

UNDERSTANDING THE SELF

WHAT IS THE 'SELF'?

What makes you *you*? Take five minutes and list whatever comes to mind.

What did you come up with? Was it a set of values you hold, or a list of behaviours or emotions? Did you mention social groups you belong to or activities you enjoy? Was it influenced by what others think of you or how positive you feel about yourself? Or maybe who you aspire to be? Is everything on the list representative of your current self, or does it also represent past or future versions of you? In all likelihood, your list reflects a mixture of all of the above, and a range of other things. If you undertook the above exercise it may also have left you feeling a little unsatisfied – perhaps you listed a number of things which described you, but also failed to capture the essence of *you*. If so, you are in good company. Psychologists have long argued over what makes up the self (or even whether such a thing exists at all), and the popularity of different definitions has varied over time. For instance, Mauss (1938; see Mauss, 1985) highlights that at some periods of history (for instance, in pre-classical times) the 'self' seemed to be understood solely by reference to narratives about the world. From such a perspective, people are seen as having

a role to play in the ‘story’ but little independent meaning beyond that. Ancient Egyptian views of the self separated out the physical and a more fundamental ‘shadow essence’ (which we could see as being similar to a soul). They also argued that the shadow could persist only as long as the body was preserved through mummification. Later, Roman philosophers suggested the self was seen to be governed by a personality ‘type’ which fixed how one would think and behave – and assumed one’s behaviour was directed towards fulfilling one’s inevitable destiny. Religion has also influenced the view of the self – for example Christianity’s view of a moral self, or Buddhism’s rejection of the idea of a permanent self existing at all. It’s also a popular literary subject – Oscar Wilde’s character Dorian Gray temporarily avoided staining his self with his misdeeds by transferring the sin to a portrait, and science fiction has long explored what makes a self a self (with Arthur C. Clarke’s murderous artificial intelligence, HAL 9000, suggesting that it is not just people that do bad things to one another!).

More contemporary psychological attempts to understand the self tend to veer away from the more esoteric side of these debates, but also represent a diverse set of opinions as to what makes you into you. This chapter will look at key social psychology accounts of the self – examining perspectives which primarily revolve around ideas of ‘*self as an individual being*’ and ‘*self as part of social structures or groups*’. We will also explore how our self-esteem (the extent to which we feel favourable towards ourselves) influences, and is influenced by, our sense of self. Finally, we’ll question that a self as a conscious, truly self-aware agency has meaning by reviewing evidence suggesting that much of our behaviour is unconscious and uncontrollable.

THEORIES OF SELF: INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL ACCOUNTS

Conceptualisations of self have often revolved around whether the self is an individual concept (‘individual self’) or one tied up with social relationships within groups (‘collective self’). Psychologists also explore whether we have ‘one self’ or ‘many selves’ and also whether these constructs always guide our behaviour, or only influence us on occasion.

PSYCHODYNAMIC VIEWS OF THE SELF

A classic way of understanding the self as an individual-level concept is via *psychodynamic theory*. Psychodynamics was developed principally by Sigmund Freud, working with others, in Vienna between the late 1880s and his death in 1939. The psychodynamic approach argues that the self is split into three aspects – the *id*, the *ego* and the *super-ego* (Freud, 1920). The *id* is part of the self which contains our basic desires and drives, such as nourishment and sexual and aggressive tendencies. The *id* has no rational aspects and demands immediate responses to its (often multiple) demands. The *id* interacts with the other two aspects of the self – the *super-ego* and the *ego*. The *super-ego* is almost the polar opposite of the *id* – acting as a moral compass, and as a critic of the *id*'s desires. Finally, the *ego* acts as a negotiator between the *id*, the *super-ego* and reality. It tries to meet the needs of the *id*, while considering the drives of the *super-ego* and minimising long-term harm to the self. Unresolved conflicts between these structures are thought to cause mental illness, such as depression and anxiety. It is argued that the *super-ego* and *ego* are the only the parts of the self that are open to conscious inspection, and even they have a large proportion which resides in the unconscious or 'pre-conscious' sections of our psyche. In clinical contexts, classic psychoanalytical techniques such as *free word association* and *ink blot tests* aim to give therapists a clue as to which unresolved conflicts reside in the unconscious and help to coax them into the conscious realm where they can be resolved. Psychodynamics is generally in decline as a popular model of understanding the self, as is psychoanalysis as a treatment technique. However, the work of theoreticians such as Freud has made a lasting contribution to social psychology – in particular highlighting the important role of the unconscious in our behaviour. It also lay the groundwork for *trait-based models of personality*.

