

Self Concept

by [Saul McLeod](#)  published 2008

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves. To be aware of oneself is to have a concept of oneself.

Baumeister (1999) provides the following **self concept** definition: "the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is". Self Concept is an important term for both [social psychology](#) and [humanism](#).

Lewis (1990) suggests that development of a concept of self has two aspects: -

(1) The Existential Self

This is *the most basic part of the self-scheme or self-concept; the sense of being separate and distinct from others and the awareness of the constancy of the self*" (Bee, 1992).

The child realizes that they exist as a separate entity from others and that they continue to exist over time and space. According to Lewis awareness of the existential self begins as young as two to three months old and arises in part due to the relation the child has with the world. For example, the child smiles and someone smiles back, or the child touches a mobile and sees it move.

(2) The Categorical Self

Having realized that he or she exists as a separate experiencing being, the child next becomes aware that he or she is also an object in the world. Just as other objects including people have properties that can be experienced (big, small, red, smooth and so on) so the child is becoming aware of him or her self as an object which can be experienced and which has properties. The self too can be put into categories such as age, gender, size or skill. Two of the first categories to be applied are age ("I am 3") and gender ("I am a girl").

In early childhood. the categories children apply to themselves are very concrete (e.g. hair color, height and favorite things). Later, self-description also begins to include reference to internal psychological traits, comparative evaluations and to how others see them.

[Carl Rogers](#) (1959) believes that the self concept has three different components:

- The view you have of yourself (**Self image**)
- How much value you place on yourself (**Self esteem** or self-worth)
- What you wish you were really like (**Ideal self**)

Self Image

(what you see in yourself)



This does not necessarily have to reflect reality. Indeed a person with anorexia who is thin may have a self image in which the person believes they are fat. A person's self image is affected by many factors, such as parental influences, friends, the media etc.

Kuhn (1960) investigated the self-image by using *The Twenty Statements Test*.

He asked people to answer the question 'Who am I?' in 20 different ways. He found that the responses could be divided into two major groups. These were *social roles* (external or objective aspects of oneself such as son, teacher, friend) and *personality traits* (internal or affective aspects of oneself such as gregarious, impatient, humorous).

The list of answers to the question "Who Am I?" probably include examples of each of the following four types of responses:

1) Physical Description: I'm tall, have blue eyes...etc.

2) Social Roles: We are all social beings whose behavior is shaped to some extent by the roles we play. Such roles as student, housewife, or member of the football team not only help others to recognize us but also help us to know what is expected of us in various situations.

3) Personal Traits: These are a third dimension of our self-descriptions. "I'm impulsive...I'm generous...I tend to worry a lot"...etc.

4) Existential Statements (abstract ones): These can range from "I'm a child of the universe" to "I'm a human being" to "I'm a spiritual being"...etc.

Typically young people describe themselves more in terms of personal traits, whereas older people feel defined to a greater extent by their social roles.

Self Esteem and Self Worth

(the extent to which you value yourself)

Self esteem refers to the extent to which we like accept or approve of ourselves or how much we value ourselves. Self esteem always involves a degree of evaluation and we may have either a positive or a negative view of ourselves.

HIGH SELF ESTEEM i.e. we have a positive view of ourselves. This tends to lead to

- Confidence in our own abilities
- Self acceptance
- Not worrying about what others think
- Optimism

LOW SELF ESTEEM i.e. we have a negative view of ourselves. This tends to lead to

- Lack of confidence
- Want to be/look like someone else
- Always worrying what others might think
- Pessimism

There are several ways of measuring self-esteem. For example, [Harrill Self Esteem Inventory](#) is a questionnaire comprising 15 statements about a range of interest. Another example is the [Thematic Apperception Test](#) (TAT), which is a neutral cartoon given to the participant who then has to devise a story about what's going on.

Morse and Gergen (1970) showed that in uncertain or anxiety arousing situations our self-esteem may change rapidly. Participants were waiting for a job interview in a waiting room. They were sat with another candidate (a confederate of the experimenter) in one of two conditions:

A) Mr. Clean - dressed in smart suit, carrying a briefcase opened to reveal a slide rule and books.

B) Mr. Dirty - dressed in an old T-shirt and jeans, slouched over a cheap sex novel.

