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Article in *Psychological Bulletin* · May 1979

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## Symbolic Interactionist View of Self-Concept: Through the Looking Glass Darkly

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Research on the relationship between self-perceptions and evaluations from other people is reviewed. Studies of naturalistic interactions indicate that people's self-perceptions agree substantially with the way they perceive themselves as being viewed by others. However, there is no consistent agreement between people's self-perceptions and how they are actually viewed by others. There is no clear indication that self-evaluations are influenced by the feedback received from others in naturally occurring situations. When feedback from others is manipulated experimentally, self-perceptions are usually changed. However, methodological limitations such as the questionable external validity and strong demand characteristics of the experimental situations employed make the significance of these findings unclear. The available evidence is examined within a framework that considers the transmission, processing, and evaluation of judgments from others. Other means by which interaction may influence self-perceptions aside from direct evaluative feedback are considered.

O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as others see us!

Robert Burns, *To a Louse*

Burns's couplet expresses a concern about self-knowledge and its origins that is ancient and contemporary. Recently, a resurgence of interest in the self has flourished in many areas of psychology, especially in psychotherapeutic formulations that view cognitions about oneself as vital mediators in the maintenance and modification of behavior and in social psychological theories involving attribution, cognitive dissonance, and self-awareness. Understanding how attitudes about the self are developed and maintained has thus become increasingly important.

When people are asked how they know that they possess certain characteristics, a typical answer is that they have learned about them from other people. A more for-

mal theoretical statement of this view has been articulated by the influential school of thought known as symbolic interactionism. This theory proffers the idea of a "looking glass self" and asserts that one's self-concept is a reflection of one's perceptions about how one appears to others. This assertion has received widespread professional acceptance and is intoned with catechistic regularity in many leading texts on social behavior (e.g., Raven & Rubin, 1976; D. J. Schneider, 1976; Secord & Backman, 1974).

Social philosophers and psychologists of the late 19th century such as Peirce (1868), James (1890), and Baldwin (1897) were precursors of symbolic interactionism in their emphasis on the self as a product and reflection of social life (Gordon & Gergen, 1968; Ziller, 1973). Cooley (1902), generally credited as the first interactionist, developed the idea of the looking glass self. He posited that the self is inseparable from social life and necessarily involves some reference to others. This process of social reference results in the looking glass self: "A self idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his

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The authors appreciate the comments of an anonymous reviewer on an earlier draft of this article.

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judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley, 1902, p. 152). According to Cooley, from early childhood our concepts of self develop from seeing how others respond to us: "In the presence of one whom we feel to be of importance, there is a tendency to enter into and adopt, by sympathy, his judgment of ourself" (p. 175). Mead (1934), the major theorist of symbolic interactionism, amplified and expanded the view of the self as a product of social interaction: "The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individuals of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (p. 138). Essential to the genesis of the self is the development of the ability to take the role of the other and particularly to perceive the attitude of the other toward the perceiver. Mead's looking glass self is reflective not only of significant others, as Cooley suggested, but of a generalized other, that is, one's whole sociocultural environment. More recently, Kinch (1963) has summarized and systematized symbolic interactionist self theory by noting that it basically involves an interrelation of four components: our self-concept, our perception of others' attitudes and responses to us, the actual attitudes and responses of others to us, and our behavior.

In recent years, self theories have been proposed that do not insist on the primacy of social others as sources of information about the self. Bem (1967, 1972) has asserted that self-perception is a special case of person perception:

Self-descriptive attitude statements can be based on the individual's observations of his own overt behavior and the external stimulus conditions under which it occurs. . . . As such, his statements are functionally similar to those that any outside observer could make about him. (1967, pp. 185-186)

Jones and Nisbett (1971) have qualified Bem's analysis somewhat by proposing that "actors tend to attribute the causes of their behavior to stimuli inherent in the situation, while observers tend to attribute behavior to stable dispositions of the actor" (p. 93). Duval and Wicklund's (1972) objective self-

awareness theory also emphasizes the potential of the individual for active self-appraisal. Objective self-awareness is a state of consciousness in which attention is focused inward on the self, making the individual an object to his or her consciousness. The assumption that self-awareness is dependent on the imagination of another's views is minimized. Although these self-perception theories have stimulated considerable research, the initial justification for each view was mainly on theoretical rather than empirical grounds. Thus, some attention is given to the relevance of the data presented here to self-perception theories, although the main objective is to evaluate the evidence relevant to the looking glass self.

Information concerning the looking glass self derives from several lines of inquiry, not all of them explicitly related to this theory. Even work that has been done within the framework of symbolic interactionism suffers from a severe case of "ahistoricity," so that there is little sense of cumulative development of information. This article attempts to examine thoroughly the studies done under the auspices of symbolic interactionism. An exhaustive review of relevant studies outside of this framework cannot be claimed, however, since these come from many divergent bodies of literature.

The research presented is divided into two sections. First, studies are reported that examine feedback given in uncontrolled, naturally occurring interactions. Next, investigations of the effects of controlled feedback in structured situations are considered, with attention given to work in which feedback is purportedly based either on objective information or on more subjective judgments. Some restrictions on the types of research reviewed here should be noted. The main dependent variable examined is expressed self-perceptions. Studies exploring the impact of self-relevant feedback on other aspects of behavior are typically not covered, since it is debatable whether such changes are necessarily mediated by changes in self-perceptions. Also, although it may be argued that studies of attitude change on any topic involve some implied reappraisal of self-evalu-

Table 1  
*Investigations of the Relationship Between Subjects' Self-Descriptions and Subjects' Perceptions of How Others Describe Them*

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and perceived others' evaluation? <sup>a</sup>
Davidson & Lang (1960)	Correlation	203 fourth-sixth graders	Self-concept	Teacher	Yes ( $r = .82$ )
Fey (1955)	Correlation	58 3rd year medical students	Self-acceptance	Peers	Yes ( $r = .71$ )
Goodman (1973)	Correlation	185 fourth-sixth graders	Self-concept	Peers	Yes ( $r = .37$ )
Goslin (1962)	Comparison	187 seventh and eighth graders	Personality traits	Peers	Accepted subjects: yes; rejected subjects: no
Jourard & Remy (1955)	Correlation	99 undergraduates	Perception of self and body	Mothers, fathers	Yes ( $.56 \leq r \leq .77$ )
Kemper (1966)	Count of significant correlations	256 business men ( $M$ age = 40 years)	Self-description	Wife, boss, colleague, father	Yes (with wife > with boss > with colleague > with father: all $r$ s $\leq .22$ )
Miyamoto & Dornbusch (1956)	Count of supporting results	195 undergraduates	Personality traits	Peers, generalized other	Yes
Orpen & Bush (1974)	Correlation	14 males, 17 years old	Responsibility, sociability	Peers	Yes ( $.49 \leq r \leq .80$ )
Quarantelli & Cooper (1966)	Nonstatistical comparison	1,012 1st to 2nd year dental students	Self-rating on dental student - dentist continuum	Peers, instructors, wives, generalized others	Yes (high self-raters > low in mean perceived response of others)
Reeder, Donohue, & Biblarz (1960)	Nonstatistical comparison	54 enlisted military personnel	Leadership, work ability	Peers	Yes (high self-raters > medium > low in estimated group rating)
Swanson (1969)	Comparison of correlations	11 emotionally disturbed, 35 learning disabled, 35 normal children, 6-12 years old	Self-worth, self-acceptance	Parents	Emotionally disturbed: yes; learning disabled and normals: no
Teichman (1972)	Correlation	50 delinquent, 25 nondelinquent boys	Self-concept	Parents	Nondelinquents: yes ( $.78 \leq r \leq .85$ ); delinquents: no
Walhood & Klopfer (1971)	Correlation	13 graduate students	Love, dominance	Peers	Yes ( $.60 \leq r \leq .93$ )