TRAIT-BASED MODELS

Other individual approaches to understanding the self can include looking at traits which define people – and can guide our interactions with others. One way of doing this is by arguing that we have various

dimensions of personality, each varying between individuals. For instance, the *P-E-N model* (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1974; 1977) suggests personality varies on three dimensions: *psychoticism/socialisation, extroversion/introversion* and *neuroticism/stability*. Similarly, the *OCEAN model* identifies *openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness and extraversion* (see McCrae & Costa, 1987). These trait-type models can also be more specifically linked to types of social behaviour or attitudes. For instance, Theodor Adorno's work on *authoritarian personalities* (Adorno et al., 1950) and, more recently, Bob Altemeyer's ideas about *right-wing authoritarianism* (Altemeyer, 1981) argue that some people are more inclined to endorse discriminatory beliefs than others. Such individuals also follow strong leaders more readily and are more conservative. Other lines of research looking at traits as part of the social self consider the extent to which people tend to be *pro-self* versus *pro-others* in their outlook and behaviours (see Van Lange et al., 1997); and how we view the causes of our own and others' behaviours (attribution theory, which is explored in the *social relationships* theme). Levels of empirical support for these approaches vary – some commentators, for example, highlight the fact that so-called 'traits' often have low test-retest reliability (for instance, my score on a personality measure may fluctuate over relatively short spaces of time, or between situations). However, the idea that we have particular traits which make up our self continues to be a dominant discourse in the field.

THE SELF IN RELATION TO OTHERS

Most accounts of the self recognise that the way we perceive ourselves is often linked to how others view us, and both these constructs can guide our cognition and behaviour. Perhaps the strongest form of this argument is made by the *symbolic interactionism* school (e.g. Blumer, 1986; Mead, 1934). This approach argues that our reality, including our sense of self, is based on a shared understanding of what objects (including people) mean. So, one person's behaviour could be categorised as 'terrorist' by one set of people, and 'heroic' by another. Applied to self, the ways we think and behave can also vary in meaning. For example, doing something risky with little thought could be regarded as either 'bold' or 'foolhardy'. Thus, our

understanding of ourselves is based very much on social interactions with others and the extent to which they shape our interpretation. In particular, symbolic interactions approaches argue, we draw on the 'reflective appraisals' of others' opinions to generate our sense of self. This process is also referred to as the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902). Evidence supporting this approach is widespread. For instance, research conducted in India suggests that watching Western male stereotypical figures in films influences male movie-goers' self-perception and their interactions with women (Derné, 1999). The way others act towards us has also been shown to have long-lasting effects. In a famous experiment on *self-fulfilling prophecies*, experimental psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson showed that telling teachers that a sample of their young students (randomly selected) had 'unusual potential' led to these children being treated differently, and subsequently developing a higher IQ than their peers (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966). Although the idea of such a *looking glass self* may make intuitive sense, and has a wide range of empirical support, it does have some caveats and limitations. Most notably, it appears that the way we think people perceive us is more important than how we are actually perceived (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Also, as we will discover when we discuss self-esteem, whom we choose to take seriously when we think about how others see us, and how we respond to negative evaluations, is complicated – we do not simply allow all negative (or positive) evaluations to shape our sense of self.

SELF-DISCREPANCY THEORY

Another way of understanding how our concept of self influences us is Higgins' (1989) *self-discrepancy theory*. This argues that we hold three variations of our self-representation – our *actual self* (how we see ourselves at the moment), our *ideal self* (how we would like to be) and our *ought self* (the self we think we should be, often driven by external evaluations such as social norms). Higgins argues that when we feel our actual self is out of kilter with our ideal or ought selves we act to reduce the gap. If I feel, for instance, that I am not being sufficiently kind (or assertive, etc.) relative to how I would like to be, or to how others think I should be, I can act more in that way.

The idea of different forms of individual self is also picked up in *elaborated self-awareness theory* (Carver & Scheier, 1981), which argues that we also have a *private* and *public* self which we can be aware of. The private self consists of what we think ourselves (i.e. how we are thinking or feeling privately). The public self reflects how aware we are of how others may see us (for instance, through what we publicly say or do). These levels of awareness change what standards we use to guide our behaviour. You could think of this as influencing which of our ‘actual’, ‘ideal’, and ‘ought’ selves has the most influence on us at any given time.

