CHAPTER 26

IDENTITY, SELF-CONCEPT, AND SELF-ESTEEM

THE SELF LOST AND FOUND

ROY F. BAUMEISTER
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

I. DEFINITIONS

The most obvious and common things are sometimes the most difficult to define. This certainly applies to the self. People use the word "self," especially with its many prefixes and suffixes, dozens of times each day, and yet it is difficult to pause and say what is meant by self.

For purposes of the present discussion, it seems best to define certain terms. The term *self* corresponds to its everyday usage in colloquial speech. As such, it encompasses the direct feeling each person has of privileged access to his or her own thoughts and feelings and sensations. It begins with the awareness of one's own body and is augmented by the sense of being able to make choices and initiate action. It also encompasses the more complex and abstract constructions that embellish the self. In everyday speech, the familiar expressions "to find yourself" or "to know yourself" do not ordinarily mean to locate one's body and be able to recognize it; rather, those expressions refer to some difficult act regarding complex, abstract knowledge.

The term *self-concept* refers to the totality of inferences that a person has made about himself or herself. These refer centrally to one's personality traits and schemas, but they may also involve an understanding of one's social roles and relationships.

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Lastly, the term *identity* refers to the definitions that are created for and superimposed on the self. These definitions refer to concepts about who the person is and what the person is like. Identity can be analyzed as consisting of an interpersonal aspect (a set of roles and relationships), a potentiality aspect (a concept of who the person might become), and a values aspect (a set of values and priorities) (Baumeister, 1986). Identity differs from self-concept in that it is socially defined. That is, the self-concept is wholly contained in the person's own mind, whereas identity is often created by the larger society, although individuals typically have some opportunity to refine or negotiate the identities that society gives them.

Identity must be regarded as an aggregate definition of self. That is, a self can be defined in many ways—with many traits and many different roles. Identity is thus the product of the many definitions of self that exist. Likewise, the self-concept is a loose combination of the many ideas and inferences that the person has about him- or herself. The term *self-esteem* refers to the evaluative dimension of the self-concept.

II. FINDING THE SELF: CREATION OF IDENTITY

This section will examine how identity (and self-esteem) are constructed. It will begin with the role of culture, by considering how different historical periods have treated the single self. Then it will turn to how knowledge about the self is actually formed and organized. Next, it will take a closer look at the formation and maintenance of self-esteem. Lastly, it will consider briefly some of the ways people try to control the information about the self, usually in order to fit it into established or preconceived patterns.

A. The Self in Historical Perspective

Although the concept of self tends to seem so natural and normal as to be inevitable, it is in fact far from universal. Ideas about the nature of the self have varied widely across cultural and historical boundaries. Although more detailed accounts of these variations are available elsewhere (see Baumeister, 1986, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989), it is necessary to summarize briefly some of the factors that distinguish the sense of self in the modern Western world.

The sense of uniqueness is an appropriate starting point. Modern Western society treats each person as a special, unique individual and encourages people to regard themselves (and each other) that way. This is a fairly recent development, however. To be sure, the ancients recognized that people were not identical, but they placed relatively little importance on these differences. What mattered were the similarities in form and function. Similarly, in the Middle Ages people were regarded as having functions according to their place in society. The person's identity was intimately bound up with his or her social rank, family ties, and occupation, and people were not supposed to want to change any of these. More important,

the models of human potential were essentially the same for the vast Christian majority: salvation in heaven, as a result of living a moral and pious life, was the goal for everyone. At most, people differed according to how well they served their functions, that is, whether they fulfilled their duties and obeyed the rules (see MacIntyre, 1981).

It was not until the early modern period (roughly 1500–1800) that people became fascinated with all the small characteristics that made one person different from another (e.g., Weintraub, 1978). One sign of this new interest was a great increase in biographical and autobiographical writing, including a greatly increased emphasis on accurate description of factual details about the person's life (Altick, 1965; Weintraub, 1978). This new interest was associated with a great social change toward an emphasis on individuality. Politically, economically, socially, philosophically, and in other ways, society came to treat each person as a unique, self-contained unit. People began to think of themselves as capable of changing roles, to search for their own unique traits and destiny, to campaign for individual rights and social equality, and to do other things that reflected this new sense of the individual.

The notion of an inner self expanded greatly during this same period. The inner self is a metaphor for one's private access to, or privileged possession of, one's thoughts and feelings and intentions. There is some evidence that the notion of an inner self began to gain in importance in our culture around the 16th century (e.g., Trilling, 1971). It may have been derived in some way from the Christian Gnostic notion of soul. At first, the inner self may have been simply a way of thinking about hypocrisy, deception, and insincerity: people were not always really the way they appeared on the surface to be.

Over time, however, the notion of an inner self expanded. People began to believe that their inner selves contained their true personality traits, the basis for creativity, and even their most strongly held values and opinions. Poets and other artists attracted great public attention because they were believed to lead rich inner lives (Altick, 1965). For example, instead of just enjoying Shakespeare's plays, people began to wonder seriously about what kind of person Shakespeare must have been (Altick, 1965). By the 19th century, the culture had come to regard each person as containing a vast inner realm of hidden material. The culture had also come to think that the path to personal fulfillment depended substantially on discovering this inner self and developing it (Baumeister, 1986; Sennett, 1974; Weintraub, 1978).

Two developments are associated with this shift toward an expanded concept of the inner self. First, self-knowledge had come to seem increasingly difficult. Confidence in self-knowledge eroded over the subsequent centuries through a series of developments that included the Puritan discovery of the pervasiveness of self-deception, the Victorian fascination with involuntary disclosure, and later the Freudian exploration of the unconscious.

The second development is the evolution of the idea of identity crisis. Erik Erikson (1968) claimed that he coined the term *identity crisis* in the 1940s and it immediately gained a wide usage. The instant popularity of the term suggests that

there was already a broadly familiar phenomenon that it defined, so one must assume that identity crises were occurring before then. But the weight of the evidence suggests that the modern form of identity crisis only became generally apparent late in the 19th century. In the Middle Ages, for example, people had no term or concept for an identity crisis, nor did they apparently undergo the sort of experience to which it now refers.

The historical predecessors of identity crises were, first, the religious conversion experience, and, second, the belief that one did not belong in the role or life in which one found oneself. These experiences are important because they imply a separation of the person from his or her beliefs and actions (which are changed in religious conversion) and from his or her place in society. Thus, the self is conceived of as something that exists prior to and apart from its beliefs and roles (see MacIntyre, 1981, for elaboration). Undoubtedly, this new view of the self was encouraged by the rise in social, occupational, and geographical mobility, which showed how the same person could switch to a very different place in society.