Self-esteem of participants with Mr. Dirty increased whilst those with Mr. Clean decreased! No mention made of how this affected subjects' performance in interview. Level of self-esteem affects performance at numerous tasks though (Coopersmith, 1967) so could expect Mr. Dirty subjects to perform better than Mr. Clean.

Even though self-esteem might fluctuate, there are times when we continue to believe good things about ourselves even when evidence to the contrary exists. This is known as the perseverance effect.

Miller and Ross (1975) showed that people who believed they had socially desirable characteristics continued in this belief even when the experimenters tried to get them to believe the opposite. Does the same thing happen with bad things if we have low self-esteem? Maybe not, perhaps with very low self-esteem all we believe about ourselves might be bad.

Argyle (2008) believes there are 4 major factors that influence self esteem.

1) **THE REACTION OF OTHERS.** If people admire us, flatter us, seek out our company, listen attentively and agree with us we tend to develop a positive self-image. If they avoid us, neglect us, tell us things about ourselves that we don't want to hear we develop a negative self-image.

2) **COMPARISON WITH OTHERS.** If the people we compare ourselves with (our reference group) appear to be more successful, happier, richer, better looking than ourselves we tend to develop a negative self image BUT if they are less successful than us our image will be positive.

3) **SOCIAL ROLES.** Some social roles carry prestige e.g. doctor, airline pilot, TV. presenter, premiership footballer and this promotes self-esteem. Other roles carry stigma. E.g. prisoner, mental hospital patient, refuse collector or unemployed person.

4) **IDENTIFICATION.** Roles aren't just "out there." They also become part of our personality i.e. we identify with the positions we occupy, the roles we play and the groups we belong to.

But just as important as all these factors, are the influence of our parents! (See Coopersmith's research.)

Ideal Self

(what you'd like to be)

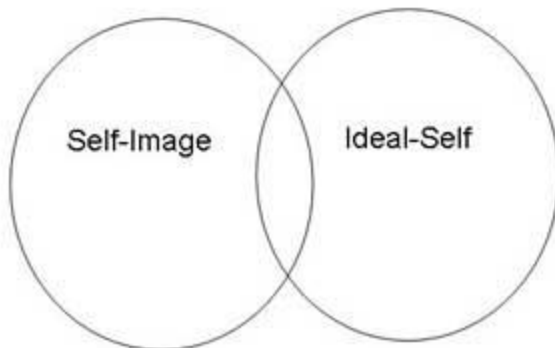
If there is a mismatch between how you see yourself (e.g. your self image) and what you'd like to be (e.g. your ideal self) then this is likely to affect how much you value yourself.

Therefore, there is an intimate relationship between self-image, ego-ideal and self-esteem.

Humanistic psychologists study this using the [Q-Sort Method](#).

A person's ideal self may not be consistent with what actually happens in life and experiences of the person. Hence, a difference may exist between a person's ideal self and actual experience. This is called incongruence.

Incongruent

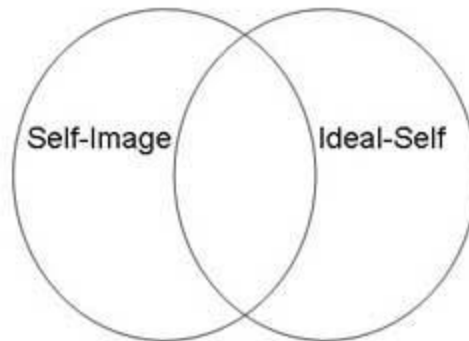


The self-image is different to the ideal self.

There is only a little overlap.

Here self-actualisation will be difficult.

Congruent



The self-image is similar to the ideal self.

There is a more overlap.

This person can self-actualise.

Where a person's ideal self and actual experience are consistent or very similar, a state of congruence exists. Rarely, if ever does a total state of congruence exist; all people experience a certain amount of incongruence. The development of congruence is dependent on unconditional positive regard. Roger's believed that for a person to achieve self-actualization they must be in a state of congruence.

Michael Argyle (2008) says there are four major factors which influence its development:

- The ways in which others (particularly significant others) react to us.
- How we think we compare to others
- Our social roles
- The extent to which we identify with other people