Of course, most of us do not wander around constantly dwelling on our sense of self while we think and behave, and social psychology recognises this. Indeed, some theorists argue that when we are in groups, we may engage in a process known as *deindividuation* which leads us to act with less or no reference to our self. This can lead us to behave more anti-socially. Both being in a group and feeling anonymous can encourage deindividuation. For instance, psychologist Edward Diener and colleagues (Diener et al., 1976) showed that children on a trick-or-treating tour (where children in fancy dress call at people’s houses at Halloween asking for sweets) more often took advantage of an opportunity to steal money or candy when they thought they were anonymous (i.e. wearing a mask). This effect was particularly pronounced if they did not know the adults in the situation. Similarly, ideas around *automaticity* (which we explore in more depth later in this chapter) suggest that we often behave in social situations according to *situational schema* – set ‘scripts’ which tell us how to behave (for example, when going to a restaurant, one usually waits for a table, agrees with the one offered, orders some food, eats and pays the bill, usually without much thought, or reference to the self). We may have social schema about a variety of behaviours (how we respond to criticism, what we do when we first arrive at work, etc.). So, for much of the time, our self may be largely irrelevant! Of course, another way of looking at this is that our self is actually more a collection of these relatively automatic ways of behaving than it is anything else.

Although they have different foci, the above accounts all have one thing in common – they assume that the self is something which resides largely within the individual. This *bottom-up approach* can

be contrasted with other accounts of the self, so-called *top-down approaches*, which suggest that our self is more closely tied to our relationships with others. It is to these group-level accounts that we now turn.

THEORIES OF SELF: GROUP-LEVEL ACCOUNTS

What groups are you a member of? Are any of these important to you? How do they make you feel when you think of them? On reflection, do these group memberships form part of your self? The accounts of self we have looked at so far have assumed that people generally consider the self as being mostly contained within (and defined by) individual-level characteristics (i.e. traits) and evaluations (how others perceive us as individuals). However, as the exercise above may have revealed, much of our idea of self is tied up with the groups we are a part of – our *social identities*. Psychologist Susan Fiske argues that we choose to be a part of a group to fulfil *core social motives* comprising *belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancement* and *trust* (Fiske, 2010). But how do these collective identities operate, and what effects do they have on our sense of self? One way of understanding this is via *social identity theory*.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory (SIT) was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and '80s to explain intergroup relations (see Tajfel and Turner, 1979). SIT rests on three assumptions. First, it assumes that we want to feel good about ourselves. Second, it assumes that aspects of our self are tied up with the groups we are members of. Finally, it argues that we can feel good about ourselves on the basis of positive comparisons between our own groups (ingroups) and others (outgroups). When groups are low in status, they may not have opportunities to engage in such *positive differentiation* in obvious ways, and this motivates thought and behaviour. Briefly, SIT argues that when we are in low-status groups, we make a judgement as to whether we can use a *personal mobility* strategy and simply leave the group (i.e. if boundaries between our own group and others can be crossed, are *permeable*). If boundaries are seen as *impermeable* (i.e. we cannot move from

one group to another) group members look to change the status of the group (to generate positive differentiation). If group members can perceive an alternative to the status quo, they may engage in *social competition* – actively trying to change relative status through social action, civil disobedience, peaceful protests, violence etc. If group members cannot imagine a future in which they are equal (or superior) to other groups then they may engage in *social creativity* strategies which allow positive differentiation despite apparent status differences. Such strategies include changing the value of dimensions used for comparison (e.g. ‘money isn’t everything’), finding new dimensions (‘we are not a rich group, but we are honest!’) or finding a new comparison out-group (‘we may not be the richest, but we do better than these folk over here’). SIT argues that by conceptualising intergroup relations in this way, the approach can be used to understand why, how and when a group engages in the various strategies (personal mobility, social competition or social creativity) it outlines.

SELF-CATEGORISATION THEORY

SIT provides a description of why social identities are important to people, and some of the mechanisms which underpin intergroup relationships and behaviour – particularly around possible status changes for groups and their members. In this sense it is a very motivational account of social behaviour. It does not, however, really discuss how, at a cognitive level, a particular social identity is selected at any given time. Nor does it provide a more general understanding of social categorisation. These aspects of social cognition are described in *self-categorisation theory* (SCT), developed by John Turner and colleagues (Turner et al., 1987). One key principle of SCT is the idea of *levels of abstraction*. The self can vary on a dimension between ‘self as I’ (a low level of abstraction), ‘self as ingroup’ (my own group relative to an outgroup – a moderate level of abstraction) and, at the highest level of abstraction, ‘self as a human’. At each level of abstraction, more people are considered part of the self. The level of abstraction at which we self-identify is dictated by what makes most sense in the situation we find ourselves in, and a number of other factors. These include *perceiver readiness*, *comparative fit* and *normative fit*. SCT recognises that identities are not created from nowhere – they are

a product of our experience. As such, some identities (those which we feel more favourable about, have used more often or meet our current needs or goals) are thought to be more accessible to us: we are said to have higher *perceiver readiness* to use them. *Comparative fit* refers to the discriminatory power of a particular categorisation: we look for groupings which maximise differences *between* groups, while minimising differences *within* groups. Finally, *normative fit* is the extent to which people's behaviours fit with our expectation of how members of a particular group behave – essentially we use our stereotypes (see Chapter 5) to guide decisions of how we categorise people into 'us' and 'them'.