The notion of identity crisis is based on the belief that a person is conceptually separate from his or her place in society, and on the belief that a person can find inside him or herself the basis for choosing an identity. These beliefs, as we have seen, are modern beliefs, and they would have been inconceivable to earlier eras. Identity crisis is thus a modern, Western phenomenon, reflecting the new ideas about the self. The modern notions of self are more complex and sophisticated than other notions, but they are not necessarily more accurate, and they also carry a variety of burdens and potential problems. The identity crisis is one symptom of the modern burden of selfhood.

Most cultures in the history of the world have not required people to create definitions of themselves that could serve as the basis for their adult lives, and so most cultures have not produced large numbers of identity crises. Indeed, even our own culture did not make such a requirement until recently. One's occupation was arranged by one's parents, who also took a leading role in arranging one's marriage, and so the individual did not have very many choices to make in determining his or her own adult identity. Now, however, parents at most provide advice, and the young person can (and must) choose from a bewildering variety of possible career opportunities and potential marriage partners (e.g., Kett, 1977).

Thus, although the modern self is associated with a great deal of freedom and opportunity and flexibility, it is also a problem. The 20th century has seen an expanding fascination with the problems of the self, as reflected in everything from the popular culture (e.g., books and movies in which people try to understand or find themselves) to scientific research (e.g., social science research on the self). What was once a simple, straightforward matter has now become something difficult, uncertain, and problematic.

Complicating the matter further is the fact that modern society has turned to selfhood to solve some of its more pressing problems. In particular, the main difficulty in finding meaning in life for modern Western individuals is that of finding a firm basis for values. In response to this value gap, modern society has placed an

increasing emphasis on the self as a fundamental good and source of value. The rise of the self as a basic value is one of the most important cultural changes of the 20th century and has transformed the way people understand their identities and modern attitudes about work, family, love, and death (Baumeister, 1991b).

Partly as a result of this burden of selfhood, the modern self (along with its concepts and definitions) carries a substantial ambivalence. On the one hand, the modern self is a unique and special entity, a fascinating puzzle, and a presumed source of much that is valuable in life. On the other hand, the self can be a difficult and uncertain puzzle, a focus of fears and anxieties, and a burdensome source of demands and obligations. Whereas our ancestors had one word, "selfishness," to refer to orientation toward oneself (and to condemn it as morally undesirable), modern society has added a wide assortment of words that express many nuances of that orientation over a wide evaluative spectrum: individualism, individuality, egoism and egotism, self-confidence, self-centeredness, self-expression, and so forth. The modern psychology of self must be understood against the context of this ambivalence.

B. Self-Knowledge

Although the self may be understood as a unity, the self-concept is not really a single, unified concept so much as a loosely connected set of ideas, inferences, and illusions. Indeed, one recent thrust of research on self-knowledge has abandoned the notion of a single self-concept per se and focused instead on *self-schemas,* that is, specific concepts of various features of the self (Markus, 1977). The self-concept can be regarded as a collection of these particular schemas about its traits.

Developmental psychologists have addressed the question of how children accumulate knowledge about themselves (see Damon & Hart, 1982, for review). It appears that children begin early in life to form notions of who they are, but the formation of self-concept is dependent on a wide variety of factors, including the sources of feedback available from peers and the child's own developing ability to understand itself in abstract or complex ways.

Children are born with identities (insofar as they belong to particular families) but must develop self-concepts. The child's sense of self apparently begins with the discovery that some events are contingent on its own acts—perhaps most vividly, seeing one's image in the mirror and noticing that it moves whenever oneself moves (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). The first contents of the self-concept appear to be as a member of a particular family, as being young and small, and as being male or female. Among older preschool children the self is understood especially in terms of capabilities and competencies (e.g., Keller, Ford, & Meacham, 1978). This emphasis continues through the early school years, although it becomes increasingly comparative; that is, the child evaluates competence relative to others' levels and relative to measured standards of competence (e.g., Erikson, 1950, 1968; Ruble, 1983). In adolescence, people increasingly come to think of themselves in terms of

abstract and interpersonal traits, issues of choice, and values (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Montemayor & Eisen, 1977).

The development of self-knowledge is hardly a smooth or easy process. Indeed, a study by Rosenberg (1979) found that over half the preadolescents in his sample felt that their parents or other adults knew them better than they knew themselves. The notion that a person has privileged access to his or her inner states is one that children come to accept only after a long period of development.

Throughout life, an important source of self-knowledge is the social feedback people receive from each other. An extreme statement of this view was put forward by the symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead, who proposed that self-knowledge is essentially distilled from feedback received from other people. But an extensive literature review by Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) found the symbolic interactionist view of the self-concept to be inadequate. People's self-concepts do not correspond very closely to how they are regarded by others. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that people are less than fully accurate in their perceptions of how others evaluate them (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Self-deceptions enable people to sustain views of themselves that are more favorable than their actual feedback would tend to warrant.

Thus, the feedback people receive from others may be subject to substantial distortions. Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) found that people's self-concepts were highly correlated with how they believed others regarded them, even though the self-concepts were not correlated with how others actually regarded them. Thus, it may be most accurate to suggest that the self-concept is the product of some negotiation between one's interpersonal feedback and one's preferred beliefs about oneself.

Swann and Hill (1982) demonstrated that the effects of social feedback depend on how people are able to respond to it. When subjects were given bogus personality feedback with no chance to respond to it, they tended to accept it and shift their private views of themselves to agree more with it. In contrast, when other subjects were given bogus feedback plus a chance to dispute it (which they did), they were not swayed by it. The implication is that the passive self may be shaped directly by external feedback, but the active self tends to take an aggressive and critical response to feedback so as to measure it against what it already knows. By responding actively to feedback, people can maintain their views of themselves despite contrary evidence.

By adolescence and certainly throughout adulthood, people have a collection of concepts about themselves. They have fairly detailed (although not necessarily coherent) concepts about who and what they are. They may also have fairly elaborate concepts about who and what they might become. Identity begins with an awareness of one's body, but in an adult human being identity is generally oriented toward goals (Baumeister, 1986). These goals include becoming a certain kind of person and not becoming another kind of person.

These concepts of what oneself might become have been termed *possible selves* by Markus and Nurius (1986, 1987). These researchers began with the

older notion of an *ideal self* (e.g., Rogers & Dymond, 1954). People have some concept of themselves, not as they currently are, but rather as they would ideally like to be, and their efforts are often directed at becoming more like their ideal self. Markus and Nurius added, however, the important notion that people have concepts of what they fear becoming—such as overweight, unloved, or a failure. Often these undesirable possible selves are quite detailed and elaborate concepts, and people exert efforts to avoid becoming like these feared selves. Indeed, in many respects the undesired self becomes a major motivating factor (Ogilvie, 1987).