<sup>a</sup> For all  $r$ s,  $p < .05$ .

ations, the focus here is limited to changes in attitudes about the self, since there is evidence that reactions to feedback about the self differ from those about other attitudes (e.g., Eagly, 1967). A final restriction involves the area of self-presentation. Expressing one's self-perceptions in any public fashion inevitably has some potential instrumental value, and numerous investigations have focused on the functional impact of such self-statements. These studies, however, address issues that are not central to our discussion. The focus of this article is on investigations in which self-statements are perceived as fairly accurate estimates of the individual's actual attitudes and external incentives to a particular type of self-presentation are minimized.

#### Naturalistic Studies

Many investigations have sought support for the idea of the looking glass self in naturally occurring interactions. One group of studies has focused on the proposition that individuals' self-perceptions should be highly congruent with the way they see themselves as being perceived by others. Table 1 shows that these studies vary widely along a number of different dimensions. Most analyses were correlational, some involved statistical comparisons, and some of the earlier studies relied on nonstatistical "eyeballing" of the data (e.g., Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956; Quarantelli & Cooper, 1966; Reeder, Donohue, & Biblarz, 1960). Samples have been drawn from all levels of the educational system and from a variety of other populations. Evaluations by self and others have most often centered on global measures of self-concept, although some investigations have examined more specific aspects of personality and behavior. Overall, these studies show modest to strong correlations between individuals' perceptions of themselves and the way they assume others perceive them. Nonsignificant relationships have occurred in situations in which deviant groups, such as delinquents (Teichman, 1972), learning disabled students (Swanson, 1969) and socio-metrically rejected students (Goslin, 1962), have been studied. The only exception to this

pattern is Swanson's finding that for 11 emotionally disturbed children there was congruence between self-acceptance and perceived parental acceptance and that for 35 normal children this congruence was absent.

In addition to postulating concordance between self-evaluation and the perceived evaluations of *significant* others, Mead (1934) contended that self-concept is reflective of the perceived evaluation of a *generalized* other. Relatively few studies have examined this facet of symbolic interactionism. There is some evidence that individuals' self-perceptions are similar to their perceptions of how they are viewed by others in general (Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956; Quarantelli & Cooper, 1966; Reeder et al., 1960). The evidence on whether self-perceptions are more strongly related to the perceived impressions of specific others or to the perceived impressions of the generalized other, however, is contradictory (Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956; Quarantelli & Cooper, 1966).

The demonstration of a relationship between people's self-perceptions and how they feel others see them is not sufficient in validating the symbolic interactionist position. It is necessary, in addition, to demonstrate congruence between (a) self-perceptions and others' actual perceptions of the person and (b) perceived other-evaluations and actual other-evaluations. A large number of studies have examined the former relationship; they are summarized in Table 2. Although many of these studies are of questionable statistical and conceptual significance (Wylie, 1974), the overall pattern of the conclusions drawn by these investigations suggests much less agreement between self-judgments and actual judgments by others than between self-judgments and perceived judgments. Approximately half the studies reviewed show no significant correlations between self-perceptions and others' actual evaluations. The majority of the remaining investigations have reported either significant but low correlations or ambiguous results. There are no easily distinguishable factors that account for the presence or absence of positive associations. A wide range of subjects and evalu-

(text continued on page 558)

Table 2  
*Investigations of the Relationship Between Subjects' Self-Descriptions and Actual Descriptions of Them by Significant Others*

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and others' evaluations? <sup>a</sup>
Alberti (1971)	Correlation	656 first-third graders	Performance in role of student	Peers, teachers	With peers: no; with teachers: yes
Amatora (1956)	Correlation	400 fourth-eighth graders	22 personality traits	Peers	Yes: for boys, $.15 \leq r \leq .67$ for 19 out of 22 traits; for girls, $.15 \leq r \leq .62$ for 20 out of 22 traits
Bishop (1971)	Correlation	25 graduate students	Counseling effectiveness	Clients, supervisors	With clients: no; with supervisors: yes ( $r = .41$ )
Bledsoe & Wiggins (1973)	Comparison	100 ninth graders, 200 parents	Self-image	Parents	No (parents' evaluations > adolescents' self-evaluations)
Brams (1961)	Correlation	27 graduate students	Effective communication in counseling	Peers, supervisors	No
Breslin (1968)	Correlation	28 handicapped, 10-16 years old	Self-concept	Peers	No
Buckley (1970)	Comparison	22 student teachers	Self-attitude	Students	No (high self-raters equaled low in ratings by students)
Burke (1969)	% agreement	113 undergraduates	Final grade	Peers, teachers	With peers: 70%; with teachers: 60%
Carroll (1952)	Correlation	125 army enlisted men	5 personality traits	Peers	Yes ( $.29 \leq r \leq .56$ )
Cogan, Conklin, & Hollingworth (1915)	Average deviation of self-rankings from median ranking of subject by others	25 junior, 25 senior coeds	9 personality traits	Peers	No: mean of average deviations on 9 traits was 6.1 places
Douce (1970)	Correlation	60 female high school students	Self-esteem	Peers	No
Eisenmann & Robinson (1968)	Correlation	17 institutionalized physically disabled, 30-60 years old	Creativity	Peers	Yes ( $r = .74$ )
Fey (1955)	Correlation	58 3rd year medical students	Self-acceptance	Peers	No

(table continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and others' evaluations? <sup>a</sup>
Friedsam & Martin (1963)	Correlation, chi-square	87 medical outpatients over 50 years old	Rating of health	Physicians	Yes: corrected coefficient of contingency = .33; $\chi^2 = 5.00$ , $p < .05$ , for table of favorable-unfavorable self-ratings X favorable-unfavorable physician ratings of health
Goldings (1954)	Rank order correlation	20 male undergraduates	Happiness	5 "experienced judges" (experimenters who had tested subjects)	Ambiguous: for 2 judges, $r = .45$ and .64 ( $p < .05$ ); for other 3 judges, $p$ not significant (for all 5 judges, average $r = .38$ )
Goodman (1973)	Correlation	185 fourth-sixth graders	Self-concept	Peers	Yes ( $r = .20$ )
Goslin (1962)	Comparison	187 seventh and eighth graders	Personality traits	Peers	Accepted subjects: yes; rejected subjects: no
Gray & Gaier (1974)	Correlation	7 12th-grade females, 14 best friends, 14 parents	Positive and negative traits	Peers, Parents	Yes (with parents, $r = .74$ ; with peers, $r = .76$ )
Green (1948)	Comparison	23 Egyptian male graduate students and 23 Egyptian, British, and Greek female undergraduates	Leadership ability	Peers	No: 20 out of 23 males, 16 out of 23 females overestimated own rank as compared with group's ranking of him or her
Hamilton (1969)	Correlation	70 fraternity members	Self-esteem dominance, dogmatism	Peers	No
Hase & Goldberg (1967)	Correlation	201 1st year coed-dormitory residents	5 personality traits	Peers	Yes ( $.23 \leq r \leq .56$ )
Helper (1958)	Correlation	53 eighth and ninth graders	Favorableness, acceptance	Parents	With fathers: yes ( $.26 \leq r \leq .44$ ); with mothers: no
Horowitz (1962)	Correlation	111 fourth-sixth graders	Self-concept	Peers (same sex)	Fourth-grade girls: yes ( $r = .59$ ); all others: no

