The Reflexive Self: *A Sociological Perspective*

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The ability to reflect and consider who one is in relation to others is described as the reflexive self. From a sociological perspective, the reflexive self develops in the interaction with others through a process that includes a person's self-efficacy, self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem. Operating to control incompatible views, self-deception and self-discrepancy play an important role in maintaining a consistent and valid self-conception. The experiences of gifted children and adolescents are used to illustrate how the responses of others affect a person's reflexive self.

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Much of the research on the self in the United States is based on the early work of the pragmatist philosophers: John Dewey (1922), William James (1915), and George Herbert Mead (1934). While Dewey was most influential in the field of education, James inspired psychology and Mead stimulated sociology. As sociologists, we use the theoretical framework of Mead, known as symbolic interaction, to explain how gifted children develop a reflexive self.

Symbolic interactionists focus on the symbolic nature of human communication and the development of self as a process involving communication. Words and gestures, the symbols used to communicate, are acquired from the society in which a person lives. The self is viewed as a continuous process that takes place in interaction with others and in self-reflection—the communication with self about self. Because all interaction requires a language, which is socially and culturally given, the society and the individual are inextricably intertwined (Mead, 1934).

The pragmatists Dewey, James, and Mead shared two major ideas about the self: that its basic nature is reflexive and that it is defined in interaction with others. To say that the self is reflexive is to say that the self is both subject (I) and object (me), the knower and the known, or put more simply, talking to oneself involves being both the speaker and the listener in an internal dialogue. For example, in response to a mother's query, the child who asks herself, "Why did I hurt my brother?" is engaging in self-reflection on her own motives.

The second major idea, that the self is defined through interaction with others, implies that it is by observing the responses of others that a person comes to know and judge who she is. Following the example above, the parental reprimand, "Good girls don't hit!" provides a definition of good girls for the child and, at the same time, implies an evaluation of her actions. In this way, the child comes to see herself from the perspective of her mother; and based on that attitude, she learns to appraise her own behavior.

In this article, we propose a series of stages in the development of the reflexive self. The sequence involves two early biologically-based stages or preconditions—self-perception and self-recognition—followed by self-efficacy, self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem that develop in the interaction or conversation with one's self as well as with others (See Figure 1). In describing the process, special emphasis is placed on Kinch's (1963) model of the self-image.

The experiences of gifted children and adolescents are used to illustrate how the responses of other people affect their self development. Because gifted children acquire language earlier, because they receive, process, and assimilate information more quickly, and because they are more interactive with their environment (Morelock, 1996), it follows that the developmental sequence will occur more rapidly for them than for their average ability age peers.

The Developing Self

Two biologically-based processes, perception and recognition of oneself occurring in the first few years of life, provide the basis upon which the reflexive self develops (Povinelli & Cant, 1995). ***Self-perception*** refers to the ability to transfer perceptual experiences (taste, touch, etc.) into memory and associate sight and sound with its source. Through self-perception, young children learn object permanence and come to understand the relationship between themselves and other persons and objects. ***Self-recognition*** is the ability to recognize one's own image in the mirror and to begin to use words and gestures in a meaningful way, i.e. as other people in their social world do.

These two processes together, self-perception and self- recognition, enable children to experience the consequences of their actions as their own. What this means is that the child recognizes that because she dropped the glass, it broke, and because she took her brother's toy, he cried. The child knows, for example, that she fell and bumped her head. No invisible force pushed her and no angry table arose to strike her.

Further, self-recognition enables the child to distinguish herself from other people. This requires the ability to hold a mental image in her mind or remember a thing or event in its absence (Olson & Campbell, 1993). Holding a picture of mother and father in her mind, the child begins to develop a catalog of others. With the self-recognizing capability, she is able to include herself on the list.

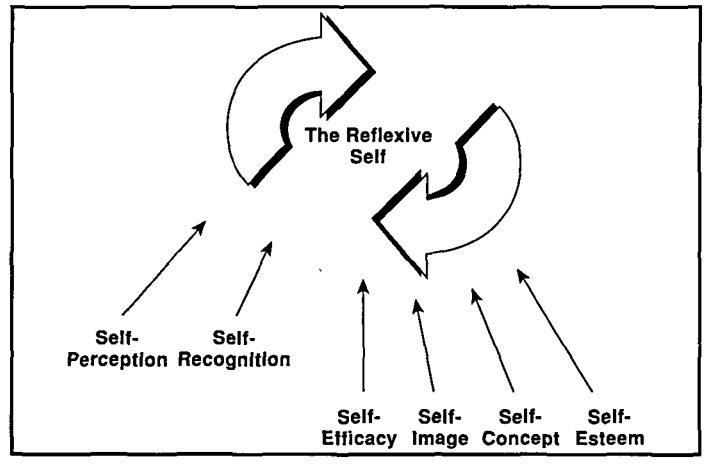

Figure 1. Components of the reflexive self.