These conceptions of possible selves are not only important in shaping behavioral motivations, they also have a strong effect on emotions. Higgins (1987; also Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1987) has proposed that emotional patterns are strongly influenced by two sets of concepts about the self. In his view, people compare how they perceive themselves with an *ideal self* and with an *ought self.* The ideal self, again, is how one would like to be, and the ought self is the way one feels some obligation or duty to be. Agitated emotions, such as anxiety and guilt, arise when one sees a discrepancy between oneself and one's ought self. Dejected emotions, such as sadness, depressed mood, and disappointment, arise when one sees a discrepancy between oneself and one's ideal self.

People's efforts to become more like their ideal selves have been studied by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982). These researchers examined how people try to claim desired identities. When people's sense of being able to reach their goals is threatened, they try harder to achieve some success or even some symbolic gesture that will help them feel that they are reaching these goals.

An important category of symbolic gestures for claiming identity involves convincing others to see oneself as having that identity. Thus, it is not enough simply to believe privately that one is reaching one's ideal self; identity demands public recognition (e.g., Baumeister, 1982b; Schlenker, 1980, 1985, 1986). Wicklund and Gollwitzer found repeatedly that people will respond to an identity threat by trying to prove themselves to somebody. Interestingly, it seemed not to matter who this other person was. If you want to be an artist, and somehow that creative ability is questioned, you will tend to try to persuade someone of your artistic talent and accomplishments. Although one might think that other artists or art critics would be the most relevant audiences, empirically people seem to settle for whomever they can find and persuade (Gollwitzer, 1986). The important factor is thus the social validation of one's identity, almost regardless of who provides it.

C. The Basics of Self-Esteem

The importance of self-esteem may well begin early in life. Kagan (1981) reviews evidence that the words "good" and "bad" are among the most common ones spoken to young children, across many cultures. Moreover, by the second year of life, children compare their behavior to standards of goodness and badness, including standards of competent performance, and so the habit of self-evaluation is acquired early and is pervasive.

Self-esteem is a central trait, in the sense that it is one of the most important elements of the self-concept and that it affects many other elements (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988). Indeed, when Wylie (1974, 1979) reviewed the research literature on self-concept, she found that the vast majority of it focused on self-esteem. To be sure, there are other aspects to how people think of themselves than the evaluative dimension, but the evaluative aspect is extremely important and has captured the primary interest of most researchers.

Despite the appeal of the symbolic interactionist arguments, most researchers have come to believe that there are two main sources of self-esteem. One is indeed the evaluative feedback the person receives from others (however distorted it may be). The other is direct experiences of efficacy and success (or failure). There is some evidence that these two aspects of self-esteem are not strongly related to each other (e.g., Franks & Marolla, 1976). People may be insecure about how others regard them but quite confident about their ability to do things right, or the reverse.

The study of individual differences in self-esteem typically features a questionnaire measure, which is used to sort people according to how favorably they regard themselves. There is a wide variety of such measures (see Wylie, 1974, 1979).

There have been several controversies about how to regard self-esteem. One controversy concerns the stability of self-esteem: does it fluctuate from day to day or remain stable? Most studies have found it to be quite stable across time. Some researchers are currently undertaking to revive the notion of self-esteem states that fluctuate rapidly, but this work has to overcome the stable tendencies of self-esteem (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Kernis, 1993). Baumeister (1991c) found a test–retest reliability of .904 across 2 weeks on a self-esteem scale, indicating very high stability. Harter (1993) has found that self-esteem can indeed change, particularly at major transition points in life (e.g., graduation), but still it tends to remain quite stable most of the time.

Another issue concerns whether self-esteem should be considered as a single quantity as opposed to a collection of independent (and uncorrelated) self-evaluations. That is, is it appropriate to think of people as having high or low self-esteem overall, or are people more likely to think well of themselves in some spheres (such as socially) while thinking poorly of themselves in others (such as athletically)? Current thinking on this issue has evolved toward a compromise. A hierarchical facet model has been proposed by Fleming and Courtney (1984; Fleming & Watts, 1980). This model says that there is indeed a global level of self-esteem that reflects a person's overall evaluation of self, but there are also specific levels of self-esteem with respect to various specific spheres. Researchers should therefore consider carefully whether they want to study global self-esteem or some particular dimension of self-esteem.

Self-esteem levels are centrally linked to differences in self-knowledge (Baumgardner, 1990; J. D. Campbell, 1990; J. D. Campbell & Lavallee, 1993). People with high self-esteem appear to have clear, consistent, and stable views about themselves. People with low self-esteem, in contrast, do not seem to know

themselves well. Their self-concepts appear to be confused, contradictory, unstable, uncertain, and full of gaps.

Self-esteem has been shown to influence a variety of behaviors (see Baumeister, 1993, for such a compilation). People with low self-esteem appear to be more susceptible to influence than people with high self-esteem (Brockner, 1983; Cohen, 1959; Janis, 1954; Janis & Field, 1959). Initial failure is apparently quite aversive to people with high self-esteem, and they become determined to avoid repeating the experience. They respond either by trying harder on the second trial (e.g., Shrauger & Sorman, 1977; Silverman, 1964) or by avoiding the task if they can (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 1985). People with low self-esteem respond to initial failure by remaining at about the same level of effort, although some researchers have interpreted this as a withdrawal of effort in comparison with the responses of people with high self-esteem (cf. Maracek & Mettee, 1972).

It is important to realize, however, that although self-esteem predicts responses to such feedback, there is very little evidence of any general tendency for people with low self-esteem to perform worse than people with high self-esteem; indeed, most laboratory studies have found the two groups to perform about the same (e.g., Brockner & Hulton, 1978; J. D. Campbell & Fairey, 1985). Thus, despite the occasional benefits of confidence, high self-esteem is not associated with large advantages in success or achievement. It is unwarranted to assume that low self-esteem is an accurate assessment of one's general lack of competence (see also A. Campbell, 1981).

However, there may be differences in success in life that do not depend on competence. Managing oneself effectively, such as by choosing appropriate tasks and making commitments that one can keep, can be just as important as overall competence in bringing success, and recent evidence indicates that people with high self-esteem are generally more effective at setting appropriate goals and living up to their commitments (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993), partly due to their superior self-knowledge (J. D. Campbell, 1990). On the other hand, ego threats produce extreme and irrational reactions from people with high self-esteem, and they become prone to respond in nonoptimal and even self-defeating ways to such threats. Their effective self-management seems to vanish in such circumstances (Baumeister et al., 1993).