Table 2 (continued)

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and others' evaluations? <sup>a</sup>
Israel (1958)	Comparison of level of self-evaluation of subjects evaluated by group as high, middle, low No. of subjects whose comparison of self versus others agreed with the others' comparisons	29 student nurses	Intelligence, leadership, orderliness, appearance	Peers	Yes: for intelligence and leadership only, subjects highly evaluated by group had higher self-evaluations No: few subjects exceeded chance accuracy in their comparisons of self versus others versus the same comparisons made by the others
Jansen, Robb, & Bonk (1973)	Factor analysis	173 graduate students	Counseling competence	Peers	No (self-ratings > peer ratings)
Jorgenson (1967)	Correlation	400 third graders	Personality traits	Peers, teachers	No
Kelman & Parloff (1957)	Rank order correlations	7 male, 8 female neurotic group-therapy patients	Behaviors in group therapy	3 observers (psychologists and social worker)	No (both before and after therapy)
Klimoski & London (1974)	Correlation, factor analysis	133 nurses	Job performance	Peers, supervisors	No
Lomont (1966)	Comparison	64 sorority, 72 fraternity members	Dominance-submission, love-hate	Peers	Yes: no significant differences between means of subjects' self-ratings and means of peer ratings Yes ( $r = .28$ )
Mayo & Manning (1961)	Correlation	196 naval recruits	Effort in aviation course	Peers	
McConnell (1959)	Comparison	137 third and fourth graders	Social acceptance	Peers	No: less than 50% females, about 33% males judged selves accurately (compared with peer ratings)
McIntyre (1952)	Comparison	224 second semester dormitory freshmen	Self-acceptance	Peers	No (high-accepted subjects equaled low in self-acceptance)

(table continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and others' evaluations? <sup>a</sup>
Miyamoto & Dornbusch (1956)	Count of significant results	195 undergraduates	Personality traits	Peers	Yes
Mote (1967)	Correlation	157 fifth and sixth graders, mothers	Self-concept	Mothers	Mother's satisfaction with child learning: yes; with child behavior: no
Orpen & Bush (1974)	Correlation	14 males, 17 years old	Responsibility, sociability	Peers	No
Perkins (1958)	Correlation	48 fourth-sixth graders	Self-evaluation	Teachers	Yes ( $r = .41$ )
Phillips (1963)	Correlation	96 third and 96 sixth graders	Social characteristics, school achievement inventory	Peers, teachers	Third graders: no; sixth graders: yes (with peers, $r = .40$ ; with teachers, $r = .57$ )
Powell (1948)	Rank order correlations	140 coed-dormitory residents	Adjustment	Dorm advisors, peers	No: <i>Mdn ps</i> (from 8 dormitory corridors) $\leq .24$
Reeder, Donohue, & Biblarz (1960)	Nonstatistical comparison	54 enlisted military personnel	Leadership, work ability	Peers	Low self-raters: yes; high and medium self-raters: no
Reese (1961)	Comparison	408 fourth, sixth, eighth graders	Self-evaluation	Peers	Curvilinear relationship: medium self-concept > high > low in amount of acceptance by others
Rokeach (1945)	No. overestimates versus underestimates (self versus average other ratings)	134 female undergraduates	Physical beauty	Peers	No: 72% of subjects overestimated own beauty
B. Schneider (1970)	Correlation, factor analysis	240 male undergraduates	Group leadership behaviors	Peers	Yes ( $.25 \leq r \leq .51$ ); factor structure different for self-ratings and peer ratings

Table 2 (continued)

Study	Analysis	Subjects	Assessment dimension	Significant others	Congruence between self and others' evaluations? <sup>a</sup>
Scott & Johnson (1972)	Correlation	234 undergraduates	Attitudes toward 14 persons, issues, and so on	Friends	Yes ( $.14 \leq r \leq .61$ )
	Correlation	50 undergraduates	9 motives (needs)	Friends	Yes, for 7 of 9 motives ( $.25 \leq r \leq .55$ )
	Correlation	92 institutionalized youthful offenders	Attitudes toward 16 persons, issues, and so on	Work supervisors, counselors	Yes, for 8 of 16 attitudes ( $.17 \leq r \leq .59$ )
Todorosky (1972)	Correlation	177 sorority members	Self-acceptance	Peers	No
Tschechtelin (1945)	Comparison	1,542 fourth-eighth graders	22 personality traits	Teachers, peers	No: boys tended to underestimate self versus peers and teachers; girls tended to overestimate
Walhood & Klopfer (1971)	Correlation	13 graduate students	Love, dominance	Peers	No
Webb (1955)	Correlation	95 naval aviation cadets	Intelligence	Peers	Yes ( $r = .43$ )
Werdelin (1969)	Correlation, factor analysis	416 high school students	Classroom behaviors	Peers, teachers	No
Wetzel (cited in Peterson, 1965)	Correlation	72 undergraduates	Adjustment, introversion-extraversion	Peers, parents	Yes ( $.24 \leq r \leq .41$ )
Winthrop (1959)	Correlation	60 female undergraduates	Adjustment	Closest friend	Yes: for overall adjustment and 4 subscales, $.41 \leq r < .66$

<sup>a</sup> For all  $r$ s,  $p < .05$ .

(text continued from page 552)

ators were used, and comparisons were made on many attributes, most frequently self-esteem or task competence. Also, a number of studies have shown that perceived reactions of others are closer to self-concept than are actual reactions (Miyamoto & Dornbusch, 1956; Orpen & Bush, 1974; Quarantelli & Cooper, 1966; Sherwood, 1965; Walhoo & Klopfer, 1971). The minimal associations between self-perceptions and others' actual evaluations suggest that people do not accurately perceive others' opinions of them, that these opinions minimally influence self-judgments, or, as indicated by a study by Reese (1961), that these two variables may be curvilinearly related, thus explaining why significant linear correlations do not often emerge (Hartup, 1970). Studies assessing degree of influence are infrequent and are discussed below.