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Increased self-recognition enables the child to use the personal pronouns I, me, and you correctly, a skill that is much more difficult than using a person's own name because everyone uses these terms differently (you are not you to yourself, rather you are I or me). Thus, the young child identifies herself by her own name, "Jessica want to go," just as she does other people, "Daddy want to go?" In time, with the increased ability to distinguish between self and others, this becomes, "I want to go." "Do you want to go, too?"

Self-Efficacy

Knowing that a person can accomplish an intended act and recognizing that the consequences of such an act are the result of her own initiative is what is meant by being efficacious (Gecas, 1989). Self-efficacy, or the ability to be instrumental in one's environment, is paramount to self-development. To be able to achieve goals and execute plans enables her to be active and productive—an agent to be dealt with and responded to in the social world. As competence and confidence in her effectiveness grows, a general sense of self-efficacy develops that often transcends the specific task or content area.

Sarah, a preschooler, gets along well with other children and enjoys group activities. She makes friends easily and likes to ask them to come over to her house. She has learned to stand up for herself when someone makes fun of her. As a result, Sarah feels self-efficacious; and when she must attend a new school, she approaches the teacher and new children with interest and enthusiasm.

Early interaction with significant others that provides an opportunity for the child to be active and receive appropriate responses leads the child to develop a sense of self-efficacy. The parent who encourages the child to try new activities and is supportive of early efforts is facilitating the development of her self-efficacy. When Jessica is able to say to her mother, and more importantly to herself, that she wants to button her own blouse and tries and tries and succeeds with delight, she is learning to be efficacious.

Self-efficacy increases throughout childhood with the ability to accomplish tasks and realize the intended effects. If a child believes that she can do something and is given the opportunity to try, she learns to assess the effect of her actions. On the other hand, if she is repeatedly denied the opportunity to pursue goals, the development of self-efficacy is thwarted.

The structure of the school environment can get in the way of the development of a strong sense of self-efficacy for some gifted children. This occurs when the structure of classrooms is rigid and the variation of tasks is low. Many gifted children have extremely high energy levels and need constant stimulation and novelty to hold their interest (Lovecky, 1993). If teachers do not acknowledge this excitability and provide activities and outlets for appropriate expression, children may fail in mastering important tasks. The result is that they are not efficacious in the school environment.

Self-Image and the Self-Concept

A person's self-image is a representation of self that changes within and across situations as roles and expectations change (Kinch, Falk, & Anderson, 1983). For example, a child's self-image changes as she shifts from the role of granddaughter to that of older sister or student, and the expectations change accordingly. Likewise, the teacher's self-image changes as she shifts from classroom instructor to mother to spouse.

Every day children in different social roles and in different social settings carry out actions and are responded to by other people. The response of others is based in part on the image or concept they have of the child. The child, in turn, brings her perception of the other person's response into her schema. If this perception does not conform to her own self-image, the child may change the way she thinks about herself. If change in self-image occurs, her subsequent behavior or role performance will be altered.

This process was first identified by Kinch (1963) in his discussion of the formalized theory of the self-concept. In this article, Kinch highlights the fundamental connection between self and significant others as an ongoing process (see Figure 2).

To illustrate the model, a gifted child may enter the school setting with an eager learner self-image. If she is a divergent thinker who sees everything as related and connected, she may appear to school personnel as bossy, stubborn, tactless, and rebellious (Lovecky, 1993). Teachers may respond to the child as problematic, and other children may pick up on these adult reactions and tease and bully the child. Thus, the child begins to feel ostracized, and her optimistic self-image is eroded. In its place, an indifferent student image may appear. The result depends, however, on the frequency of such reactions and the consistency of the response among the teachers and other students.

Research shows that the perceived appraisal of other people (perception of another person's response) has a direct effect on the self-image while the actual response of other people has an indirect effect, i.e. through perceptions, as proposed in the model. For instance, Bachman and O'Malley (1986) found a stronger correlation between the ***perceived responses*** of others and self-appraisals than between the ***actual evaluations*** of others and self-appraisals. Many individual factors, e.g. temperament and intellectual ability, may influence the perception of another person's response as well as the context in which the interaction occurs.

As shown in the model, a person's self-image influences the way she behaves. Rosenberg's (1979) early research on self processes shows that a person's self-image and her behavior, or role enactment, are closely related. Following the circle of the self-image model, her behavior becomes a stimulus for the reactions of others, and the self-image process begins anew.

