attributing traits to the self such as "honest," "moody," "outgoing," "shy," "hard-working," "smart," "good at math but not gym class," or "nice except when I am around my annoying brother." By late childhood and early adolescence, the personality traits that people attribute to themselves, as well as those attributed to them by others, tend to correlate with each other in ways that conform

to a well-established taxonomy of five broad trait domains, repeatedly derived in studies of adult personality and often called the **Big Five**: (1) extraversion, (2) neuroticism, (3) agreeableness, (4) conscientiousness, and (5) openness to experience (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008). By late childhood, moreover, self-conceptions will likely also include important social roles: "I am a good student," "I am the oldest daughter," or "I am a good friend to Sarah."

Traits and roles, and variations on these notions, are the main currency of the **self as social actor** (McAdams & Cox, 2010). Trait terms capture perceived consistencies in social performance. They convey what I reflexively perceive to be my overall acting style, based in part on how I think others see me as an actor in many different social situations. Roles capture the quality, as I perceive it, of important structured relationships in my life. Taken together, traits and roles make up the main features of my **social reputation**, as I apprehend it in my own mind (Hogan, 1982).

If you have ever tried hard to change yourself, you may have taken aim at your social reputation, targeting your central traits or your social roles. Maybe you woke up one day and decided that you must become a more optimistic and emotionally upbeat person. Taking into consideration the reflected appraisals of others, you realized that even your friends seem to avoid you because you bring them down. In addition, it feels bad to feel so bad all the time: Wouldn't it be better to feel good, to have more energy and hope? In the language of traits, you have decided to "work on" your "neuroticism." Or maybe instead, your problem is the trait of "conscientiousness": You are undisciplined and don't work hard enough, so you resolve to make changes in that area. Self-improvement efforts such as these—aimed at changing one's traits to become a more effective social actor—are sometimes successful, but they are very hard—kind of like dieting. Research suggests that broad traits tend to be stubborn, resistant to change, even with the aid of psychotherapy. However, people often have more success working directly on their social roles. To become a more effective social actor, you may want to take aim at the important roles you play in life. What can I do to become a better son or daughter? How can I find new and meaningful roles to perform at work, or in my family, or among my friends, or in my church and community? By doing concrete things that enrich your performances in important social roles, you may begin to see yourself in a new light, and others will notice the change, too. Social actors hold the potential to transform their performances across the human life course. Each time you walk out on stage, you have a chance to start anew.

The Motivated Agent

Whether we are talking literally about the theatrical stage or more figuratively, as I do in this



When we observe others we only see how they act but are never able to access the entirety of their internal experience. [Image: CC0 Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/m25gce>]

module, about the everyday social environment for human behavior, observers can never fully know what is in the actor's head, no matter how closely they watch. We can see actors act, but we cannot know for sure what they *want* or what they *value*, unless they tell us straightaway. As a social actor, a person may come across as friendly and compassionate, or cynical and mean-spirited, but in neither case can we infer their motivations from their traits or their roles. What does the friendly person want? What is the cynical father trying to achieve? Many broad psychological theories of the self prioritize the motivational qualities of human behavior—the inner needs, wants, desires, goals, values, plans, programs, fears, and aversions that seem to give

behavior its direction and purpose (Bandura, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986). These kinds of theories explicitly conceive of the self as a *motivated agent*.

To be an agent is to act with direction and purpose, to move forward into the future in pursuit of self-chosen and valued goals. In a sense, human beings are agents even as infants, for babies can surely act in goal-directed ways. By age 1 year, moreover, infants show a strong preference for observing and imitating the goal-directed, intentional behavior of others, rather than random behaviors (Woodward, 2009). Still, it is one thing to act in goal-directed ways; it is quite another for the I to know itself (the Me) as an intentional and purposeful force who moves forward in life in pursuit of self-chosen goals, values, and other desired end states. In order to do so, the person must first realize that people indeed have desires and goals in their minds and that these inner desires and goals *motivate* (initiate, energize, put into motion) their behavior. According to a strong line of research in developmental psychology, attaining this kind of understanding means acquiring a **theory of mind** (Wellman, 1993), which occurs for most children by the age of 4. Once a child understands that other people's behavior is often motivated by inner desires and goals, it is a small step to apprehend the self in similar terms.