The issue of accuracy in perceiving others' opinions has also been examined by the consideration of the relationship between individuals' perceptions of others' views of them and others' actual views. Of the studies assessing this relationship, some show congruence (Ausubel & Schiff, 1955; Ausubel, Schiff, & Gasser, 1952; De Jung & Gardner, 1962), some indicate partial or ambiguous relationships (Goslin, 1962; Israel, 1958; Reeder et al., 1960; Tagiuri, Blake, & Bruner, 1953; Walhoo & Klopfer, 1971), and others demonstrate no association (Ausubel, 1955; Fey, 1955; Kelman & Parloff, 1957; Orpen & Bush, 1974). Most of the studies showing congruence have involved judgments of highly evaluative characteristics such as liking by the other person, whereas those showing minimal associations have typically involved more content-specific judgments. Ability to predict peers' liking increases with age, at least from the lower grades through high school (Ausubel & Schiff, 1955; Ausubel et al., 1952; De Jung & Gardner, 1962), reflecting perhaps a more extensive interaction with those judged, more frequent expression of interpersonal preferences, or greater sensitivity to interpersonal cues. Also, whether one is predicting positive or negative feelings may be important; people

seem to be better able to predict who likes them best as opposed to who likes them least (Tagiuri et al., 1953). That self-perceptions are consistently more strongly correlated with people's perceptions of how they think others view them than with how others actually view them suggests that the tendency to assume greater similarity between one's own and others' attitudes than actually exists (e.g., Newcomb, 1961) extends into the area of attitudes toward oneself. Thus, subjects' self-evaluations may be weakly related to others' opinions of them because they frequently do not know what others' opinions are.

Since the studies reported thus far show no direction of causality or change over time, it is impossible to decide whether the actual or perceived evaluations of people by others are a cause or effect of how they perceive themselves. If one is to infer that others' judgments influence self-perception, assessments must be made at different times to see if self-perceptions change in the direction of others' earlier evaluations. Almost all of the relevant investigations have examined short-term changes in self-evaluation in relation to actual or perceived evaluations by others. Sherwood (1965) had sensitivity training participants rate themselves on a set of bipolar trait scales during the second day of a 2-week program. At the end of the program they rated themselves again, rated how they felt other group members would rate them, and rated other group members on the same set of dimensions. The ratings of a person by others were more similar to his or her self-ratings at the end of the program than to initial self-ratings. Since others' ratings were not obtained at the outset, one cannot infer that they actually influenced self-ratings. Instead, both the subject and other group members may have observed and responded to changes in subjects' presentation of themselves as the sessions continued.

Rosengren (1961), in a study of 10 institutionalized preadolescent boys with emotional disturbances, obtained self-ratings and ratings by peers over a 1-year interval. He found that for the post- as compared with the preratings, self-ratings were more similar

to both subjects' perceptions of others' ratings of them and others' actual ratings of them. Although these subjects did see themselves more similarly to the way they were seen by others, the critical comparison showing that self-ratings in the second evaluation became more similar to others' initial evaluations of them was not made.

The most sophisticated naturalistic investigation to date remains an early study by Manis (1955). Male undergraduates assigned as dormitory roommates rated themselves, their ideal selves, and their roommates at the beginning of a semester and after 6 weeks. Based on sociometric choices at the beginning of the first sessions, a friend and a nonfriend were designated for each subject. Subjects' self-perceptions and their friends' perceptions of them were more similar after their final rating than after their first. The most important finding was that subjects' final self-ratings were more similar to others' initial judgments of them than were their initial self-ratings. Furthermore, others' second ratings of a subject were no more similar to the subject's initial self-perceptions than were their first ratings, suggesting that others' impressions were not substantially influenced by the subject's initial self-evaluation.

Although these data suggest that individuals do change their self-perceptions in the direction of others' opinions about them, methodological limitations make this conclusion equivocal. Most significantly, subjects' self-perceptions changed in the direction of friends' initial judgments of them only when the designated friend had initially described them more favorably than subjects had described themselves. When their designated friend described them less positively than their own self-perceptions, there were no increases in the similarity of their self-descriptions. A friend who views subjects more positively than the subjects view themselves would be likely to reciprocate the subjects' friendship more than someone who views them less favorably than they view themselves. Learning that they have chosen as a friend someone who also likes them may enhance people's feelings of interpersonal per-

ceptiveness and social competence and cause them to raise their self-evaluation.

Even if Manis's results indicate that a friend who describes a peer positively influences the peer's self-perceptions, the nature of the changes generated remains unclear. Subjects may either change the overall favorableness of their self-ratings to more closely match that of their evaluators, or they may change their assessments on specific dimensions so that the pattern of their self-descriptions across dimensions becomes more similar to that of their evaluators. This distinction raises the issue of whether the influence of others' assessments extends beyond the general evaluative level to more specific elements of the dimension being assessed. Perhaps when people are reacting to others' evaluations of them, the principal or even exclusive information that they process is whether they are being perceived in some globally positive, negative, or neutral way.

The only long-term longitudinal study that has been reported involved self-ratings and ratings by peers and teachers of children in the first and second grades who were later reassessed in the fifth and sixth grades (Trickett, 1969). Neither peer nor teacher ratings from the initial assessment were significantly correlated with self-ratings in the second assessment. Children's perceptions of how peers saw them in the initial assessment were uncorrelated with their self-perceptions in the second measurement. Although the author implied some causal influence of others' ratings (particularly those of teachers) on later self-perception, this is difficult to detect in the data. The absence of such an effect is not surprising in light of the fact that by the time subjects were in the later grades they had been exposed to a number of different peers and teachers, whose influence was impossible to gauge.

The numerous naturalistic studies that have been undertaken have not, by and large, contributed substantially to an understanding of the extent to which others' perceptions influence self-judgments. Currently, there is little evidence that in their ongoing social interactions people's views of themselves are shaped by the opinions of others. This is due

primarily to the lack of repeated assessments of self-perceptions and others' perceptions whereby movements of one toward the position of the other could be determined.

Other issues are also important in evaluating the naturalistic data. Many investigations may not have examined situations in which the input of other people was maximal. For instance, most studies have used late adolescents and adults as subjects. If these individuals are in stable life situations, they may be more likely to maintain relatively solidified self-images. The impact of others' opinions could possibly be enhanced and more pronounced if adults were studied in unfamiliar situations in which their norms for self-evaluation and the behavior patterns that they displayed were in a state of flux, as in Manis's (1955) study of incoming college freshmen in dormitories. It also seems likely that younger people are more susceptible to external influence in developing their self-concept than are older individuals.

A final consideration in assessing the work reviewed above concerns the individuals who are sources of feedback and their relationship to the subjects studied. Although peers are the most commonly used and are, in many cases, perhaps the most appropriate sources of evaluations, more attention should be given to the actual degree of interaction between them and the people whose self-perceptions are being assessed. Membership as a peer in a group of students or workers does not necessarily demand that colleagues offer appraisals to one another. For both children and adults, a relatively small number of people may serve as significant sources of evaluative feedback. In most studies it is the researcher who decides who the subjects' significant others are, and in many cases this designation may be off the mark. Investigations that attempt to identify the significant others of a given population (e.g., Denzin, 1966) would be useful preliminary steps in future naturalistic investigations.