People with low self-esteem are more likely than highs to say that their behavior varies across situations (e.g., Goldberg, 1981; Paulhus & Martin, 1988; see J. D. Campbell & Lavallee, 1993). This may reflect the greater plasticity or flexibility of people with low self-esteem (Brockner, 1983), and it may also reflect their general lack of firm self-knowledge (J. D. Campbell, 1990). Self-esteem also influences the way people respond to public situations. Many behavioral differences are found only in public situations (e.g., Archibald & Cohen, 1971; Shrauger, 1972; Wilson & Benner, 1971), which suggests that self-esteem is associated with important differences in self-presentational patterns (e.g., Arkin, 1981; Baumeister, 1982a).

For a long time, the evidence suggested that people with low self-esteem were more likely to hold negative stereotypes and prejudices than people with high self-

esteem, but recent work has revealed a serious flaw in this evidence. People with low self-esteem are more critical of others and of themselves than are people with high self-esteem. The discrepancy between evaluation of self and evaluation of outgroups is about the same for people of all levels of self-esteem (Crocker & Schwartz, 1985).

D. Motivations Regarding the Self-Concept

We have already seen that the self-concept typically includes reference to certain goals, including trying to reach one's ideals and avoid certain undesirable possible selves. Beyond these broad goals, however, it appears that people spend a considerable amount of effort on their self-concepts. However, researchers have been sharply divided as to the nature and goal of these efforts.

The two main motivations regarding the self-concept are consistency and favorability. It is clear that once a person has formed a certain concept or evaluation of self, and if it is acceptable, people seek to maintain it, and they resist external influences designed to change it. But is this because the strive for consistency or because they desire favorability? The evidence is divided.

The view that people desire to hold positive views of themselves has a long history. It seems clear that the majority of people strive to sustain favorable views of themselves (Taylor, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). They blame their failures externally but take credit for successes, they convince themselves that others like them, and they exaggerate their degree of control and efficacy (e.g., Greenwald, 1980). They persuade themselves that their abilities are unique but that their opinions are validated by most other people (J. D. Campbell, 1986).

On the other hand, there is evidence that people seek consistency. They strive to confirm their views of themselves, they dispute feedback that is discrepant from their self-concepts, and they will even avoid someone whose opinion of them differs from their self-concept (Swann, 1987).

The main test case, of course, is what happens when people have formed unfavorable opinions of themselves. In this case, if they desire consistency, they should prefer to receive unfavorable evaluations that confirm their low self-esteem. On the other hand, if they mainly desire favorable views of themselves, then they should prefer favorable evaluations.

An extensive review of the early research literature on this topic found some support for both predictions, but the preponderance of studies supported the favorability hypothesis (S. C. Jones, 1973). A later and more careful review by Shrauger (1975) found, however, that one could explain the discrepant findings by sorting the work according to how the response to evaluations had been measured. Shrauger found that when the measures were primarily affective, people showed a clear preference for favorable feedback, regardless of their level of self-esteem. However, when the measures were primarily cognitive, people seemed more inclined to believe and accept feedback that was consistent with their views of themselves. In short, people with low self-esteem are more likely to enjoy receiving favorable feedback

but they are more likely to believe unfavorable feedback. Subsequent work has borne out Shrauger's conclusion (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987).

The desire to think favorably of oneself can be placed in a broader context, especially if one accepts the view that the motivation is linked to emotional patterns. Becker (1973) proposed that self-esteem is a vital means of protecting oneself against anxiety. This hypothesis has recently been revived and elaborated by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986). According to this view, human beings are unique among animal species in that they know that they are going to die. This fear of death gives rise to an existential terror that is the main cause of anxiety in life. People therefore desperately need some defenses against this threat of death, or else they would be in a constant state of terror. Self-esteem furnishes a vital protection against anxiety, because it casts the individual as a valued participant in a cultural drama that will continue even after the individual dies. By regarding themselves as important, worthy individuals, people can begin to overcome the feelings of insignificance and ephemerality that are caused by the realization that they will die (Greenberg et al., 1986).

The terror management hypothesis has generated some controversy, mainly because there is some question as to whether the existential fear of death is really the central cause of all human anxiety. An alternative view has proposed that anxiety is a natural response to exclusion from social groups (Baumeister, 1990a; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister & Tice, 1990). In other words, people feel anxiety when others reject them, dislike them, avoid them, and so forth, or even when there is merely some threat of rejection. The social exclusion view is nonetheless quite compatible with Becker's and Greenberg et al.'s hypothesis that self-esteem is an important defense against anxiety. People with high self-esteem consider themselves to be competent, virtuous, and attractive by definition, so they are less worried than others that they will be rejected or excluded. As a result, they are less troubled by anxiety. People with high self-esteem expect others to like them and to want to be associated with them, and they confidently pursue these outcomes.

III. LOSING THE SELF: PROBLEMS OF SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

At the beginning of this chapter, I proposed that the modern interest in self must be understood in the context of the tension between the great desire to know and express the self and the concomitant burdens and difficulties associated with the self. This section will examine some of the specific problems and difficulties that are associated with the self.

A. The Puzzle of Low Self-Esteem

Psychology has generally been sympathetic to people with high self-esteem. Indeed, studies of adjustment have often treated self-esteem as one measure of adjustment,

such that the higher a person's self-esteem score, the better adjusted the person is assumed to be. If that were all there were to it, society should perhaps simply encourage everyone to be as conceited as possible! It is not difficult to understand the goals and motives of the people with high self-esteem. They want to succeed, to be loved and admired, and to enjoy their lives and accomplishments.

In contrast, the motives of people with low self-esteem have been a mystery. Their goals have been relatively uncertain. Indeed, as we saw in the precious section of this chapter, many psychologists have proposed that people with low self-esteem desire failure and rejection, because this feedback will confirm their negative opinions of themselves (e.g., Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; Aronson & Mettee, 1968; Maracek & Mettee, 1972). The accumulated evidence has shown, however, that people with low self-esteem desire success just as much as anyone else (e.g., McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981).

The solution to the puzzle of low self-esteem may be somewhat complex. To perceive it, it is first necessary to realize that most research subjects who are classified as low in self-esteem are not low in an absolute sense. Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) reviewed the distributions of self-esteem scores for many different scales in many different studies, and they found that invariably there were only a few people whose scores were genuinely low. Many people score at the high end of the scale, and most of the rest score in the middle. Thus, in an absolute sense, most people should be labeled as either high or *moderate* in self-esteem. Low scores are only relatively low; in an absolute sense, they are moderate.