Building on theory of mind and other cognitive and social developments, children begin to construct the self as a motivated agent in the elementary school years, layered over their still-developing sense of themselves as social actors. Theory and research on what developmental

psychologists call the age 5-to-7 shift converge to suggest that children become more planful, intentional, and systematic in their pursuit of valued goals during this time (Sameroff & Haith, 1996). Schooling reinforces the shift in that teachers and curricula place increasing demands on students to work hard, adhere to schedules, focus on goals, and achieve success in particular, well-defined task domains. Their relative success in achieving their most cherished goals, furthermore, goes a long way in determining children's self-esteem (Robins, Tracy, & Trzesniewski, 2008). Motivated agents feel good about themselves to the extent they believe that they are making good progress in achieving their goals and advancing their most important values.

Goals and values become even more important for the self in adolescence, as teenagers begin to confront what Erikson (1963) famously termed the developmental challenge of identity. For adolescents and young adults, establishing a psychologically efficacious identity involves exploring different options with respect to life goals, values, vocations, and intimate relationships and eventually committing to a motivational and ideological agenda for adult life—an integrated and realistic sense of what I want and value in life and how I plan to achieve it (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Committing oneself to an integrated suite of life goals and values is perhaps the greatest achievement for the self as motivated agent. Establishing an adult identity has implications, as well, for how a person moves through life as a social actor, entailing new role commitments and, perhaps, a changing understanding of one's basic dispositional traits. According to Erikson, however, identity achievement is always provisional, for adults continue to work on their identities as they move into midlife and beyond, often relinquishing old goals in favor of new ones, investing themselves in new projects and making new plans, exploring new relationships, and shifting their priorities in response to changing life circumstances (Freund & Riediger, 2006; Josselson, 1996).

There is a sense whereby *any* time you try to change yourself, you are assuming the role of a motivated agent. After all, to strive to change something is inherently what an agent does. However, what particular feature of selfhood you try to change may correspond to your self as actor, agent, or author, or some combination. When you try to change your traits or roles, you take aim at the social actor. By contrast, when you try to change your values or life goals, you are focusing on yourself as a motivated agent. Adolescence and young adulthood are periods in the human life course when many of us focus attention on our values and life goals. Perhaps you grew up as a traditional Catholic, but now in college you believe that the values inculcated in your childhood no longer function so well for you. You no longer believe in the central tenets of the Catholic Church, say, and are now working to replace your old values with new ones. Or maybe you still want to be Catholic, but you feel that your new take on faith requires a different kind of personal ideology. In the realm of the motivated agent, moreover, changing values can influence life goals. If your new value system prioritizes

alleviating the suffering of others, you may decide to pursue a degree in social work, or to become a public interest lawyer, or to live a simpler life that prioritizes people over material wealth. A great deal of the identity work we do in adolescence and young adulthood is about values and goals, as we strive to articulate a personal vision or dream for what we hope to accomplish in the future.

The Autobiographical Author

Even as the “I” continues to develop a sense of the “Me” as both a social actor and a motivated agent, a third standpoint for selfhood gradually emerges in the adolescent and early-adult years. The third perspective is a response to Erikson’s (1963) challenge of identity. According to Erikson, developing an identity involves more than the exploration of and commitment to life goals and values (the self as motivated agent), and more than committing to new roles and re-evaluating old traits (the self as social actor). It also involves achieving a sense of *temporal continuity* in life—a reflexive understanding of *how I have come to be the person I am becoming*, or put differently, how my past self has developed into my present self, and how my present self will, in turn, develop into an envisioned future self. In his analysis of identity formation in the life of the 15th-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Erikson (1958) describes the culmination of a young adult’s search for identity in this way:

"To be adult means among other things to see one’s own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and prospect. By accepting some definition of who he is, usually on the basis of a function in an economy, a place in the sequence of generations, and a status in the structure of society, the adult is able *to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned it*. In this sense, psychologically we do choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes, and gods. By making them our own, we maneuver ourselves into the inner position of proprietors, of creators."