#### Studies of Controlled Feedback From Others

Although researchers have employed a wide range of specific procedures for assessing the role of controlled feedback on

judgments of others, most studies have followed one of two paradigms, which differ mainly in the extent to which the evaluator's judgments are based on objective data. In the first type of study the feedback received is purportedly based on tests of personality or competence. Typically, subjects describe themselves on the attributes assessed by the tests, then take the tests, receive feedback about their performance either immediately or within a week or two, and finally re-appraise themselves. This procedure has been employed not only in specific efforts to assess the symbolic interactionist position but also in studies examining the effects of change in self-evaluation on other aspects of behavior, with change in self-evaluation often examined principally as a manipulation check. In the second type of study, feedback is based on the subjective impressions of other individuals who have no specific knowledge of objective assessment results. These studies have varied in the extent to which the other person is presented as having expertise in the topics considered.

The most elementary question typically asked in this research is, Will individuals modify their self-descriptions in the direction of the feedback they receive? The most elementary answer is *usually*. Such changes have been shown for numerous populations and for many different attributes, from competence in public speaking (Videbeck, 1960) and physical skills (Haas & Maehr, 1965) to a variety of personality traits (e.g., Backman, Secord, & Pierce, 1963; Binderman, Fretz, Scott, & Abrams, 1972; Cooper & Duncan, 1971; Eagly, 1967; Evans, 1962; Harvey & Clapp, 1965; Harvey, Kelley, & Shapiro, 1957; Regan, Gosselink, Hubsch, & Ulsh, 1975; Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Snyder & Shenkel, 1976; Steiner, 1968). In almost all cases changes in self-perception have been judged by modifications in verbal self-descriptions made immediately following others' evaluations and in the presence of the evaluator.

Although controlled feedback from others typically produces some changes in people's self-descriptions, several factors influence the extent of such changes. These include the

discrepancy of feedback from subjects' self-perceptions, favorableness of feedback, characteristics of the evaluator, consensual validation of the judgments given, and attributes of those evaluated. After these factors have been examined, some general observations on the significance and limitations of studies employing manipulated feedback are considered.

### *Discrepancy of Feedback From Self-Perceptions*

The amount of discrepancy between others' evaluations and one's own self-perceptions has been examined in several studies. Bergin (1962) found that the credibility of feedback influenced the relationship between discrepancy and self-perception changes. With a high-credibility source, increases in discrepancy resulted in greater changes in self-relevant attitudes, whereas for a low-credibility source the tendency was for greater credibility to produce less change. Although not wholly consistent, other results have suggested that when others' evaluations are purportedly based on objective test data, self-perceptions change more as the discrepancy from initial perceptions increases (Binderman et al., 1972; Eagly, 1967; Gerard, 1961; Johnson, 1966). However, Gerard found that this occurred only when subjects felt that the feedback they had received would be made public, and Eagly found that changes increased from low to moderate but not from moderate to high levels of discrepancy. Johnson found a curvilinear trend, with attitude change first increasing with increased discrepancy and then decreasing. In contrast with the findings based on objective test data, when feedback was based on subjective ratings of a personality dimension made by subjects' classmates, changes in self-evaluations were not enhanced by increased discrepancy between their judgments and subjects' initial self-perceptions (Harvey & Clapp, 1965; Harvey et al., 1957). Although many factors may differentiate these studies from one another, they are generally consistent with Bergin's argument about the role of credibility and suggest that for feedback that

diverges substantially from one's views to have a strong effect on self-evaluations, it must be perceived as being based on clear objective information.

### *Favorableness*

Several studies have examined amount of change in self-perceptions as a function of feedback favorableness. Some of these studies involved the "Barnum effect," that is, the acceptance of bogus personality feedback (Meehl, 1956). Most such investigations indicate that favorable information is more readily accepted than unfavorable information (Sundberg, 1955; Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, & Houston, in press; Mosher, 1965; Weisberg, 1970), with a few showing no differential acceptance (Dmitruk, Collins, & Clinger, 1973; Evans, 1962). These studies' significance is questionable, however, since they involved no preassessments of subjects' self-evaluations and may have reflected the greater comparability between positive information and initial self-perception than between negative information and initial self-perceptions.

A few studies have attempted to control for the discrepancy between feedback and initial impressions. Steiner (1968) examined changes in self-ratings on bipolar traits and found that positive feedback produced greater changes than negative feedback, when feedback was based on upper level undergraduates' interpretations of self-report tests. Another study (Snyder & Shenkel, 1976) attempted to control for the "initial truthfulness" of the information evaluated and found no differences in the acceptance of positive or negative feedback given by the graduate student and based on projective tests.

Turning to studies in which feedback was not based on personality test results, we find that most were not designed to assess differences in reactions to equally discrepant positive and negative evaluations (Haas & Maehr, 1965; Jones, Gergen, & Davis, 1962; Maehr, Mensing, & Nafziger, 1962; Papa-georgis & McCann, 1965; Videbeck, 1960). Two careful investigations that did examine initial self-perceptions produced inconsistent findings similar to those of Steiner and Sny-

der and Shenkel just discussed. Eagly (1967) found no differential acceptance of feedback from a trained rater with regard to subjects' assertiveness or submissiveness. Harvey and Clapp (1965), however, found that students changed their self-ratings on a set of bipolar adjectives more when they had received positive feedback than when they had received negative feedback from classmates. The evaluators in Eagly's study may have had more legitimized expertise than those in Harvey and Clapp's study, and the same may have been true in the Barnum effect study of Snyder and Shenkel (1976) versus that of Steiner (1968). These results may suggest that subjects are reluctant to accept unflattering information about themselves unless they feel that the source of that information has a particularly strong basis for judgment. The inconsistency of these findings, however, suggests that the differential acceptance of positive versus negative information may depend on a variety of parameters. Eagly and her colleagues have shown, for example, that positive information is readily accepted if the recipients of the information do not expect to be evaluated again (Eagly & Acksén, 1971) and if they have no choice over the information they have received (Eagly & Whitehead, 1972). Other factors such as the strength of the subject's initial self-perceptions and the attributes on which feedback was given may also be relevant here.

#### *Evaluator Characteristics*

The most systematic investigation of factors affecting the influence of an information source involved several studies by Webster and Sobieszek (1974), who examined subjects' responses to evaluations of their ability on a perceptual task. Each subject worked with a partner, and both subjects' initial performance was judged by an evaluator whose apparent competence on the task was varied. The impact of the evaluator's assessment on subjects' self-perceptions was not measured directly, but was inferred from the extent to which subjects acquiesced to their partners' judgments on a subsequent set of items. The evaluator's judgments had more

effect on rate of acquiescence when the evaluator was presented as very competent as opposed to moderately competent and had no effect when he was presented as incompetent. Manipulation of more general aspects of the evaluator's competence by presenting him to high school subjects as either a college junior or an eighth grader produced no differential changes in acquiescence level.