In contrast to the self-image which may change from role to role, a person's ***self-concept*** is a trans-situational representation of self that is durable and relatively stable across situations (Demo, 1992). It is composed of the many separate pictures a person has of herself, i.e., her self-images. While early ***self-images*** are dominated by changing physical characteristics, early ***self-concepts*** are related to more permanent aspect of self, such as "one's name,

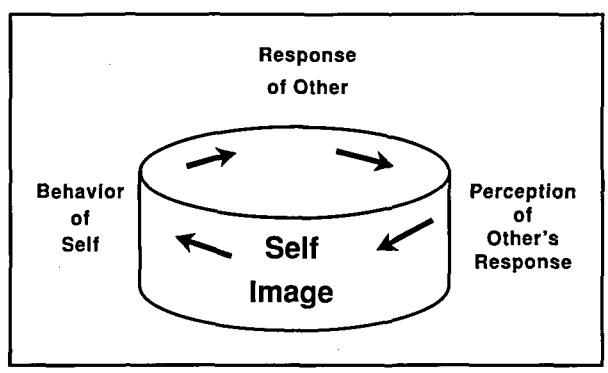

Figure 2. The formalized self-image process.

aspects of gender identity, age, body image, possessions, personal characteristics and favorite activities" (Demo, 1992, p. 309).

Parents and older siblings are the primary significant others whose interactions and assessments are formative in the early years of self-development. Later, other caretakers, teachers, and peers take on increasing importance in defining who a person is in relation to others.

The affective domain also plays an important part in defining a person's self-image and concept. Interacting with others, children learn not only how to think about themselves and conduct themselves, but also how to recognize their emotions and express them appropriately.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the process of judging oneself based on the evaluation a person makes in taking the role of the other toward herself and then feeling good or bad about that judgment. "In a real sense, taking the role of the other... is best understood as ***taking the perspective*** of the other, seeing the world from the perspective of other individuals or groups" (Charon, 1995, p. 105). In this process, a person imagines the evaluation of others and then experiences a feeling ranging anywhere from pride to mortification (Cooley, 1902).

As the child grows, there is an increasing ability to take the role of specific others, such as her mother or her teacher. Viewing herself through the eyes of those known to her, she responds to her own actions as they would respond. In reflection, she evaluates her behavior in light of that response. Her self-esteem comes from the feeling of pride or shame she experiences based on an imagined judgment.

Children's social environments and social contacts expand as they enter day care, preschool, and school—settings with other children of the same age. Groups of age peers such as these provide children with increased opportunities to judge their capabilities and those of others, noting similarities and differences. Such comparisons of skill and ability become the basis upon which children's self-esteem develops.

Johnson's (1992) theoretical work on the development of the emotional self suggests that pride and shame, emotions which produce blushing in the child, only occur in the immediate presence of others at this time. The timing of maturation in her model, however, represents a general developmental course that may not reflect the experiences of gifted children, especially those who are highly gifted. Development, for these children, is based on their mental age rather than their chronological age. For example, Gross (1997) argues that social comparisons are made at a much earlier age for gifted children. This occurs because of the early development of speech patterns and heightened cognitive understanding.

As the school-age child begins to understand the complexities of social structure and organization, she moves into a new phase. Mead (1934) called this the game stage, relating it to the game of baseball. When the child sees many different social roles (i.e. the pitcher, the catcher, the outfielder) united in an organized whole, there is an understanding not only of the part each player takes, but an overall understanding of how team members cooperate as a group to play the game.

At the game stage, as the child begins to take on the role of the generalized other, seeing the common thread in responses of specific others and abstracting a generalized view, her feeling of self-efficacy, her self-concept, and her self-esteem become more stable and trans-situational. Her many self-images, however, remain somewhat more malleable and responsive to social encounters.

In adolescence, self-esteem becomes increasingly important as peers become significant others whose reflected appraisals influence the self. According to Johnson (1992), the feelings of pride and guilt based on the opinion of others now take place outside the immediate presence of others and result in dramatic shifts in self-esteem. These changes in self-esteem may be extremely disruptive to an adolescent's self-concept as she attempts to bring together discrepant views of self.

Gifted girls are especially vulnerable to the effects of competing self-images brought about by any change in self-esteem. For example, by junior high school, many gifted girls reject the notion of being exceptionally bright in favor of popularity. In an effort to disassociate themselves from their gifted self-image, they abandon gifted friends and consciously try ***not*** to do well in school. With declining grades and the growing acceptance by nongifted peers, their self-esteem may actually increase, but unless direct intervention is taken "much of gifted girls' talents may be permanently lost" (Silverman, 1993, p. 304). Thus, the tradeoffs are very costly to them.

