Part III: The Self

The Self is the Center
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Social psychology is concerned with reciprocal social influences: how we are influenced by others and how we in turn influence them. At the center of psychological approaches to social influences is The Self.

Theory and research on The Self has focused on “the cognitive self” or self concept, the “feeling self” or self-esteem, and the “social self,” or defining the person within a social context (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014).

A very useful theory of The Self, within ever-broadening sets of social networks, was advanced in Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

The above figure, from Johnson & Puplanpu (2008), illustrates the nested social environments that the person inhabits. In the above figure, Johnson and Puplanpu (2008) were concerned with the immediate technological influences on children. Our current focus is on the concentric circles surrounding The Self: the micro system (immediate household and family environments), the meso-system (neighborhood and regional environments), the exo-system (national and cultural environments), the macrosystem (the ideological values and norms), and the chronosystem (the effects of movement through time).
Bronfenbrenner’s nested ecology theory is useful in assessing the causes of war, and in imagining multifaceted strategies for achieving World Peace.

The Self Concept

The self concept is what we think about ourselves: our personalities, our motivations, our roles and responsibilities. We develop or learn our self-concepts through our life experiences – positive and negative – that shape our personality traits and social identities.

The Self develops within a cultural context (the exosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s nomenclature), which differ on many dimensions, for example, individualism vs. collectivism. These cultural differences may be reflected in Americans’ self concept as independent, whereas Asian Americans describe themselves as more interdependent (DeAndrea, Shaw & Levine, 2010).

Self concepts are highly complex, particularly for those residing on the intersections of demography: women, ethnic and sexual minorities, etc. Additionally, self concepts may also differ in clarity, in how well they are defined, as well as in consistency over time (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014).

Self awareness is the extent to which we are consciously aware of ourselves, our self concepts, and how we might be perceived by others. A closely related concept to self-awareness is self-consciousness. When individuals are induced to be self-aware, they are more likely to engage in morally correct behavior (Jhangiani & Talley, 2014).

In contrast, in states of de-individuation – where the person’s sense of self is diminished (as in the case of large groups, or in the taking on of specific roles) – people often display disinhibited behavior. De-individuation may be an important mechanism to account for the killing of innocents in war.

The Self Esteem

Generally, how we think about ourselves is related to how we feel about ourselves. Positive thoughts lead to positive self esteem; negative thoughts to its opposite. People sometimes go to extraordinary lengths—even to the point of self-delusion—in maintaining or enhancing a positive feeling about themselves.

Although positive self esteem is associated with positive mental health, too much of a good thing can be problematic. The narcissistic personality is “…characterized by overly high self-esteem, self-admiration, and self-centeredness” (Jhangiani & Talley, p. 128). One can readily imagine how these personality dynamics – when aggregated at the national level – might lead individuals to violence or nations to war.
The Social Self

The Self is multi-faceted, and develops within the nested social networks described earlier. Early in life, the “micro-system” factors (i.e., home and family) are most important, with the developing Self moving into broader and more mature social networks.

The social environment often applies labels to individuals that may affect their interactions and their self-concepts. A label such as “hyperactive,” may produce self-fulfilling effects, especially when internalized.

Labels may also produce a “halo effect,” for better or worse. For example, when someone is labeled as “beautiful,” they are also seen as “good.”

An individual’s self concept may be affected by upward or downward social comparison. If we compare our circumstances with those of someone in a superior position (an example of upward social comparison), our self esteem is bound to suffer. In contrast, downward social comparisons might be expected to elevate our sense of Self.

Finally, the Self is a product of the groups that we belong to, and that provide us with a social identity. Most people belong to multiple groups, with diverse and complex social identities. These group memberships and social identities often shift over the course of a lifespan.

Overview

Describe the students’ papers that have been selected….

References