Other investigators have also examined the effects of manipulating general competence. Whether a test evaluator was a PhD or a counseling practicum student influenced the degree of acceptance of bogus personality feedback if that information was highly discrepant from the subject's initial self-perception but not if it was less discrepant (Binderman et al., 1972). Whether a person received ratings on adjective dimensions from an acquaintance or from a stranger in his or her class had no effect on the degree of change in subsequent self-ratings (Harvey et al., 1957). Although it is difficult to develop generalizations from such scattered findings, these data suggest that others' expertise or competence has an impact on the acceptance of their evaluations only when that competence is specifically relevant to the judgment being made.

#### *Consensual Validation*

Another aspect of the credibility of information received involves the extent to which it is validated by others. Presumably, as a larger number of individuals reflect a particular perception to the subject, the likelihood that the subject will incorporate that perception is increased. Following this assumption, Backman et al. (1963) found that bogus personality feedback had less effect on college students' self-ratings as a greater number of significant others were viewed as agreeing with the subject's initial self-perception. The specific relevance of the number of others who hold an opinion is unclear, however, since neither the salience of the dimensions to the subjects themselves nor the strength of their own self-perceptions was assessed. In another study, junior high school boys were given feedback about their physical skills by either one or two experts (Haas &

Maehr, 1965). Initial postfeedback ratings did not differ as a function of the number of raters, but self-ratings made 6 weeks after the experts' judgments showed greater changes on the attributes evaluated for the group judged by two experts. Since there was no condition in which consistent feedback was repeated by a single judge, it is not certain that it was a second person as opposed to a repetition of the communication that was the critical factor in enhancing feedback. This is an important issue, since there is some evidence that the repetition of an evaluation by the same evaluators enhances changes in self-evaluations (Kinch, 1968). Thus, there is no clear evidence that increasing the number of people who make an evaluation enhances the likelihood that it will be accepted.

The consistency of feedback across different evaluators has also been examined. Although there has been some suggestion that people respond more strongly to feedback that is consistent than to feedback that varies from evaluator to evaluator (Sherwood, 1967), other findings offer little support for this view (Kinch, 1968; Sobieszek & Webster, 1973). Because of the wide variation in the methodology of these studies, it is impossible to determine which differences among them account for the inconsistency in findings. However, given the ambiguous nature of these results, plus the fact that multiple and inconsistent evaluations may be frequent in real-life interactions, more careful examination of how evaluative information is combined and integrated seems warranted.

### *Self-Evaluator Characteristics*

There is some evidence that individuals differ in their receptivity to information about themselves. The main characteristic that has been examined in this regard is level of self-esteem, perhaps because most of the work on response to others' feedback has focused on highly evaluative information. There is some consistency in the finding that individuals who have generally low self-esteem are more influenced by negative feedback from others and less by positive feed-

back than are individuals with high self-esteem. This has been shown even when subjects' initial self-perceptions about the specific attributes evaluated were comparable, and it has been demonstrated for judgments of assertiveness-submissiveness (Eagly, 1967), social sensitivity (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970), and several other personality traits (Harvey & Clapp, 1965). The only instance in which such a differential acceptance was not demonstrated was for self-awareness (Shrauger & Lund, 1975).

Studies of other individual differences in recipients have been more episodic. Gerard (1961) found that a self-report measure of susceptibility to social influence predicted degree of change in self-perception, but only when the evaluation from others was supposed to be made public. People who had a less well-developed sense of self or a lower level of ego identity (Erikson, 1956) changed their self-evaluations more following success or failure feedback on an intellectual task than did those at higher levels of ego identity (Marcia, 1967). Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961) reported that levels of concreteness-abstractness in cognitive processes predicted the extent of changes in self-descriptions following personality test feedback. These data indicate that in the future, precise appraisals of the impact of others' judgments on self-perceptions will require acknowledging the association between subject characteristics and the nature of the judgments given.

### *Significance of Manipulated Feedback*

Having considered some factors that can affect the impact of others' ratings, we turn to an examination of the broader significance of feedback manipulation studies, particularly the degree of influence that feedback in such studies has been shown to have. Issues to be considered here are how long feedback effects last, their situational specificity, and the influence of feedback about a specific attribute for self-appraisal on other attributes.

One important but relatively neglected issue is the longevity of the impact of others' evaluations. Only two studies have examined

the effect of others' appraisals over time. In one investigation, subjects were given positive or negative feedback about physical skills by an expert, and their self-perceptions were reassessed immediately and after 1 day, 6 days, and 6 weeks (Haas & Maehr, 1965). Both positive and negative evaluations affected self-perceptions, and these effects were maintained over the 6-week period, although they appeared to diminish over time. Changes in dimensions not specifically evaluated were evident immediately after the evaluation, but were insignificant thereafter. Hicks (1962) gave subjects feedback that classmates judged them more favorably than their own self-perceptions on a group of personality traits. Two days after the initial evaluation, subjects were more likely to have raised their self-judgments on the elevated traits than on the control traits, although this difference did not hold after a week. Thus, the minimal evidence available on this issue suggests that the impact of others' judgments on self-perceptions holds over short periods of time but tends to diminish as time passes.

Also relevant in assessing the importance of feedback from others is the extent to which the effect of feedback generalizes from focal attributes to other characteristics. The three studies that have examined this effect used expert sources and systematically varied the relatedness of secondary attributes to the focal dimension (Haas & Maehr, 1965; Maehr et al., 1962; Videbeck, 1960). They found, not surprisingly, that judgments changed more on the dimension that was evaluated than on the one that was not (Maehr et al., 1962) and that those changes that did occur in other dimensions dissipated over time (Haas & Maehr, 1965). Therefore, relatively little information exists regarding the manner and extent to which content-focused evaluations are generalized to other characteristics of oneself.

Situational factors may also influence the degree of acceptance of others' self-evaluations, since the functional utility of accepting or rejecting others' impressions may vary from situation to situation. When college students feel that evaluations of their performance on a test are going to be made

public, for example, they change their self-perceptions regarding that attitude more than do subjects who feel their responses will be known only to themselves (Gerard, 1961). Eagly and Acksen (1971) found that individuals changed their self-perceptions more in the direction of negative information and less in the direction of positive information when they felt that they would be retested on the attribute on which their performance was assessed, as compared with when they felt no retesting would occur. Positive attributes may be accepted and negative attributes may be fended off if there is no immediate prospect that the accuracy of these self-enhancing beliefs will be challenged. Other potential costs and gains of accepting or rejecting others' evaluations might also be envisioned. For instance, acknowledgment of certain positive attributes might be accompanied by the anticipation of favorable future outcomes or of increased demands from others. Similarly, the endorsement of negative attributes might lead to the anticipation of social rejection or loss of other favorable outcomes. In examining such problems it is important to distinguish between self-presentation and self-perception, since certain external factors might influence the manner in which people present themselves without affecting their actual self-perceptions.

The factors that most limit the interpretation of these manipulated feedback studies are the demand characteristics of the situation in which changes in self-perception are assessed. Invariably the appraisal of changes in self-evaluation was made in the presence of the evaluator or experimenter. When the evaluator is present, subjects who do not change their self-perceptions directly discredit the evaluator's appraisal, which may be difficult, particularly if the evaluator is presented as an expert. Even when evaluators are absent, experimenters may be perceived as being likely to communicate with them. Very rarely are there clearly reported efforts to disguise the postmanipulation self-appraisal process (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970).