Next, it is vital to recognize that people with low self-esteem do not seem to have a firm sense of who and what they are, as already mentioned (Baumgardner, 1990; J. D. Campbell, 1990; J. D. Campbell & Lavallee, 1993). This pervasive "self-concept confusion" (J. D. Campbell & Lavallee, 1993) may underlie a broad range of their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Furthermore, one must take into account the evidence that these "low" self-esteem individuals have mixed reactions to success, as already noted. They would like to succeed, but they do not expect to do so (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Shrauger, 1975; Swann et al., 1987). Thus, they are somewhat insecure about achieving the outcomes they desire, in contrast to the people with high self-esteem who are confident that they can achieve whatever they try.

There is also some evidence suggesting that different levels of aspiration are associated with different levels of self-esteem. In a study by Baumeister and Tice (1985), people received initial success or failure and then had an opportunity to persist at the task or to devote their time to something else. Not surprisingly, people with high self-esteem showed great interest in the task when they initially succeeded, but they tended to avoid the task if they had initially failed. People with low self-esteem, however, showed the opposite pattern.

One way of interpreting these results is to suggest that people with high self-esteem are interested in achieving exceptional successes, whereas people with low self-esteem mainly want to avoid failures. When the person with low self-esteem receives failure feedback, it is discouraging, but the person will tend to work on

this problem to try to remedy the deficit. That way, the likelihood of future failure is reduced. In contrast, initial success signifies to someone with low self-esteem that he or she is already performing at an adequate, passable level, so there is no need to work on it. Indeed, it may be prudent to avoid the task, so that there is no danger of ruining one's initial success by failing at it on a second try. Thus, people with low self-esteem may be oriented toward remedying their deficits and overcoming their faults, so as to reach an adequate or passable level.

A more general formulation has recently been put forward by Baumeister et al. (1989). This formulation distinguishes between the motive to *protect* one's self-concept and the motive to *enhance* it (i.e., make it more favorable). Self-enhancement requires seeking out opportunities to achieve, succeed, and stand out; self-protection involves avoiding chances of failure, rejection, or humiliation. Tice (1990) showed that even when similar behaviors are involved, they appear to be driven by different motivations: People with low self-esteem are mainly concerned with self-protection, whereas people with high self-esteem are mainly concerned with self-enhancement (see also Arkin, 1981; Baumeister et al., 1989; Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986).

A final and important piece of the puzzle has been suggested by Steele (1988) and Spencer, Josephs, and Steele (1993). In their view, self-esteem is a resource, and people with low self-esteem simply do not have as much of it as people with high self-esteem. Accordingly, when stressed or threatened, they have less to draw upon, and they respond—and indeed approach life in general—in a more protective and defensive way.

Thus, a solution is slowly emerging to the puzzle of low self-esteem. People who score low on self-esteem measures typically lack a clear and definite stock of self-knowledge, and in particular they suffer from a lack of helpful, positive views about themselves. They desire and enjoy success, but their actions are influenced by their doubts that they will be able to achieve success on a regular or frequent basis. They focus on protecting themselves against failures and rejections, such as by presenting themselves in a cautious or modest fashion. They orient themselves toward finding out their shortcomings and inadequacies so as to remedy these. Unlike people with high self-esteem, who focus on their strengths and try to cultivate these so as to become outstanding, people with low self-esteem strive to be adequate by focusing on their weaknesses and overcoming them.

These are of course only broad, general patterns. People with high self-esteem dislike failure and will work hard to avoid humiliating experiences. But when they have a choice, their primary goal is to achieve great success rather than to avoid failure. People with low self-esteem will tend toward the opposite choice.

B. Self-Defeating Behavior

One of the greatest paradoxes of human behavior, and certainly in the study of the self, is self-defeating behavior. It is clear that people sometimes do things that cause themselves pain, harm, loss, and even death. Self-defeating behavior spans

a wide spectrum, ranging from getting into debt or making poor investments to suicide. Self-preservation and the pursuit of self-interest are widely regarded as the essence of rational behavior, and so these self-defeating behaviors seem quintessentially irrational.

Considerable information is available about the ways people harm themselves and sabotage their projects (see Baumeister & Scher, 1988). To make sense of this information, it is first necessary to distinguish several possible categories of self-defeating behaviors. The purest form would be cases in which people engage in some action for the sake of the loss or suffering that it will bring them. In these cases of deliberately self-destructive behavior, the person both foresees and desires the harm to self. At the other extreme, people may harm themselves almost by accident; in these cases, people neither desire nor foresee the harm to self, but their efforts toward positive goals are undermined by counterproductive means or strategies. Lastly, an intermediate category includes cases in which the harm to self is perhaps foreseen but is not desired. In this category, typically, people are engaging in trade-offs, so they engage in the behavior for the sake of positive benefits and accept the risks and costs that accompany it.

There is very little evidence that normal adult human beings engage in the first kind of self-destructive behavior (i.e., deliberate self-destruction). However, there is considerable evidence of counterproductive strategies. People use various bargaining strategies (Pruitt, 1981) or ingratiation strategies (E. E. Jones & Wortman, 1973) that backfire and produce undesired results. They persist in failing endeavors far past the point at which they should rationally cut their losses and start over elsewhere (Rubin & Brockner, 1975; Staw, 1976; Teger, 1980). They respond to pressure situations by focusing on themselves, which tends to impair skilled performance (Baumeister, 1984). Even learned helplessness can be considered a maladaptive withdrawal of effort (Seligman, 1975; also Roth & Kubal, 1975).

Lastly, there is considerable evidence of self-defeating behavior that occurs as a result of trade-offs between competing, incompatible goals. People handicap their performances so as to give themselves an excuse for failure (e.g., E. E. Jones & Berglas, 1978). They use drugs and alcohol, which can cause considerable damage to one's health and relationships, in order to avoid realizing unpleasant things about themselves (Hull, 1981). They disregard and disobey medical advice from their physicians, even skipping important appointments and failing to take their medicines (e.g., Dunbar & Stunkard, 1979; Sackett & Snow, 1979). They sacrifice tangible rewards to avoid temporary embarrassment or to take revenge against others (Brown, 1968; Brown & Garland, 1971). Despite their desire to have friends, shy people avoid others and avoid social interactions, so they remain lonely and isolated (e.g., Cheek & Busch, 1981; W. H. Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981; Maroldo, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

One somewhat surprising conclusion that has emerged regarding self-defeating behavior is that it often appears to be motivated by states of high self-awareness (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). When attention is focused on the self, especially in an aversive fashion, people are more likely to do things that will produce harmful

outcomes. In many cases, this appears to occur because people are eager to escape from an awareness of the self's shortcomings. The willingness to accept costs and risks for the sake of immediate relief is increased when the current state involves an aversive awareness of self.

