

Other People as a Source of Self-Knowledge

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I have a friend – let’s call her Felicia – who has said a number of times over the years that she does not photograph well. Recently Felicia was stopped on the street by a professional fashion photographer who wanted to take her picture for a fashion and style blog. Felicia assented – reluctantly, I think – and a few weeks later the photographs appeared online. One of Felicia’s friends (okay, it was me) came across the blog post and put up a link on Facebook, and within minutes, Felicia responded – rather predictably – that she thought she looked terrible in the pictures. But after compliments and “likes” from friends started accumulating, Felicia modified her stance a little bit, allowing that she was coming around to liking, or at least accepting, the photos.

This chapter explores whether other people’s perceptions might be a source of self-knowledge. My anecdote about Felicia is meant to illustrate a major tension in trying to make sense of whether and how feedback from others might be incorporated into the self. On the one hand, a typical adult’s self-concept is pretty stable: most people have a strong sense of who they are. And it is arguably a good thing if someone’s sense of self does not rise and fall with every offhanded comment that someone else has made, because a stable sense of self provides a sense of stability and order to one’s place in the world. But on the other hand, the self-concept may not be entirely impervious to social feedback. Many people are interested in learning about themselves. Moreover, it is probably pretty difficult to remain completely unaffected by what others are saying.

Many psychologists, from William James onward, have been interested in “the social self.” The self is intimately, and perhaps inextricably, entwined with the social world. We compare ourselves to others (Festinger, 1954); we look for our place within some groups and apart from others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and as members of a larger society (Erikson, 1950); we try to learn about the self by imagining the impressions we make on others (Mead, 1934). It hardly makes sense to imagine a self-concept without incorporating the social world.

Many “social” theories of the self are primarily about what and how the self thinks about the social world: the social world is important because it is something that the individual mentally represents, and those mental representations are involved in the process of building a self-concept. Such social-cognitive processes are clearly important in understanding the bases of self-knowledge, but they may not be the only way that other people are involved. Other people may matter not just as mental representations, but in a more truly “social” way.

My goal in this chapter is to try to look beyond these individual-centered social-cognitive approaches and ask to what extent other people – not just mental representations of the social world but actual human beings – might affect self-knowledge. I will consider some of the ways that other people’s impressions of an individual could affect that individual’s self-knowledge. More specifically, I will focus on the perhaps counterintuitive notion that other people could potentially contribute to *accurate* self-views. To set a manageable scope for this chapter, I will focus on an admittedly narrow subset of social knowledge – knowledge of one’s social roles and personal attributes (such as personality traits). I acknowledge up

front that “self-knowledge” is a much broader domain that includes many other things, including knowledge of one’s preferences and goals, of one’s physical body, and much more (cf. Markus, 1983; Neisser, 1988).

An Early Perspective: Reflected Appraisals

Reflected appraisals – perceptions of how others perceive the self (i.e., “what do other people think of me?”) – are a particularly interesting species of meta-perception (perceptions of perceptions), and are probably the most widely studied form of meta-perception (see Carlson & Kenny, this volume). Reflected appraisals were central to symbolic interactionist theories of how the self develops (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). The symbolic interactionists proposed that people form a sense of self by first learning or inferring how others perceive them – i.e., by forming reflected appraisals. Over time, reflected appraisals become internalized into a self-concept (components of which are often called “direct self-appraisal” in the context of symbolic interactionism).¹

Kinch (1963) proposed a series of postulates that formalized the symbolic interactionist theory. If two of these postulates hold true then actual social others will affect the self by way of reflected appraisals. The first postulate is that reflected appraisals must be based on the actual behaviors of other people. The second postulate is that direct self-appraisals must be based on reflected appraisals. With regard to accuracy, we can add that in order for people to acquire accurate self-

¹ These influences of others on the self were part of a larger cycle in which the self also affected others; such reciprocal interactions are an important part of the larger theoretical model.

views from others, others must be able to accurately perceive the individual's roles and attributes, and they must behave in ways that are based on those perceptions.

On the last point, there is substantial evidence that people are able to perceive one another with at least some degree of accuracy (e.g., Funder, 1987, 1995; Kenny & Albright, 1987), and sometimes with greater accuracy than individuals have in perceiving themselves (Vazire, 2010). Attributes that are reputational in nature, such as social status (defined as one's prominence in the eyes of others), are another area where others might have better information than the self (Srivastava & Anderson, 2010). There is also evidence that perceptions guide interpersonal behavior (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Jussim, 1991; Snyder & Swann, 1978). Thus it is reasonable to suppose that if reflected appraisals affect direct self-appraisals, they may promote accuracy. But what does contemporary research say about Kinch's original postulates? Do people use others' behavior to form reflected appraisals; and do people then use those reflected appraisals as a basis for forming direct self-appraisals?