One major way that the significance of manipulated feedback studies might be en-

hanced would involve making the assessment of change less reactive and more subtle. For example, the appraisal might be woven into some other aspect of the experiment supposedly unrelated to the portion in which feedback was given, as has been done in counterattitudinal advocacy studies (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965; Hendrick & Seyfried, 1974). Another possibility is to have the final self-evaluation made after an initial "debriefing," with the evaluation presented in the context of an appraisal of the effects of psychological experiments on individuals' attitudes and feelings.

A final issue in manipulated feedback studies is whether changes in self-evaluation are specific only to the self or can reflect modifications in judgments of others as well. There is evidence (Bramel, 1962; Edlow & Kiesler, 1966; Steiner, 1968) that when people are confronted with information discrepant from their self-evaluations, they not only change their self-evaluations but also modify their evaluations of others on the attribute judged. This may reflect a process of defensive projection or simply a change in the criteria they use for evaluating the attribute in question. Unfortunately most studies have looked only at shifts in the absolute level of self-judgments and not at changes in judgments of self relative to others. Such relative appraisals may be at least as significant as absolute judgments. Therefore, the effect of feedback on judgments of others as well as of oneself should be evaluated.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The numerous studies of naturalistic and manipulated feedback that we have reviewed have had much to say about the relationship between others' judgments and self-appraisals; it is unfortunate that the flaws and limitations of these investigations have rendered the significance and validity of their findings questionable. Although there is evidence that individuals' self-perceptions and their views of others' perceptions of them are quite congruent, there is less evidence that self-perceptions are related to or influenced by others' actual perceptions. None of

the studies of naturally occurring interactions were designed so that they would demonstrate unequivocally that receiving content-focused feedback from others leads to corresponding changes in one's own self-perceptions. In contrast, there is ample evidence of changes in self-perceptions following controlled feedback in laboratory settings. However, the importance of these findings is unclear because of the short-term nature of most assessments and the potential effects of demand characteristics. In evaluating the contributions and limitations of the available research, we give some attention to how information from others about the self is transmitted, received, interpreted, and acted upon. These are aspects of social self-perception that have for the most part been neglected by researchers in this area.

### *Availability of Evaluative Information*

That there is minimal agreement between individuals' judgments of others' perceptions of them and their actual perceptions suggests that the communication of feedback to others may often be infrequent or ambiguous. Although norms regarding the evaluation of other people's behavior probably vary widely across different subcultures and situations, strong sanctions are often maintained against making direct appraisals, particularly when they are negative. In some of the only research on the communication of evaluations, Blumberg (1972) found that people report inhibiting the direct communication of all types of evaluations to others, particularly if it is negative or if the recipient is not known well. Barriers to direct expression can be found in intimate relationships as well as in more impersonal social interactions. This "not-even-your-best-friend-will-tell-you" phenomenon has been noted by Goffman (1955), who pointed out that unfavorable evaluations of close associates are typically given only when directly solicited and that in such a situation, chances are that the asker has already made some negative self-appraisal. Perhaps this accounts in part for the popularity of sensitivity training, in which people have the privilege of finding out what others

really think of them, and of assertiveness training, in which they can learn to communicate their true feelings about others.

To understand the real impact of others' opinions, one must determine how frequently such opinions are communicated directly in people's everyday social interactions. Who gives evaluations? On what dimensions? Under what circumstances? How often and how explicitly? The answers to such questions would facilitate an assessment of the relative influence of others' judgments on self-perceptions, as opposed to the opposite influence of self-perceptions on the perception of others' judgments. When information from others is not explicit, its interpretation may depend substantially on one's own self-perception on the attribute being assessed. In clinical contexts, for example, if people have concerns about what others think of them, it is frequently assumed that their inferences about others' feelings reflect a projection of their own self-evaluations.

It is quite likely that direct feedback occurs extensively in the socialization of young children by parents and other adults. During the process of language development, for instance, it seems certain that children come to model the construct system of those around them and to apply these constructs to themselves. Symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) and self-perception theorists (Bem, 1967, 1972; Duval & Wicklund, 1972) alike have discussed the importance of preschool interactions in the development of a concept of self. It is surprising, however, that an empirical literature substantiating these arguments is nonexistent. Naturalistic studies of self-concept and perceived or actual assessments by others pick up developing selves as they enter the captive environment of elementary school. The subjects in these studies are typically in at least third or fourth grade (see Tables 1 and 2); only two studies have used first graders (Alberti, 1971; Trickett, 1969). Studies of controlled feedback almost exclusively use undergraduates. Since the preschool years are so vital to theories of the development of self-concept, it seems imperative that this period be attended to empirically. However,

this may be easier to recommend than to implement. Trickett, for example, has noted the difficulties encountered in assessing the self-concept of first graders, which means that new and imaginative methods are necessary in this regard. Furthermore, recent work raises questions about whether young children possess the abstract concepts necessary to process information from others and use it in forming perceptions of themselves (Herzberger, Note 1). A naturalistic study of parent-child evaluative interactions might be a desirable first step in determining just what kind of feedback is given in the earliest stages of life.

Finally, in considering the availability of information from others it is important to recognize that people who are evaluated may help to determine how much evaluative information they receive. People's frequency of social interaction, how directly they ask for information, and how much they behave in ways that might elicit others' comments may all affect the amount of evaluative feedback received.

#### *Interpretation of Information From Others*

Although it is likely that people differ in their interpretations of others' feedback, particularly if that feedback is not explicit, these differences have not been explored extensively. People may disagree about what cues from others constitute an evaluation. And even when cues have been identified, people may differ in the inferences or conclusions they draw from these cues about others' judgments of them. For instance, it might be important to examine the extent to which information is considered principally for its specific content or for its evaluative meaning. To date the evidence suggests that content-specific feedback changes self-descriptions principally for those attributes on which feedback is given and only minimally on other attributes (Haas & Maehr, 1965; Videbeck, 1960). However, the nature of the situation in which these data were obtained may have maximized the impersonal, objective quality of evaluations and minimized the generalization that can occur in other contexts.

Characteristics of the evaluator may also be significant in determining the extent to which information is accepted. To date examinations of evaluator competence (Webster & Sobieszek, 1974) imply that only competence relevant to the attribute being judged has real impact on the acceptance of information. Expertise of the evaluator may be more complex, however, when the attributes judged do not involve specific, clearly defined skills. In these more subjective judgments, evaluators' competence may be judged more on global indices of status or on the extent to which they are perceived to hold norms similar to one's own on the dimensions in question.

A more situational aspect of the evaluator's competence involves whether or not the evaluator has a sufficient sample of one's behavior to make an adequate appraisal. Even if an appraiser is viewed as a good judge, his or her evaluation may be discounted if it is based on a limited or unrepresentative sample of behavior. Wyer, Henninger, and Wolfson (1975) showed, for example, that observers were much more likely to base their judgments on the limited behavior sample that they observed than were actors, whose self-appraisals were based less on that specific behavior sample and more on previous experiences.