It seems unwarranted, then, to infer that people have self-destructive urges or motivations. Self-defeating behavior occurs among normal people either as an unwanted by-product of some desirable outcome or as an unwanted result of poor judgment and ill-advised strategies.

C. Identity Crisis

The term *identity crisis* apparently originated in the 1940s (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Erikson's view was that an identity crisis is a normal, possibly universal stage of human development, typically associated with adolescence. The universality of identity crises has become an increasingly untenable hypothesis. For one thing, identity crises appear to be historically and culturally relative to some extent; as far as we can tell, people did not commonly have identity crises before the 19th century (e.g., Baumeister, 1986), although it is plausible that exceptional individuals occasionally had them (see Erikson, 1958). Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that many people today do not report anything resembling an identity crisis. In Erikson's view, identity crises could be unconscious, so people might not be aware of having them. Such a hypothesis is difficult to evaluate and perhaps impossible to disprove, but researchers have consistently found people who reveal no sign of identity crises even in response to in-depth interviews (e.g., Marcia, 1966, 1967).

The discovery that many people show no signs of identity crises has led researchers to formulate a taxonomy of *identity statuses* (Marcia, 1966, 1967; Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973). People are sorted according to whether they have had identity crises or not, and according to whether they have formed a secure identity with roles and commitments or not. The four statuses deserve some explanation and comment (for reviews, see Bernard, 1981; Bourne, 1978).

People who have had identity crises and resolved them successfully are classified as *identity achieved.* These people are typically mature, well adjusted, and flexible. Indeed, they score highest on most adjustment measures, suggesting that identity crises are generally beneficial in the long run.

People who have had identity crises but have not resolved them are classified as *moratoriums.* Typically, they are currently involved in the crisis. The term "crisis" carries a connotation of disaster and suffering, which is only partly accurate. Moratorium subjects often appear to be open to new experiences, actively exploring a wide range of ideas and lifestyles, and often exhilarated by some of what they find, although of course there are periods of confusion, depression, and dismay. Some researchers have recently come to prefer the term "exploration" rather than "crisis," simply to avoid the melodramatic implications of the latter term.

A third category, *foreclosures,* involves people who have commitments to adult identity patterns without having gone through a substantial period of crisis

or exploration. Most children have foreclosed identities, for they tend to accept the beliefs, values, and goals that their parents instill in them. The adolescent identity crisis often begins with a rejection of these parental lessons. Hence, people who do not experience the adolescent crisis typically retain their allegiance to what their parents taught them. Foreclosures tend to seem mature earlier than their peers, and their lives often conform to a pattern of stable, continuous progress toward long-term goals. However, they tend to be inflexible and they do not adapt well to changing or stressful circumstances. There is some evidence suggesting that the foreclosure pattern is maladaptive for males but not for females (Marcia & Scheidel, 1983), although it would be premature to draw a broad conclusion.

The fourth category, *identity diffusion,* refers to people who have not formed the commitments to adult identity but are not engaged in any active search or effort to do so. This category is generally regarded as the most maladaptive and even pathological of the four. At a minimum, these individuals tend to resemble the "perpetual adolescent" who postpones the responsibilities, decisions, and commitments of adult life as long as possible.

The nature and processes of identity crisis have remained shrouded in mystery. The vagueness of the concept, combined with its multiple usages (including metaphorical and colloquial ones), has made it very difficult to study the process closely. One review of the available evidence concluded that there are actually two major types of identity crisis (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985; also Baumeister, 1986).

The first type of identity crisis can be called an *identity deficit.* This is the state created when the person's identity is inadequate to make the choices facing it. It is commonly associated with adolescence and midlife, arising especially when the person questions and then rejects the patterns of thinking and acting that have guided the person over the preceding years. In the adolescent, it is often associated with breaking away from parents and learning to think and act independently (e.g., Blos, 1962). At midlife, it may often be prompted by the sense that one's life is passing by and so one must reassess where best to devote one's time and efforts (see Levinson, 1978). The identity deficit is often accompanied by radical shifts in feelings and behaviors.

The other type of identity crisis can be called an *identity conflict.* It typically arises when the person has defined him or herself in terms of multiple commitments, and these make conflicting demands on the person. Examples of this type of identity crisis include conflicts between family ties and religious beliefs, and conflicts between occupational advancement and personal or home life. Unlike the wide mood swings of the identity deficit, the identity conflict is often characterized by a pervasive, oppressive sense of being trapped, guilty, or traitorous. These crises also do not show the exploratory openness to experience that characterizes the deficit crises. The person suffering from an identity conflict does not want new information or alternatives, for he or she already has too many commitments. Instead, there may be a tendency for the identity conflict to breed a passive attitude, as the person postpones making any irrevocable decision and hopes for a solution to emerge.

Thus identity crises are not universal but rather are associated with particular individuals, circumstances, and cultural or historical patterns. There are two broad types of identity crises, and research should distinguish between them. Identity deficits appear to be linked to particular stages in life, associated with the desire to reject and replace some definitions of the self, and associated with beneficial outcomes. Identity conflicts can occur at any age, they arise when the situation forces the person to choose between different definitions of self, and these crises do not apparently benefit the individual.

D. Escape from Self

If the self can be a burden or problem, then sometimes people may want to avoid self-awareness. Escapist motivations may be strongest when the self is linked to aversive emotional states. As Higgins (1987) has proposed, such states arise when people fall short of their standards, including ideals and moral obligations. Self-awareness is centrally concerned with comparing oneself with standards, so when the self falls short, it may be especially painful or unpleasant to focus attention on oneself (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975). Research has shown a variety of circumstances that make self-awareness especially aversive and motivate people to try to avoid anything that would shift their attention inward. These circumstances include receiving a bad evaluation (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), hearing that one has personality problems that would be difficult to correct (Steenbarger & Aderman, 1979), receiving a rejection and putdown by an attractive member of the opposite sex (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1976), or performing actions that run counter to one's belief and values (Greenberg & Musham, 1981). Most of these studies measured escape from self-awareness by confronting the subject with a mirror and assessing the subject's attempts to avoid it, such as by choosing a seat facing away from the mirror or by finishing quickly and leaving the room.

In everyday life, of course, escape from aversive self-awareness is not always as easy as walking away from a mirror. When the self is cast in an unfavorable light, people may find themselves locked into undesirable emotional states and unable to distract themselves from the unpleasant thoughts about their failures and inadequacies.