-- (Erikson, 1958, pp. 111–112; emphasis added).

In this rich passage, Erikson intimates that the development of a mature identity in young adulthood involves the I’s ability to construct a retrospective and prospective *story* about the Me (McAdams, 1985). In their efforts to find a meaningful identity for life, young men and women begin “to selectively reconstruct” their past, as Erikson wrote, and imagine their future to create an integrative life story, or what psychologists today often call a narrative identity. A narrative identity is an internalized and evolving story of the self that reconstructs the past and anticipates the future in such a way as to provide a person’s life with some degree of

unity, meaning, and purpose over time (McAdams, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). The self typically becomes an *autobiographical author* in the early-adult years, a way of being that is layered over the motivated agent, which is layered over the social actor. In order to provide life with the sense of temporal continuity and deep meaning that Erikson believed identity should confer, we must author a personalized life story that integrates our understanding of who we once were, who we are today, and who we may become in the future. The story helps to explain, for the author and for the author's world, why the social actor does what it does and why the motivated agent wants what it wants, and how the person as a whole has developed over time, from the past's reconstructed beginning to the future's imagined ending.

By the time they are 5 or 6 years of age, children can tell well-formed stories about personal events in their lives (Fivush, 2011). By the end of childhood, they usually have a good sense of what a typical biography contains and how it is sequenced, from birth to death (Thomsen & Bernsten, 2008). But it is not until adolescence, research shows, that human beings express advanced storytelling skills and what psychologists call **autobiographical reasoning** (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean & Fournier, 2008). In autobiographical reasoning, a narrator is able to derive substantive conclusions about the self from analyzing his or her own personal experiences. Adolescents may develop the ability to string together events into causal chains and inductively derive general themes about life from a sequence of chapters and scenes



Young people often "try on" many variations of identities to see which best fits their private sense of themselves. [Image: Sangudo, <https://goo.gl/Ay3UMR>, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, <https://goo.gl/Toc0ZF>]

(Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). For example, a 16-year-old may be able to explain to herself and to others how childhood experiences in her family have shaped her vocation in life. Her parents were divorced when she was 5 years old, the teenager recalls, and this caused a great deal of stress in her family. Her mother often seemed anxious and depressed, but she (the now-teenager when she was a little girl—the story's protagonist) often tried to cheer her mother up, and her efforts seemed to work. In more recent years, the teenager notes that her friends often come to her with their boyfriend problems. She seems to be very adept at giving advice about love and relationships, which stems, the teenager now believes, from her early

experiences with her mother. Carrying this causal narrative forward, the teenager now thinks that she would like to be a marriage counselor when she grows up.

Unlike children, then, adolescents can tell a full and convincing story about an entire human life, or at least a prominent line of causation within a full life, explaining continuity and change in the story's protagonist over time. Once the cognitive skills are in place, young people seek interpersonal opportunities to share and refine their developing sense of themselves as storytellers (the I) who tell stories about themselves (the Me). Adolescents and young adults author a narrative sense of the self by telling stories about their experiences to other people, monitoring the feedback they receive from the tellings, editing their stories in light of the feedback, gaining new experiences and telling stories about those, and on and on, as selves create stories that, in turn, create new selves (McLean et al., 2007). Gradually, in fits and starts, through conversation and introspection, the I develops a convincing and coherent narrative about the Me.

Contemporary research on the [self as autobiographical author](#) emphasizes the strong effect of *culture* on narrative identity (Hammack, 2008). Culture provides a menu of favored plot lines, themes, and character types for the construction of self-defining life stories. Autobiographical authors sample selectively from the cultural menu, appropriating ideas that seem to resonate well with their own life experiences. As such, life stories reflect the culture, wherein they are situated as much as they reflect the authorial efforts of the autobiographical I.