Confirmation and Contradiction

Two related processes that play an important role in maintaining a consistent and valid self-concept are self-deception and self-discrepancy. These processes operate in different ways to control incompatible views of the self. When the deception and discrepancy become too great, however, their positive function is outweighed by the negative emotional responses that ensue. Under these conditions, they extract a toll on the psyche resulting in stress, anxiety, and, in some cases, depression.

Self-Deception

As children's self-concepts become more stable, they attempt to confirm and protect the representation of self in various ways. They may select from the comments and reactions of others those which are more validating, attending only to them. They may adopt a certain style of dress or speech that is congruent with the desired impression. In these ways, they define the situation for themselves and others so that a positive and preferred view of the self is attained.

Other means of managing the presentation of self are with excuses, justifications, and disclaimers. This is called impression management. Children frequently use impression management to maintain their positive self-concept and high self-esteem.

Rachel, an elementary school girl, was observed at a swimming pool recently to have done a particularly poor dive with her legs flopping in opposite directions. Her swim mate exclaimed, "That's not a dive." To which she replied, "I know. I did it on purpose. I know how to dive!"

These ways of reinforcing and preserving a stable self-concept represent the positive side of self-deception (Gecas & Burke, 1995). The negative side occurs when a complex system of justifications and pretenses are created that spiral out of control, threatening a person's authenticity.

Jason, a fifth grader, attempts to find social acceptance by continuously being humorous and witty. By becoming the joker in the

group, he experiences self-deception because he is alienating himself from his true feelings in an attempt to gain social approval. Lonely and feeling isolated from others, he engages friends with laughter and comic activities in order to be part of the group. Later he may discover that he is perceived as immature and silly, fooling only himself.

Self-Discrepancy

During periods of self-examination and reflection on the appraisals of others, self-discrepancy—an inconsistency between the various images of the self—often becomes apparent. There are two forms of self-discrepancy. One is based on the difference between a person's ideal self and her actual self. This is the discrepancy that occurs between a person's goals and their attainment. Recognizing this discrepancy can cause negative emotional reactions at the inability to live up to personal goals. When the discrepancy is too great and the responsibility assumed too oppressive, depression may ensue.

The second form of discrepancy results from the difference between the actual self and the ought or moral self, the just and principled person she believes she ought to be. The ethical dilemma this causes may result in social anxiety, including social avoidance and the fear of negative evaluations (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985).

Reconciling a person's disparate self-images provides the opportunity for positive self changes and the kinds of emotional growth discovered by Piechowski (1989) in his analysis of the gifted adolescent self. In a two-year follow-up study, Piechowski and his colleagues asked 12 to 17 year olds to reply to open-ended questions designed to assess their potential for emotional development.

Two contrasting patterns of development—rational-altruistic and introspective-emotional—were discerned in adolescents' responses. The patterns are distinguished by their level of emotional intensity (Piechowski, 1989). Those in the rational-altruistic category had a strong goal orientation and a sense of social responsibility. Further, they were involved in the type of questioning elicited by the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self. Adolescents in the introspective-emotional category, on the other hand, appear to be struggling with questions brought on by the disparity between the actual self and the moral self. They were intensely aware of their own personal growth, the feelings of others, and their real self.

Conclusion

The ability to engage in an internal conversation with oneself as both the subject and the object is defined by symbolic interactionists as the reflexive self. The inner dialogue comes from the responses of significant others to one's appearance, or actions, or attitudes. The perception of other people's responses becomes incorporated into one's many self-images. These various self-images, taken together, make up the self-concept, an overall and strong sense of who a person is in relation to others. One's self-esteem follows from the positive or negative feelings she has about herself based on the perceived judgement of others.

As children grow and the complexity of their interaction increases, the dimensions of the reflexive self (self-efficacy, self-image, self-concept, and self-esteem) become more difficult to distinguish. They are described here as separate entities, yet they are understandable only in relation to one another. At some point they become intertwined, woven into the fabric of the reflexive self.

Influencing the self process in general, and the self-concept in particular, self-deception, in its milder forms, allows for the maintenance of a positive self-concept at those times when a person is embarrassed by shortcomings and imperfection. Similarly, self-discrepancy can have positive effects. By revealing inconsistencies in self-images, it enables a person to reassess and adjust her behavior in line with goals and values. Emotional growth may be fostered, especially in the gifted personality. In the extremes, both self-deception and self-discrepancy can be damaging.

As interdependent social beings, the responses of others are crucial to the development of self. The gifted child who may be more sensitive to the feedback of others is vulnerable—benefitting more from the praise of other people and suffering more from their scorn. In their vulnerability, however, lies the potential for extraordinary self-growth.

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