In research on adults, reflected appraisals as a route to self-knowledge have had a rocky history. Reflected appraisals correlate with direct self-appraisals and others' perceptions, but causation and underlying mechanisms have been difficult to establish (e.g., Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979; Tice & Wallace, 2005). By contrast, stronger evidence has been found among adolescents (e.g., Cole, 1991; Felson, 1985, 1993; Harter, 1999; Pfeifer et al., 2009). For example, in a longitudinal study, Felson (1985) found that reflected appraisals prospectively predicted adolescents' self-appraisals of physical attractiveness. And in a

neuroimaging study, Pfeifer and her colleagues (2009) found that during a self-reflection task, there was greater overlap between regions used for self-perception and other-perception among adolescents than among adults, suggesting that adolescents may be more heavily drawing upon representations of other people's minds when directly appraising the self. One plausible interpretation of these and other findings is that an adolescent's still-forming self-concept is more open to influences of all kinds, including input from the social world; by contrast, adults have more stored self-appraisals and therefore have less need to look outward to fill in the gaps. Another proposed explanation is that adults are more likely to refer to internal guideposts, such as possible selves, and less likely to make social comparisons when drawing inferences about the self (Harter, 1999).

Reflected appraisals are an important part of the history of research on self-knowledge, and they continue to be of great interest, particularly in research on development of the self during childhood and adolescence (Pfeifer et al., 2009). They present one possible pathway for others to affect self-knowledge; but reflected appraisals are not necessarily the only way. It is possible for others to affect the self-concept without a mental representation of others' perceptions being formed along the way (Srivastava & Beer, 2005). In the remainder of this chapter I will draw upon research on reflected appraisals when it provides positive evidence of social influences; but I will also consider different ways that other people could affect the self-concept.

The Loyal Resistance: Motivated Self-Perception

Before further considering whether and how other people might influence self-knowledge, it is important to weigh the evidence for why such influences may be limited. Several prominent theories of the self have suggested that the self-perception process is guided by motives that would make it resistant to social influences. The *self-enhancement* perspective argues that people are motivated to form and maintain positive self-views. The *self-verification* perspective proposes that people are motivated to maintain consistency and coherence in their self-views. These motives are reviewed in detail in other chapters in this volume (Helzer & Dunning; Schriber & Robins; Strube) – here I focus on the potential these motives have for derailing social influences on accurate self-views.

Self-enhancement. Perhaps the most widely studied motivation in self-perception is self-enhancement. The self-enhancement motive is the desire to have an evaluatively positive self-concept. (Sometimes self-enhancement is also described as a motive to maintain high self-esteem.) Researchers have discovered a number of different psychological processes that have the effect of increasing or maintaining the positivity of the self-concept. Many of these processes can make people resistant to information from others that might otherwise be used to update the self-concept.

One such process is the self-serving attributional bias: a tendency to attribute the causes of positive events to one's own personality, while attributing negative events to factors outside of one's own control (e.g., Bradley, 1978). Two meta-analyses have found that the self-serving bias is present in many different kinds of samples (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004).

The magnitude of the self-serving bias is typically quite substantial, but it is moderated by a number of factors including culture, age, and self-esteem. For example, the self-serving bias is larger in Western samples than in Asian samples, though it is still present in the latter (Mezulis et al., 2004). It is also larger among individuals with higher self-esteem.

A self-serving attributional bias would lead individuals to dismiss social information or feedback that is evaluatively negative. Instead of being seen as potentially diagnostic of the self, negative information from others would be attributed to other causes, such as transient factors (“I’m just having a bad day”) or others’ inaccurate perceptions (“he doesn’t know the real me”). Self-serving biases do not operate as strongly on positive social information; but because most people see themselves positively already (e.g., Alicke & Govorun, 2006), such information does not have much potential to change the existing self-concept.

Even when feedback temporarily overcomes self-serving biases, over time such biases might creep back in to erase openness to personal growth. For example, in a study of reactions to “360 feedback” given to managers, in the form of leadership ratings made by their co-workers, managers who initially believed they were good leaders but who received low leadership ratings from others – in other words, managers who demonstrably self-enhanced and were directly confronted with others’ perceptions of them – described themselves as highly motivated to improve their performance after hearing the feedback. However, when the researchers followed up 6 months later, the managers’ motivation had not resulted in them taking any concrete steps to improve performance (Atwater & Brett, 2005).