Finally, the interpretation of the evaluation may depend on a perception of how candid other people are being. If one believes that there is some ulterior motive in making the evaluation (e.g., ingratiation or one-upmanship), it may not have as much effect on one's self-perception as a communication interpreted as more genuine.

### *Comparison With Self-Evaluations*

An important aspect of others' judgments is how closely they agree with one's initial self-appraisal. Although judgments that match an initial self-perception may do little more than fortify this perception, judgments that are at variance frequently set up some dissonance or tension that requires cognitive reappraisal. There is an implicit disagreement between symbolic interactionist and self-at-

tribution theories as to how such discrepancies are resolved. The symbolic interactionist view implies that such discrepancies are typically dealt with by changing one's self-perceptions, whereas self-attribution theories suggest that people have a reasonably clear and stable picture of themselves and may not readily conform to the discrepant appraisal of another individual.

The extent to which self-perception is maintained in the face of contradicting information from others presumably depends on the certainty of an individual's initial self-perceptions. Several factors may influence people's assuredness about their self-perceptions, all of which are related to opportunities for examining their own behavior. One factor is the salience of the dimension on which a judgment is made. Individuals are expected to have more clearly developed opinions about themselves on dimensions that are more important to them. A second aspect regarding the opportunity for observation may be the degree to which the person can compare his or her behavior with that of other people (cf. Festinger, 1954). Impressions may be more firmly established if people have the chance to compare themselves with other individuals. However, the opportunity for such comparisons may vary depending on the dimension being judged. A final determinant of assuredness may be the clarity of the criteria against which attributes are judged. A person is more likely to have a firmly established self-appraisal on an attribute that has a very clear public definition. One reason for children's potential susceptibility to self-concept molding may be their lack of clear criteria for defining particular characteristics. This may also account for the clinical observation that negative global self-perceptions (e.g., "I am rotten" or "I am a total failure") are resistant to change without exploration of what those attributes actually entail.

One complication in assessing the impact of others' feedback is that some changes in self-perception might be attributed to input from others when in fact they really reflect changes in individuals' independent appraisals of themselves. In the naturalistic studies

cited previously, changes toward others' perceptions could be accounted for by the individuals having changed or reappraised their own behavior. Certainly there is little in this literature that would negate the potential significance of the claim of self-perception theories that most self-knowledge comes from direct observation of one's own actions.

### *Maintenance of Changes*

As previously mentioned, there is little evidence of the long-term effects of others' judgments on self-appraisals, and more adequate investigations of these effects are clearly required. Although these investigations would ideally involve naturally occurring interactions, manipulated feedback designs could also be employed. The use of negative feedback in such studies would, of course, be unacceptable ethically, but the effects of positive feedback could feasibly be investigated.

Long-term investigations are particularly important, since at least three processes may mitigate the impact of others' evaluations over time. First, discrepant feedback tends to be distorted so that it becomes more congruent with one's own initial self-perceptions (Harvey et al., 1957; Steiner, 1968; Suinn, Osborne, & Page, 1962). This tendency toward distortion has been demonstrated in experimental situations, although it is unclear how extensively such distortions occur in real-life settings.

A second mitigating factor may be that evaluations from another person may sometimes induce people to change their behavior in an opposite direction. If, for instance, an individual were evaluated as being self-centered but did not like that attribute, he or she might expend a special effort to be more altruistic and accordingly strengthen this perception of altruism. It has been shown that when subjects are told that they are making shorter or slower responses than those of other individuals, they lengthen and speed up their subsequent responses (Burnstein & Zajonc, 1965; Kleinke, 1975). Thus, the long-range impact of others' judgments may sometimes be to produce either no change

in self-ratings or even changes in the opposite direction.

A third long-term effect of others' feedback may be that people change their social interactions so that they minimize their exposure to evaluators or to situations in which such feedback is likely to occur. Conceivably these mitigating long-term effects could be offset by an opposing tendency for people to change their behavior and also their self-perceptions to conform to others' role expectations. Unfortunately there are yet no investigations that have sorted out these potential outcomes.

### *Some Neglected Aspects of Others' Influence*

It should be noted that empirical investigations of Mead and Cooley's looking-glass-self hypothesis have explored almost exclusively the impact of direct feedback from others. There may, however, be several less direct but equally important effects of others' judgments on self-perception. Simply being in the presence of others may influence the manner in which people behave (Goffman, 1959) and presumably come to evaluate their own behavior. At a conscious level one might deliberately enhance socially desirable and minimize socially undesirable behaviors when in the presence of others, and such changes could influence how one saw oneself. Less deliberately controlled aspects of behavior may also be affected by others' presence, as suggested in studies of audience effects on performance (e.g., Zajonc, 1965) and on self-evaluations of competence (Shrauger, 1972). Also, as Mead's (1934) notion of the generalized other implies, the physical presence of others is not imperative, so long as the perceiver can manage a mental impression of them.

Other individuals may also influence one's self-judgments by the manner in which they interact with people. Whether or not one receives help from a co-worker, for example, has been shown to affect one's subsequent self-esteem (Fisher & Nadler, 1974, 1976). In certain role relationships, such as that between a boss and subordinate, many interpersonal behaviors become quite clearly pre-

scribed. The nature of these interactions may convey to the individuals involved a certain degree of competence, or self-worth, without any explicit communication of these qualities ever occurring. Although such processes have been described often in role theory (Goffman, 1955, 1959; Scheff, 1966), they have much less frequently been explored empirically, particularly with reference to their effects on people's self-perceptions.

A third indirect way that social interaction may influence self-perceptions is by affording the opportunity for people to compare their behavior with that of other people. Social comparison obviously requires the presence of other people at some point. It does not, however, prevent people from being active, reflective observers of their own behavior. The observance of others' behavior provides relative standards against which one's own actions and attributes may be judged. Although the significance of such comparison processes has long been recognized, few studies have explored how attributes of those against whom one compares oneself influence self-evaluation (Fontaine, 1974; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Strong & Gray, 1972). Morse and Gergen's investigation found that job applicants' judgments of themselves were substantially influenced by the apparent competence and appearance of other potential applicants. Perhaps even in situations that do not pull so explicitly for social comparisons, the observation of others' actions affects one's self-perceptions.

Finally, other people may indirectly affect one's self-perceptions when they are observed making evaluations of other individuals. Even if people do not receive feedback directly, observing someone make a judgment of another individual may provide indirect information about how they are viewed by the evaluator. How much this actually occurs depends of course on how explicit the criteria for evaluating the other person's behavior are and on the degree to which one sees similarity or dissimilarity between one's own behavior and that of the person being evaluated.

In sum, it may be that the aspect of the looking-glass-self hypothesis that has been

most frequently examined, the effect of direct feedback from other people, reflects only one of the ways that interaction with others has an impact on self-judgments. Furthermore, this means of influence may well be of no greater importance than the others. The relative ease with which direct evaluation can be explored ought not to preclude the examination of other viable aspects of social interaction that may also lead to the modification of self-evaluations.

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Received January 24, 1978 ■