Also, if the modern self is generally a source of burdensome demands and constraining definitions, people may find it exhilarating to escape from self-awareness even when nothing bad has happened. States of ecstasy appear to depend centrally on loss of ordinary awareness of self. Religious mystics speak of powerful experiences in which the ego is dissolved (see Goleman, 1988). "Peak" or "flow" experiences of ordinary individuals are often characterized by absorption in some activity, which may involve a suspension of one's normal awareness of self (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1982). Thus, although escapist motivations may arise from specific, unhappy thoughts and feelings connected with the self, they may be attractive in their own right as appealing experiences.

How do people go about escaping from self-awareness? It is not easy to stop being aware of oneself. People generally find it difficult to prevent unwanted thoughts (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987), and the self may be especially difficult to suppress. After all, one cannot monitor one's success at not thinking about oneself, for in order to monitor oneself one must attend to oneself. A cognitive effort to avoid self-awareness may therefore be a paradoxical, impossible task.

What people appear to do instead, therefore, is to *deconstruct* the self. Identity is a *construct,* that is, an entity consisting of meaning and involving connections and relationships among many events, stimuli, and contexts. Deconstruction is a matter of breaking those connections and dissolving those relationships, thereby reducing the sense of self back to its bare minimum: a mere body. By focusing narrowly on physical movement and sensation, people can avoid broadly meaningful awareness, including awareness of implications about the self (Baumeister, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987).

A variety of escapist behaviors can be understood on the basis of this process of shifting attention down to minimal levels. Cognitive deconstruction creates a state characterized by a narrow time frame (focused on the immediate present), concrete and rigid thinking, a rejection of meaningful thought, a focus on means and techniques rather than ends, a passive or impulsive style of behavior, and reduced or suppressed emotion. The deconstructed state may make the person's behavior more inconsistent, because it takes meaningful integration to recognize inconsistencies. It may also remove inhibitions, because inhibitions typically require high-level evaluations of the meanings of possible acts (see Baumeister, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a).

1. Alcohol Use

Hull (1981) proposed that alcohol use is often a means of escaping from self-awareness. Alcohol use impairs high-level cognitive processes and meaningful thought, focusing attention instead on sensations and movements. Even small doses have this effect, and so this view helps explain the appeal of having just a drink or two.

Experimental work has established the effectiveness of alcohol in escaping from unpleasant awareness of self. Alcohol makes people less likely to refer to themselves in speech and reduces the number of first-person pronouns they use (Hull, Levenson, Young, & Sher, 1983). People consume more alcohol after experiencing failure than after success (Hull & Young, 1983). Research on stress has failed to find that all forms of stress increase alcohol consumption, but people do increase consumption when the stress reflects unfavorably on the self (Hull, 1981). Indeed, one study examined the relapse rates for alcoholics who completed a detoxification program. People who experienced aversive life events tended to relapse more quickly than others, but only if they were inclined to reflect on themselves (Hull, Young, & Jouriles, 1986). When life stress was not accompanied by high self-awareness, there was presumably no drive to escape it by getting drunk.

Alcohol is a good illustration of both the positive and the negative aspects of deconstructing the self. As Hull's work has shown, people tend to consume alcohol to forget unpleasant implications about themselves. Undoubtedly, however, alcoholic intoxication is often an appealing state even in the absence of the need to escape from unpleasant emotions. By disconnecting certain aspects of the self and focusing narrowly on the immediate present, people are able to enjoy themselves more. Alcohol does appear to reduce inhibitions and make people more able to act in ways that are inconsistent with some of their abstract beliefs and values (e.g., Steele & Southwick, 1985). The uninhibited behaviors associated with wild parties are a familiar illustration of these effects of alcohol. These behaviors may involve the same escape from self-awareness and meaningful thought, for intoxicated people do things that are inconsistent with the way they normally regard themselves and want to be regarded by others. But in this case the impetus for consuming alcohol is not so much to end unpleasant feelings as the positive attractions of the intoxicated state.

2. Masochism

Masochism means obtaining sexual pleasure and arousal in connection with pain, bondage, and/or humiliation, and some theorists have extended the definition to nonsexual enjoyment of pain, helplessness, and humiliation as well. Masochism is one of psychology's long-standing puzzles. Most theorists who have written about masochism have worked from clinical observations and have regarded it as a variety of self-destructive behavior. Recent research has shown, however, that the majority of masochists appear to be normal, healthy, well-adjusted individuals who show no signs of mental illness apart from their deviant sexuality (e.g., Scott, 1983; T. Weinberg & Kamel, 1983). We saw earlier that normal people do not apparently engage in self-destructive behavior except in connection with positive, desirable goals (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). It is necessary, therefore, to furnish a new theory of masochism.

Based on current evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that masochism is a set of techniques for removing one's ordinary identity from awareness (see Baumeister, 1988a, 1988b, 1989). Masochism deconstructs the self in multiple ways. To appreciate this, one must consider the common features of masochistic activity. These include humiliation and embarrassment, loss of control (especially through bondage), and pain.

Humiliation and embarrassment are a direct attack on the dignity of the self. Earlier in this chapter, it was noted that people are generally motivated to maintain favorable views of themselves; indeed, this is almost an axiom of the psychology of self. Masochists, however, seek out degrading experiences such as being dressed in embarrassing costumes, being kept on a leash like an animal, having to kiss another person's feet, being displayed naked, and so forth. These masochistic practices thus contradict one of the most pervasive functions of the self, and they make it impossible for the person to maintain his or her normal sense of identity.

A second pervasive motivation of the self is to gain and maintain control over the environment. People are relentlessly motivated to maintain control, and where real control is lacking they cultivate the illusion of control (e.g., Brehm, 1966; Langer, 1975; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; White, 1959). Masochists, however, seek the illusion of having lost all control. They desire to be tied up, blindfolded, gagged, and otherwise restrained. They seek a partner who will give them arbitrary commands and take over all initiative. Thus, the self as an active agent ceases to exist in masochism.

The desire for pain is perhaps the most puzzling feature of masochism, for it is hard to understand how pain could become pleasure. Evidence suggests that masochists do not actually come to enjoy the pain (e.g., M. S. Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; also Scott, 1983). Also, the masochistic desire for pain is not accompanied by any desire for injury, and in fact masochists appear to be very concerned with safety (e.g., Baumeister, 1988a; Scott, 1983; M. S. Weinberg et al., 1984). Pain is quite effective, however, at shifting attention to the immediate present. It deconstructs the world, preventing meaningful thought and focusing attention on immediate sensations (Scarry, 1985). Pain is thus a tool for manipulating awareness, to help bring about the escape from ordinary self-awareness.