For some individuals, the self-enhancement motive can go beyond cognitive biases and spill into overt behavioral resistance as well. Individuals who are highly narcissistic typically have high but unstable self-esteem, meaning that their very positive self-concepts can be easily perturbed by external events (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). In an effort to preserve their high self-esteem, narcissists who are insulted by another person are prone to lash out aggressively (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). It is not entirely clear why narcissists do not just use cognitive strategies like everybody else. However, one possibility is that it may be due to poor impulse control (Vazire & Funder, 2006). Poor impulse control would make it relatively difficult for narcissists to use complex cognitive strategies; it would also make it difficult for them to conform to social norms against aggression when under a perceived threat. The end result is that although narcissists respond behaviorally to negative social information about themselves – indicating that at some level the information is registering with them – they are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to prevent that information from affecting their self-concepts.

Self-verification. Self-verification theory proposes that humans have a fundamental motive to confirm their existing self-views (Swann, 2011). An assumption of self-verification theory is that people use self-views “in making predictions about their worlds, guiding behavior, and maintaining a sense of coherence, place, and continuity” (Swann, 2011, p. 5). In order for people to reap these benefits their longstanding self-views must remain stable. Otherwise,

predictions and behavioral plans would be in constant flux, and the personal and social world would be experienced as chaotic and incoherent.

To fulfill these pragmatic and epistemic needs for a stable self, people engage in a variety of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes that make them resistant to social information that might otherwise change their self-concept. Caspi and Roberts (2001) discussed three categories of person-environment transactions – selection, evocation, and reaction – that can be a basis for either continuity or change in personality. Research on self-verification theory has shown that these three kinds of transactions contribute to continuity in the self-concept. First, people select social environments that provide them feedback that is consistent with their existing self-concepts (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Second, people try to evoke feedback from others that verifies their existing self-views (e.g., Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Third, people react to social information in ways that let them keep their existing self-views intact – for example, people selectively attend to self-consistent information more than to self-inconsistent information (Swann & Read, 1981).

In contrast to the self-enhancement motive, the self-verification motive can make people resistant to both positive and negative social information; all that is necessary is that the new information conflicts with an already-existing self-view. A recent meta-analysis found evidence for both self-enhancement and self-verification motives (Kwang & Swann, 2010). In critical tests where the two motives might conflict (i.e., when an individual has a well-established negative self-view, such as Felicia's longstanding belief that she looks bad in photographs), self-verification was

typically somewhat stronger, but the relative effect sizes were moderated by a number of factors. In particular, the threat of social rejection appears to weaken the self-verification motive. Rejection is powerful enough to directly affect self-views, in the form of lower self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). This suggests that in a hierarchy of motives, the need to belong may take priority over the need to maintain a stable and coherent sense of self. This tradeoff suggests a possible avenue for lowering resistance to potential social sources of self-knowledge, a point I will return to below.

Benefits of resistance to change. Motives to self-enhance and to self-verify can make the self resistant to the influences of social information. Such resistance may have benefits: theories that have examined the social and psychological functions served by the self suggest that it may be maladaptive for the self-concept to be overly malleable. A stable sense of self helps organize goals-directed behavior. Goals are organized hierarchically and must be mentally represented and managed in some coherent way (Carver & Scheier, 1999). McAdams (1985) proposed that at the highest level of organization, the self is represented in a narrative structure – a life story – that integrates different parts of the self into a coherent whole. The life story, in turn, is created through smaller stories that define situated components of the self; and much of this development occurs during adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). It is thus not possible to change self-views that are tied into the life story without reverberations for the entire narrative. In the case of major, life-changing events, a new and coherent resolution – not easily achieved - is important for preserving healthy psychological functioning (Pals,

2006). Another function of a stable sense of self is prediction – anticipating or simulating how one might behave in novel situations in the future. For example, Bowlby (1979) proposed that people have working models that they use to predict how the self and others will behave in close relationships, and plan behavior accordingly. Furthermore, insofar as self-views guide behavior, a stable sense of self makes an individual more predictable by others, which has advantages in relationships and social groups (Swann, 2011).

Conversely, a too-unstable self-concept would undermine functions like goal pursuit and predictability. At the outside limits, a self-concept that is very easily perturbed by social input can create a risk for poor social adjustment and psychopathology (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Jordan et al., 2003; Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991; Lieb, Zannarini, Schmahi, Linehan, & Bohus, 2004). In light of these considerations, it is reasonable to be skeptical about whether a well-functioning self-concept could nevertheless be open to influence by social others under some circumstances.

Under What Conditions Might Others Contribute to Self-Knowledge?