THE COGNITIVE EFFECTS OF CATEGORISATION

Once an identity is activated, a number of cognitive and behavioural effects are likely. One common effect is that we perceive differences *between* groups as greater than they actually are. Simultaneously, we also perceive differences *within* groups as being less pronounced than they really are. We also see ourselves as more interchangeable with other ingroup members, see the world from the point of view of the group, and are more likely to experience deindividuation (see Postmes & Spears, 1998). These effects can also influence how we see and remember the world. For instance, Duncan (1976) showed Caucasian American students a video of an interaction between a white and a black actor. One ambiguous moment in this interaction was perceived as an intentional 'shove' more often when the 'shover' was black than when they were white. In terms of memory, we are better at remembering ingroup members as individuals than we are outgroup members (Van Bavel & Cunningham, 2012). We also distort our memory to fit our beliefs about social groups. For instance, Nelson, Biernat and Manis (1990) showed men pictures of women and men of various heights (on average, they were the same height). They then asked the participants to estimate how tall the males and the females were on average. Men estimated that the women were shorter than the men. More surprisingly, this effect was sustained even when participants were (i) told groups were the same height and (ii) offered a financial incentive to be accurate!

Since their inception, SIT and SCT have evolved into more of a social identity *perspective* rather than a single theory. Early empirical evidence for SIT included the minimal group paradigm, which appeared to show evidence for a motivation to engage in positive differentiation (see the Critical Spotlight on the minimal group paradigm for more on this). More recent research involves both experimental and correlational work, in both the laboratory and the field. The idea that we have meaningful social identities has been applied to diverse real-life domains, such as riots (Reicher, 1996), workplace management practice (Ellemers, De Gilder & Haslam 2004; Hogg, 2001), conflict reduction (Bar-Tal, 2000), addiction recovery (Frings & Albery 2016), litter dropping (Grasmick, Bursik & Kinsey, 1991) and many more. It has also been used to understand group processes such as ingroup dissent (Marques, Abrams & Serôdio, 2001), the development of group identity amongst children (Abrams et al., 2003) and the collective experience of emotions (Bar-Tal, Halperin & De Rivera, 2007).

CRITICISMS OF SIT

The social identity perspective is arguably one of the most influential approaches in modern social psychology and has driven both thinking and applied practice for over four decades. However, it is not without its critics. One major criticism of the social identity perspective and SCT is that they may have more explanatory than predictive power. This means they are good at explaining why something happened in light of the theory but weaker at predicting what will happen in a given situation. Another weakness is that some aspects of the perspectives (such as the self-esteem/identity link; see Rubin & Hewstone, 1998) have received mixed support.

EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES ON GROUP-LEVEL SELF

The social identity approach is not the only approach which understands the self at a group level. Evolutionary accounts of psychology argue that natural selection favours a tendency towards *kin altruism* (helping those whom one is genetically related to more than others), which enables and encourages group co-operation. Moreover, humans are

highly social creatures, who rely on groups which function effectively (i.e. allow people to exchange favours and share risks and rewards) to survive. Evolutionary selection processes have therefore favoured individuals who can function well in groups. This evolutionary perspective can be used to explain our ability to undertake tasks which are important for group function (such as using reasoning to detect people who cheat in deals) with less effort than undertaking the same task in an abstract setting (Cosmides & Tooby, 2005). It also explains the ever popular pastime of gossip as an exchange of social information about trustworthiness (Dunbar & Dunbar 1998), humour as a form of 'social grooming' (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006) and many other social behaviours. It also suggests that the readiness of people to identify with ingroups (and favour them relative to outgroups) may be driven by evolutionary pressures (such as kin altruism). One limitation of much evolutionary theory is that although it can be explored experimentally (for instance, by giving people logic tasks, either in the abstract or presented as scenarios where they must identify cheaters), you can only use the results to infer evolutionary processes. You cannot, unfortunately, go back in time and watch the processes themselves! The problem this raises is around *falsifiability* – you can argue that process X is a product of evolution, but you could also argue that A, B or C were, if they were present. For instance, there are differences in the preference for being found funny vs. finding things funny observed between men and women. Men seem to prefer women who appreciate humour, while women prefer men who produce it. This has been attributed to mate selection processes (Bressler et al., 2006). However, one could also imagine an evolutionary explanation for a lack of difference, or a reverse pattern of findings. It is important to note that critics of social identity approaches have levelled the same criticism at that paradigm, and advocates of both approaches would argue that such falsifiability is present to some extent: both approaches rest on foundational principles which can be tested and they both can be used to develop effective interventions and to understand events with a good level of reliability.