As one example of the tight link between culture and narrative identity, McAdams (2013) and others (e.g., Kleinfeld, 2012) have highlighted the prominence of [redemptive narratives](#) in American culture. Epitomized in such iconic cultural ideals as the American dream, Horatio Alger stories, and narratives of Christian atonement, redemptive stories track the move from suffering to an enhanced status or state, while scripting the development of a chosen protagonist who journeys forth into a dangerous and unredeemed world (McAdams, 2013). Hollywood movies often celebrate redemptive quests. Americans are exposed to similar narrative messages in self-help books, 12-step programs, Sunday sermons, and in the rhetoric of political campaigns. Over the past two decades, the world's most influential spokesperson for the power of redemption in human lives may be Oprah Winfrey, who tells her own story of overcoming childhood adversity while encouraging others, through her media outlets and philanthropy, to tell similar kinds of stories for their own lives (McAdams, 2013). Research has demonstrated that American adults who enjoy high levels of mental health and civic engagement tend to construct their lives as narratives of redemption, tracking the move from sin to salvation, rags to riches, oppression to liberation, or sickness/abuse to health/recovery (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, &

Bowman, 2001; Walker & Frimer, 2007). In American society, these kinds of stories are often seen to be inspirational.

At the same time, McAdams (2011, 2013) has pointed to shortcomings and limitations in the redemptive stories that many Americans tell, which mirror cultural biases and stereotypes in American culture and heritage. McAdams has argued that redemptive stories support happiness and societal engagement for some Americans, but the same stories can encourage moral righteousness and a naïve expectation that suffering will always be redeemed. For better and sometimes for worse, Americans seem to love stories of personal redemption and often aim to assimilate their autobiographical memories and aspirations to a redemptive form. Nonetheless, these same stories may not work so well in cultures that espouse different values and narrative ideals (Hammack, 2008). It is important to remember that every culture offers its own storehouse of favored narrative forms. It is also essential to know that no single narrative form captures all that is good (or bad) about a culture. In American society, the redemptive narrative is but one of many different kinds of stories that people commonly employ to make sense of their lives.

What is your story? What kind of a narrative are you working on? As you look to the past and imagine the future, what threads of continuity, change, and meaning do you discern? For many people, the most dramatic and fulfilling efforts to change the self happen when the I works hard, as an autobiographical author, to construct and, ultimately, to tell a new story about the Me. Storytelling may be the most powerful form of self-transformation that human beings have ever invented. Changing one's life story is at the heart of many forms of psychotherapy and counseling, as well as religious conversions, vocational epiphanies, and other dramatic transformations of the self that people often celebrate as turning points in their lives (Adler, 2012). Storytelling is often at the heart of the little changes, too, minor edits in the self that we make as we move through daily life, as we live and experience life, and as we later tell it to ourselves and to others.

Conclusion

For human beings, selves begin as social actors, but they eventually become motivated agents and autobiographical authors, too. The I first sees itself as an embodied actor in social space; with development, however, it comes to appreciate itself also as a forward-looking source of self-determined goals and values, and later yet, as a storyteller of personal experience, oriented to the reconstructed past and the imagined future. To "know thyself" in mature adulthood, then, is to do three things: (a) to apprehend and to perform with social approval my self-ascribed traits and roles, (b) to pursue with vigor and (ideally) success my most valued

goals and plans, and (c) to construct a story about life that conveys, with vividness and cultural resonance, how I became the person I am becoming, integrating my past as I remember it, my present as I am experiencing it, and my future as I hope it to be.

Outside Resources

Web: The website for the Foley Center for the Study of Lives, at Northwestern University. The site contains research materials, interview protocols, and coding manuals for conducting studies of narrative identity.