3. Binge Eating

Another odd behavior pattern that appears to be on the rise in modern life is binge eating. Patterns of binge eating range from the temporary indulgences of dieters who, having broken their diets, feel that all rules are off and so eat large quantities of fattening foods, to the pathological patterns of bulimia nervosa.

There is some evidence that binge eating is associated with escape from self-awareness (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991). First, eating binges are linked to negative views of self and awareness of the self's deficiencies (e.g., Garner, Olmsted, Polivy, & Garfinkel, 1984; Gross & Rosen, 1988; Katzman & Wolchik, 1984; Schlesier-Stropp, 1984). Second, manipulations that involve ego threat or aversive moods do increase the eating by obese or dieting subjects (i.e., those most prone to engage in eating binges), unlike control subjects (e.g., Baucom & Aiken, 1981; Frost, Goolkasian, Ely, & Blanchard, 1982; Ruderman, 1985; Slochower & Kaplan, 1980). Third, binges do not occur if people are kept in a state of high self-awareness, whereas the binge is associated with the loss of attention to self. In particular, people cease to monitor their eating during a binge (e.g., Polivy, 1976). This fits the view that inhibitions and restraints involve meaningful awareness of self, and so deconstruction removes them.

Eating binges may be pleasant and desirable in themselves, but the available evidence does suggest a powerful role of unpleasant emotions and aversive awareness of self. Self-awareness and aversive emotions are minimized, thinking becomes concrete and rigid, and the person focuses on immediate sensations (especially the food) rather than long-range considerations or goals. Such binges therefore appear to be more commonly motivated by the desire to get away from an unpleasant

state than an attraction to the state of eating, although especially among dieters the eating may be intensely enjoyable.

4. Suicide

A last example of escaping the self is suicide. There are multiple patterns and causes of suicide, but escape appears to be the centrally important one (e.g., Baechler, 1975/1979; Baumeister, 1990b, 1991a). Indeed, some researchers have found escape to be more common than all other motives for suicide combined (e.g., Smith & Bloom, 1985).

The pattern of events preceding a suicide attempt appears to conform to the same process of escaping the self that was discussed in the preceding examples (see Baumeister, 1990b). Suicide is associated with a sense of falling short of one's goals and standards (including the expectations other people have for one), which produces an acute sense of self as incompetent, blameworthy, undesirable, and so forth. This awareness is initially accompanied by strong patterns of negative emotion, including depression and anxiety.

To escape from this aversive state, the person attempts to avoid meaningful thought. The mental state of the suicidal individual conforms very closely to the features of the deconstructed state. The person's sense of time is focused narrowly on the present (e.g., Greaves, 1971; Neuringer & Harris, 1974; Yufit & Benzies, (1973). Thinking is rigid and concrete (e.g., Henken, 1976; Perrah & Wichman, 1987). Initiative is stifled amid a general passivity (e.g., Henken, 1976; Ringel, 1976) or channeled into impulsive acts. Emotion is broadly stifled, so that even positive emotions are suppressed (Williams & Broadbent, 1986).

The suicide attempt itself may be a result of the person's inability to maintain the escape using less drastic methods. The person's mental state oscillates between periods of numbness (which are felt as boring and empty) and brief, intense doses of negative affect that arise whenever the person happens to resume meaningful thought. As the latter are felt as intolerable, the person is attracted to the presumed oblivion of death. The deconstructed state removes the person's normal inhibitions against taking his or her own life, and so a suicide attempt results (Baumeister, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a).

Suicide represents the most negative and maladaptive aspect of escapist motivations. It was suggested earlier that many common forms of self-defeating behavior are motivated by a desire to escape from an aversive state of high self-awareness (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). Suicide may often be an unfortunately extreme case of that principle. People attempt to take their own lives as a desperate strategy to bring an end to the emotional misery associated with an awareness of the self's failures and shortcomings.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The self begins with simple and universal psychological experiences, such as having a body and being a distinct member of a social unit. From this crude beginning,

however, the self can be defined and understood in a wide variety of ways, and different cultures and historical periods have indeed taken very different approaches to selfhood.

Our modern Western society constructs the self in a complex and elaborate fashion. The great cultural emphasis on cultivating a well-developed, unique, expressive, and successful self links the self to a variety of powerful motivations. These are both positive and negative. The opportunities for developing and fulfilling the self are greater in our modern culture than in nearly any other. At the same time, these patterns create demands, obligations, and threats that make the self especially problematic and burdensome. The self in some ways resembles the prize fish in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea:* It is a great treasure and opportunity, and at the same time it is a source of dangers and difficulties.

On the positive side, people are very interested in self-knowledge. They desire to learn about themselves, although they have strong preferences regarding what they might find out. People seek to manage and control the information about themselves. Typically, people want to confirm their favorable opinions of themselves. People hold multiple conceptions of self, including possible future selves, images of how they ideally would like to be and how they ought to be, detailed (if inaccurate) concepts of how they really are and how they appear to others, and more. People with high self-esteem are guided by a desire to stand out, to excel, and to make strongly favorable impressions on others. People with low self-esteem are torn between a desire for favorable feedback and a tendency to distrust and disbelieve it. They appear to be guided by a desire to avoid failure, rejection, and humiliation, such as by remedying weaknesses and avoiding risks.

On the negative side, the self is associated with a variety of threats and problems. When people discover a discrepancy between how they are and how they want or ought to be, they suffer a variety of unpleasant emotions. Self-esteem may play an important role in defending the individual against anxiety, and so threats to self-esteem may trigger acutely aversive emotional states. It does not appear that people are generally motivated to suffer, but they do engage in a wide variety of self-destructive or self-defeating behaviors as a result of poor judgment or conflicting goals.

Identity crises appear to be one symptom of the modern emphasis on requiring each person to create and define his or her own identity. There are at least two major types of identity crisis. Identity deficits begin when the person rejects the values and behavior patterns that have shaped his or her life up to that point, and typically a period of exploration and experimentation follows, usually with long-term beneficial results. Identity conflicts arise in conflict situations that require the person to betray some personal commitments or self-definitions.

The modern burden of selfhood has fostered a great increase in the variety of means people use to escape from self-awareness. The most common process appears to involve deconstructing the identity by focusing narrowly on movements and sensations in the immediate situation. Alcohol use, sexual masochism, binge eating, suicide, and other patterns reflect this pattern of escape.

The modern fascination with self seems likely to endure, for it is deeply rooted in current social patterns that are probably going to continue. For the near future at least, defining the self is likely to continue to be a great source of challenge and satisfaction, as well as a great source of threat and difficulty. The construction of self is one of the major life tasks to confront the modern individual.

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