Although SIT and evolutionary approaches have many differences, they also both stress the importance of social groups in normal psychological functioning. In doing so, both highlight that the way we feel about ourselves (our *self-esteem*) can be seen as an inherently

social process. But how exactly does the way we feel about ourselves interact with our social relationships?

CRITICAL SPOTLIGHT: THE MINIMAL GROUP PARADIGM

The *minimal group paradigm* (MGP) was one of the experiments on which social identity theory was built. It aimed to explore the minimum conditions required for intergroup group behaviour. In its early forms (e.g. Tajfel et al., 1971) it involved separating people (initially school children) into arbitrary groups (for instance, those who preferred images by modern artists such as Klee and Kandinsky). They were then asked to give points from a selection of choices to another member of their group, and a member of the other group. The points would be exchanged for cash, and participants did not know who else was in the same group as they were. These point rewards were paired – so giving X points to your group would lead to a member of the other group also being awarded Y points. The number of points on each side of the pair varied, so participants could choose to be *fair* (giving equal points), aim for *maximum joint profit* (highest total number of points, irrespective of who got them), *maximise ingroup profit* (to get the most for the ingroup, regardless of outgroup points) or try to generate *maximum difference* (to get as many points possible *more* than the other group, regardless of total points gained). They could also elect to use an *ingroup favouritism strategy*, a combination of the latter two approaches. The results from this (and other studies) suggest that people engage in positive differentiation even when they do not directly benefit from generating a difference between their own group and others in terms of material gain (recall that they gave points to unknown members of the groups). The MGP seems a fairly robust methodology, having been replicated among different age ranges and cultural backgrounds, when changing the basis of group membership, and in many other variations.

SELF-ESTEEM AND SOCIAL SELVES

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL SOURCES OF SELF-ESTEEM

Sometimes, we feel great about ourselves. Other times, we feel we are not good enough. We may feel positive about some aspects of

ourselves (maybe our intelligence) but bad about another (maybe our looks). These self-evaluations are often referred to as *self-esteem*. Festinger (1954) observed in his *social comparison theory* that we are motivated to maintain positive self-esteem and can aim to do so by seeking to make comparisons with people we see ourselves as superior to (*downwards comparisons*) while avoiding those against people we feel inferior to (*upwards comparisons*). We also tend to overestimate our good points, feel we have more control over events than we actually do, and have an inflated sense of optimism (a set of traits which Sedikides and Gregg (2007), call a *self-enhancing triad*). Generally, across most populations, people have moderate to high self-esteem (e.g. Baumeister, Tice & Hutton, 1989). However, contrary to what you may expect, low-esteem does *not* seem to be linked to things like aggression (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996). Similarly, high self-esteem doesn't automatically mean people are pleasantly confident (indeed, they can also be arrogant and highly self-absorbed – see Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay, 1989).

BIRGING AND CORFING

We've already seen the importance of group membership for our sense of self, and this seems to translate to self-esteem. If our groups do well, we can benefit from this positive differentiation, despite perhaps not being directly involved in the group's success. Such *basking in reflective glory* (BIRGing) has been experimentally observed. For instance, Cialdini looked at American football fans at US universities with a strong involvement in the sport (Cialdini, Borden & Thorne, 1976). On a series of Mondays following a big game, researchers went into lecture halls and counted the number of people wearing uni-branded apparel. Following a win, more students wore such clothing. In their second study (published in the same paper), Cialdini's team also rang students and asked them to describe the previous day's game (if they had seen it). When the team had won, people used 'we' ('we did well') more than when the team had lost ('they did badly'). This suggests people were highlighting their affiliation with winning, but not losing, teams. The opposite effect to (*cutting off reflected failure*, or CORFing) has also been observed in other studies. Boen, Vanbeselaere and Feys (2002), for instance, observed that voters

who displayed party political signage on their windows and lawns were much quicker to take it down if their party lost!

SOCIAL CREATIVITY AND SELF-ESTEEM BUFFERING

Taken together, the above evidence suggests that we use our positive group identities to our advantage to maintain self-esteem. It also suggests that how others perceive our group (or, at least, how we think others perceive our group) can dramatically affect our sense of self. One implication of this is that if we are in mostly low-status groups, we do not have opportunities to draw on the perceived worth of our groups. This in turn may be related to lower self-esteem. Interestingly, this does not always appear to be the case: work by psychologist Brenda Major and colleagues suggests that individuals in low-status groups have a wide range of levels of self-esteem, and that the variation between individuals in the same group often exceeds the variation between groups (see Crocker & Major, 1989). Why might this be?