<http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/>

Discussion Questions

1. Back in the 1950s, Erik Erikson argued that many adolescents and young adults experience a tumultuous identity crisis. Do you think this is true today? What might an identity crisis look and feel like? And, how might it be resolved?
2. Many people believe that they have a true self buried inside of them. From this perspective, the development of self is about discovering a psychological truth deep inside. Do you believe this to be true? How does thinking about the self as an actor, agent, and author bear on this question?
3. Psychological research shows that when people are placed in front of mirrors they often behave in a more moral and conscientious manner, even though they sometimes experience this procedure as unpleasant. From the standpoint of the self as a social actor, how might we explain this phenomenon?
4. By the time they reach adulthood, does everybody have a narrative identity? Do some people simply never develop a story for their life?
5. What happens when the three perspectives on self—the self as actor, agent, and author—conflict with each other? Is it necessary for people's self-ascribed traits and roles to line up well with their goals and their stories?
6. William James wrote that the self includes all things that the person considers to be "mine." If we take James literally, a person's self might extend to include his or her material possessions, pets, and friends and family. Does this make sense?
7. To what extent can we control the self? Are some features of selfhood easier to control than others?
8. What cultural differences may be observed in the construction of the self? How might gender, ethnicity, and class impact the development of the self as actor, as agent, and as author?

Vocabulary

Autobiographical reasoning

The ability, typically developed in adolescence, to derive substantive conclusions about the self from analyzing one's own personal experiences.

Big Five

A broad taxonomy of personality trait domains repeatedly derived from studies of trait ratings in adulthood and encompassing the categories of (1) extraversion vs. introversion, (2) neuroticism vs. emotional stability, (3) agreeable vs. disagreeableness, (4) conscientiousness vs. nonconscientiousness, and (5) openness to experience vs. conventionality. By late childhood and early adolescence, people's self-attributions of personality traits, as well as the trait attributions made about them by others, show patterns of intercorrelations that confirm with the five-factor structure obtained in studies of adults.

Ego

Sigmund Freud's conception of an executive self in the personality. Akin to this module's notion of "the I," Freud imagined the ego as observing outside reality, engaging in rational thought, and coping with the competing demands of inner desires and moral standards.

Identity

Sometimes used synonymously with the term "self," identity means many different things in psychological science and in other fields (e.g., sociology). In this module, I adopt Erik Erikson's conception of identity as a developmental task for late adolescence and young adulthood. Forming an identity in adolescence and young adulthood involves exploring alternative roles, values, goals, and relationships and eventually committing to a realistic agenda for life that productively situates a person in the adult world of work and love. In addition, identity formation entails commitments to new social roles and reevaluation of old traits, and importantly, it brings with it a sense of temporal continuity in life, achieved through the construction of an integrative life story.

Narrative identity

An internalized and evolving story of the self designed to provide life with some measure of temporal unity and purpose. Beginning in late adolescence, people craft self-defining stories that reconstruct the past and imagine the future to explain how the person came to be the person that he or she is becoming.

Redemptive narratives

Life stories that affirm the transformation from suffering to an enhanced status or state. In American culture, redemptive life stories are highly prized as models for the good self, as in classic narratives of atonement, upward mobility, liberation, and recovery.

Reflexivity

The idea that the self reflects back upon itself; that the I (the knower, the subject) encounters the Me (the known, the object). Reflexivity is a fundamental property of human selfhood.

Self as autobiographical author

The sense of the self as a storyteller who reconstructs the past and imagines the future in order to articulate an integrative narrative that provides life with some measure of temporal continuity and purpose.

Self as motivated agent

The sense of the self as an intentional force that strives to achieve goals, plans, values, projects, and the like.

Self as social actor

The sense of the self as an embodied actor whose social performances may be construed in terms of more or less consistent self-ascribed traits and social roles.

Self-esteem

The extent to which a person feels that he or she is worthy and good. The success or failure that the motivated agent experiences in pursuit of valued goals is a strong determinant of self-esteem.

Social reputation

The traits and social roles that others attribute to an actor. Actors also have their own conceptions of what they imagine their respective social reputations indeed are in the eyes of others.

The Age 5-to-7 Shift

Cognitive and social changes that occur in the early elementary school years that result in the child's developing a more purposeful, planful, and goal-directed approach to life, setting the stage for the emergence of the self as a motivated agent.

The "I"

The self as knower, the sense of the self as a subject who encounters (knows, works on) itself (the Me).

The "Me"

The self as known, the sense of the self as the object or target of the I's knowledge and work.

Theory of mind

Emerging around the age of 4, the child's understanding that other people have minds in which are located desires and beliefs, and that desires and beliefs, thereby, motivate behavior.

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