Social identity theory would explain this effect by arguing that when individuals cannot move between groups (i.e. the boundaries between them are impermeable) and when they can see no likelihood of their low status relative to a dominant group changing, they are likely to engage in *social creativity* strategies. These provide the opportunity for positive differentiation, but at a price – they also reduce the motivation to engage in *social competition*. Being a member of a low-status social group can also provide opportunities to understand negative events in ways which are less damaging to our sense of self. For instance, Sherman and colleagues (Sherman et al., 2007) showed that teams of losing sports players typically rated their degree of control over the outcome as being low (i.e. they blamed the situation for the loss) relative to winning teams – presumably to protect their self-esteem. However, when losing teams were able to publicly place value on other dimensions of being in the team (camaraderie, humour etc.) before making the ratings, this defensive tendency subsequently disappeared (as self-esteem needs had been met in other ways). Likewise, Testa, Crocker and Major (1988) showed that unattractive women who received negative feedback on an essay from a male marker did

not experience self-esteem loss when they believed the marker had seen them (presumably attributing the poor mark to discrimination rather than ability). These buffering effects do not suggest that discrimination between groups is OK, but does highlight how adaptable people are in managing in difficult situations.

As well as (sometimes) being a reflection of the groups we are in, self-esteem may also affect the way we behave towards other group members. From a social comparison or a social identity perspective (such as above), self-esteem is a fairly dynamic concept which may not have a lot to do with how positively we should really see ourselves. However, having some link between reality and our self-esteem may be important. For instance, *sociometer theory* (Leary & Downs, 1995) suggests we may have evolved a sense of self-esteem to facilitate functioning in a group (which, as humans, we need to do to survive). Sociometer theory argues that if we behave contrary to group norms, the group negatively evaluates us. Such evaluation serves to lower our self-esteem, which in turn causes us to change the behaviour and hence remain in the group. This model can be contrasted against the previous approaches we have discussed in that it suggests that (i) our esteem may be an accurate perception of how others see us and (ii) it is primarily an individual-level (as opposed to a social-level) system.

The individual-level and group-level accounts of the self we have discussed here represent the ‘classic’ approach to understanding the self, and many have been developed over decades. While most of these perspectives are still thriving, they have all had to account for two important developments in recent times. The first is rapid changes in technology which have resulted in the growing importance of the internet, and the idea of *online selves*. The second is the development of ideas around automaticity which challenge the very notion of a volitional self. It is to these two ideas which we now turn.

ONLINE VERSUS OFFLINE PERSONAS

How we construct our self may well be changing. Since becoming widely available in the 1990s, the internet has significantly changed the way we connect with others. In particular, it has presented new opportunities and methods to interact with other people (email,

instant messaging, social network sites, online gaming and forums, to name but a few). Psychologists are still getting to grips with what these enormous changes mean – both in terms of existing theory, but also in terms of opportunities to develop new approaches. In this discussion, we look at two such modes of communication – online forums and social networking sites – and explore some of the theory and evidence they have generated.

Online forums about particular topics are a popular form of communication. Anyone can join a public forum and post about a topic they are interested in and interact with other like-minded people to discuss it. Two interesting features of these groups are that they (i) are often anonymous and (ii) have fairly permeable boundaries (i.e. people enter and leave the group fairly easily). One way of understanding the effects of such features of a group is through classic accounts of anonymous group function – such as *deindividuation* (Diener et al., 1976; see also above and Chapter 6). This perspective would suggest that people using forums under a pseudonym are likely to also experience a lack of *self-regulation*. This can lead to an increased likelihood of people undertaking socially undesirable behaviours – ‘flaming’, ‘trolling’, ‘spamming’ and general online nuisance-making are all examples of such behaviours which you may have encountered yourself. However, perhaps more nuanced understandings of such behaviours are needed. Psychologists such as Lea and Spears (1991) and Reicher, Spears and Postmes (1995) argue in their *social identity model of deindividuation effects* (SIDE) that, far from relatively anonymous communication leading people to lose all sense of identity, online communication could make people focus *more* on their social identities. For instance, a lack of personal information makes people fall back on group-level information and adopt these sort of identities easily. Individual-level anonymity may also allow group members to express identities and challenge norms in a way impossible when people are more easily identifiable (and, as a result, potentially subject to sanctions).

One topic the SIDE model has been applied to is how communication methods made possible by the internet may facilitate groups attempting social change. Since early work in this area, the internet revolution has been shown to have at best mixed effects upon civic involvement – including politics and campaigning causes. On the one

hand, displaying political affiliations and making political comments to a large number of people has never been easier. Early research on engagement with the National Geographic Society (NGS) website suggests that people's online interactions often run alongside face-to-face and telephone communication. However, people who engaged with the NGS only via the internet were not particularly committed to the NGS online community (Wellman, Boase & Chen, 2002). In contrast, Kende et al. (2016) suggest that users' social activity on social media sites is a strong driver of intentions to engage in collective action, and Alberici and Milesi (2013) show that increased interaction in political forums have a similar effect. To date no research has conclusively shown that these intentions successfully translate into actual action (or, more specifically, the conditions under which they do or do not). For instance, levels of social media activity seemed to spike significantly immediately before major developments in the 2010 'Arab Spring' (in which a number of democratic movements across the Middle East gained momentum). Although it appears this increased online activity may have mobilised protestors, it is also clear that numerous people involved in those social communication activities did not themselves actually engage in 'real', offline political activity (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

In more everyday use, social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide opportunities for social interaction, but they also require us to present the self in a much more conscious (and accountable) way than do forums. Such online interactions can be incredibly beneficial: for instance, Bliuc et al. (2017) show that online self-help can be a powerful driver of personal change for people battling addiction. More generally, Tosun (2012) also observes that social network sites facilitate the maintenance of long-distance relationships that would otherwise be impossible to sustain a meaningful way. However, the quantifiable nature of our interactions (in terms of the number of friends, likes, retweets etc. which we can accrue) can lead to people feeling pressured into being strategic about what information to put forward – generating a desire to present a self which is acceptable to others (Enli & Thumim, 2012). For some, this can lead to the sense that one is being 'inauthentic' (Davis, 2012). Internet use can also lead to social isolation from one's immediate family and smaller face-to-face social circles (Kraut et al., 1998).

Similarly, perceptions of how others use social networking sites can also lead to problematic, even addictive, use (Marino et al., 2016).

This area of social psychology is still very much in its infancy, but is developing rapidly, with many new accounts of theory and evidence being published every year. However, this new field faces the challenge of not only developing new theoretical frameworks but also having to cope with rapidly changing phenomena: social networks and ways of communicating change regularly, and things that seemed like they would be around forever (for instance, social interaction platforms such as MySpace and Secondlife) can rapidly be replaced by new technologies, or evolve into new and unexpected niche communities.

CRITICAL SPOTLIGHT: MAKING A FIRST IMPRESSION ONLINE AND OFFLINE

In Chapter 4 we will see the importance of making a first impression. We will discover that some traits, such as warmth, intelligence and attractiveness, contribute to making 'a good first impression'. We will also see that a good (or bad) first impression can have huge consequences on how people interact with you in the future. We all know the importance of sending an impressive-looking CV, turning up for a job interview (or to meet your new partner's parents!) in a positive mood, and looking at least fairly presentable. However, we may not spend so much time thinking about how we present our online persona. The ways we interact with social networks, the things we blog about and the comments we make online all form part of our *digital identity*. In general, many of these things are also publicly available. Your potential employer (or in-law!) may well receive their first impression of you as a result of what Google throws up when they type in your name ... How happy are you with what will they find?

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR, FREE WILL AND AUTOMATICITY

In the final part of this chapter we will ask an important question about free will: are we in control of our selves, or do our selves control us? In essence, what extent of free will can we claim to have?

One way of understanding this question is through the role of *traits* (at an individual level) or processes such as *social norms* and *conformity* (at a group level). We can see our behaviour as being influenced by these factors and, at times, they can make us behave in ways we may prefer not to, despite our attempts to resist (see Chapter 6). However, it can also be argued that, for much of the time, we are in control of the way we behave and these processes have little or no effect on us. But what if our sense of control was largely an illusion?

The *implicit cognition* approach (also referred to as *automaticity*) makes an argument that we have little control over our behaviour, positing that up to 95 per cent of our behaviour is unconscious and occurs automatically (see Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Automatic processes such as these can be understood by models such as the *associative-propositional evaluation* (APE) model (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011). Briefly, APE argues that sometimes we behave as a result of reflective conscious processes (explicit associations). These often rely on proposition relationships (if ..., then ...). However, APE (in line with most other models of cognition) also argues that our mind is made up of nodes of information which are connected to one another. Sometimes (and many authors would argue mostly) we rely on these connections (*implicit associations*) to make decisions for us without the need for conscious reflection. This system has been referred to as a *perception-behaviour expressway* (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001), as it links seeing and doing directly, and it all occurs very quickly. To give an example of associative processes in action, we can think of a personal weakness of my own – ice cream. It is bad for me. However, I also find myself eating it from time to time. Why? From an APE point of view, I may have a node for ‘ice cream’, which is also connected to an attitude (‘yum!’) and a behaviour (‘eat!’). When one node is activated by a *stimulus* (i.e. the ice cream node is activated when I see an ice cream truck), it activates the relevant *cognitions* (yum) and also activates the *behavioural enactment* (eat) with little or no conscious intervention. It’s worth noting that ‘ice cream’ may also be attached to other nodes (e.g. ‘unhealthy’, ‘avoid’). If the pathway between ‘ice cream’ and ‘eat’ is more well established (in technical terms, has a lower *activation threshold*) than the ‘ice cream/avoid’ path, I will likely eat some. If the latter path is stronger it may win out and I won’t. If I decide to eat, another set of nodes, linked to the

behaviour of buying and eating an ice cream come into play. This set of activations is known as a *behavioural enactment sequence*. In this case, I go to the truck, ask for an ice cream, pay and eat. Such sequences occur without thought and, once started, are hard to control. To give another example, when walking or driving along a route you usually use for a particular destination, you don't pay much attention to route planning. Moreover, once you set off to a familiar destination, you must concentrate quite hard to divert yourself to another! In the ice cream example, this aspect of enactment sequences also suggests that once I have started the sequence (i.e. gone to the truck) it will be hard to stop myself making a purchase ...

What is the relevance of implicit cognition to social psychology? Importantly, these implicit processes also apply to social behaviours. For instance, nodes which represent social categories ('black individual') may also be linked to stereotypic information ('aggressive') and behaviours ('avoid', 'be defensive'). From this perspective, prejudicial, potentially conflict-increasing behaviours can occur unconsciously, even in people who may wish to avoid them. Authors such as Bargh argue that this implicit association route dominates much of our day-to-day behaviour (including social behaviours) and is actually very difficult to overcome even if we want to (see Bargh & Williams, 2006). This also suggests that, sometimes, it may be better to measure concepts such as intergroup bias using implicit rather than explicit methods. The influence of these ideas is such that we will come across evidence for the automaticity of social behaviours in virtually every chapter of this book. Examples include research showing that priming white participants with faces of African Americans can lead to greater levels of hostility (part of the stereotype for this group) when faced with a mild provocation (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996); that implicit attitudes to minority groups predict the quality of interpersonal interactions (McConnell & Leibold, 2001); and that implicitly measured social identities are a predictor of behaviours such as alcohol consumption (Frings, Melichar & Albery, 2016). The implicit/automatic approach also has some important implications for the idea of self. For instance, if much of our behaviour is automatic, is there such a thing as the self? Or is our self a combination of our automatic and more reflective systems working at different times?

CRITICAL SPOTLIGHT: REPLICATION OF AUTOMATICITY RESEARCH

Work on implicit cognition has not been without its critics, in particular around the issue of replication. For instance, Bargh, Chen and Burrows' (1996) finding that priming people with old-age stereotypes leads them to (automatically) walk slower has been the subject of a number of replication attempts. One of these, by Doyen et al., (2012), suggests that the effect may be driven by the unconscious social influence of the experimenters, rather than priming *per se*. Bargh responded to this by arguing that other studies have replicated this effect and also that the general principles of priming are well established by a variety of research teams. However, as we have seen in our discussion of the replication crisis (see Chapter 1), these debates are ongoing.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we have focused on how social psychology understands the idea of 'self' and an important associated concept – self-esteem. In both these domains we have seen that the field broadly divides into approaches which understand these concepts at an individual level ('self as I') and those which understand them at a group level ('self as a member of a social category'). What both these levels of analysis have in common is that they recognise that our self is usually defined in comparison with others (either directly or via social norms and standards). We've also seen that our understanding of the self may have to change in the near future – the presentation of multiple 'selves' online and offline, and the idea that much of our behaviour may be automatic, both challenge and complement our existing understanding of these areas.

KEY CHAPTER POINTS

- The self can be understood as an individual- and group-level psychological construct.

- Most individual-level accounts focus on comparisons between the self and others, or self and standards.
- Group-level accounts focus on the importance of social identities (aspects of the self which are tied up in group memberships) or evolutionary processes.
- Our self-esteem can also be driven by individual and group processes.
- Our self may not have as much free will as we might think!

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

1. Abrams, D., Frings, D., & Randsley de Moura, G. (2005). Group identity and self-definition. In S. A. Wheelan. *Handbook of group research and practice* (pp. 329–350). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2017). *Internet psychology: The basics*. New York: Routledge.
3. Brown, R., & Capozza, D. (eds) (2016). *Social identities: Motivational, emotional, cultural influences*. New York: Psychology Press.
4. Bargh, J. A., & Chartrand, T. L. (1999). The unbearable automaticity of being. *American Psychologist*, 54, 462–479.