In spite of the evidence reviewed above, self-enhancement and self-verification motives – and the variety of associated psychological mechanisms that may inoculate the self against social input – are not necessarily all-determining. The theories and research on these motives, as well as a variety of other theoretical perspectives, suggest that at least under some conditions people might be open to acquiring self-knowledge through input from other people.

Younger age. One factor that may make the self more open to social influence is age. Development of a consolidated self-concept begins in childhood and continues through adolescence (e.g., Harter, 1990; Measelle et al., 1998). But many of the processes that make the self resistant to social influence depend on already having a well-established and stable self-concept (Swann, 2011). As a result, the self-concepts of younger people may be more open to social input. Some developmental studies support this idea, indicating that reflected appraisals may be more influential on direct self-appraisals during childhood and adolescence than they are during adulthood (Felson, 1985; Pfeifer et al., 2009).

Expert others. People may be more open to receiving social feedback about the self when they believe that others have special expertise. For example, in a study of clinical feedback, college students were more likely to accept negative personality feedback when it came from a Ph.D. clinical psychologist than when it came from a fellow undergraduate (Halperin et al., 1976; see also Albright & Levy, 1995). Such expertise is probably important for a classic experimental method for manipulating self-esteem – providing false feedback from personality tests (e.g., Aronson & Mettee, 1968). The appearance of authority of these tests, and of the experimenter who delivers the feedback, are likely an important part of the stagecraft of such experiments.

Attributes that are defined by others' perceptions. Some attributes might be considered by folk perceivers to have an objective existence apart from human perception. This folk belief has been dubbed “naïve realism” by Ross and Ward (1996). Research on naïve realism has demonstrated that people often believe that

their own perceptions are less biased than other people's perceptions (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Naïve realism may help sustain self-enhancement or self-verification processes by allowing individuals to dismiss others' perceptions when they conflict with self-perceptions (see Hansen and Pronin, this volume).

However, some attributes depend more heavily on others' perceptions. For example, reputational attributes like social status, likability, and attractiveness are defined primarily by how one is seen by others (e.g., Srivastava & Anderson, 2010). Reputational attributes might be more changeable by social feedback than attributes that people believe have an objective existence outside of others' perceptions (Felson, 1985).

Novel components of the self. Although a great deal of development of self and identity occurs in adolescence, change can continue throughout the lifespan (Helson & Srivastava, 2001; McAdams et al., 2006). Ongoing identity development in middle adulthood is associated with psychological maturity and resilience (2006). However, a wholesale remaking of the self-concept is exceedingly rare in healthy adults; rather, healthy adult development, particularly during early and middle adulthood, is characterized by increasing complexity and differentiation in the self (Labouvie-Vief, 2003).

One way that the self can become more complex is through the development of more circumscribed, context-dependent self-views. For example, theories and research on the relational self have demonstrated that people form distinct mental representations of themselves with specific other people (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006). Such relational selves can be thought of as a set of

if-then propositions (e.g., “IF I am with my son, THEN I am goofy”). Although relational selves are somewhat influenced by prior experiences in close relationships, they can vary considerably within one person across different relationships (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). New relationships may thus be a context for ongoing development of the self during adulthood that is not constrained by an existing self-concept, and therefore may be open to social input.

Incentives to change. As discussed earlier, one argument for why the adult self-concept may be resistant to change is based in an analysis of the functions of the self. The self-concept is used to predict and guide behavior and understand the world, and a stable self-concept is thought to be important for these functions (Swann, 2011). However, careful consideration of a functional approach leaves open the possibility that the self-concept may become more malleable when other important functions would be served by changing.

One situation where research has shown that self-verification processes are weaker, and therefore the self might be open to change, is when the individual faces the threat of social rejection. For example, members of dating couples seek self-verifying negative feedback less than members of married couples; this effect may be because losing one’s partner is less of a concern in marriage (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). A recent meta-analysis found that when rejection risk was higher, self-verification motives were weaker (Kwang & Swann, 2010). Instead, people were more likely to try to impress their partners in an effort to keep the

relationship intact. This suggests that the self-verification motive (and perhaps other self-perception motives) is malleable when faced with competing goals.

When should people trust social input? The factors listed in this section may make people more open to social input about the self. Are these the right sources and situations? Many of these are arguably times or situations when openness to social input could be rational or adaptive (or both), which implies a certain amount of pragmatism. Younger people and people in novel situations or roles have less prior information to go on; when that is the case, the views of older or more experienced others may compare favorably to a nascent or uncertain self-view. Experts are more likely to have valid information than non-experts.

A variety of other factors can make others' social perceptions more accurate, making them a potential source for valid self-knowledge (Funder, 1995). Accuracy is higher among perceivers who are extraverted (Akert & Panter, 1988), intelligent (Havenstein & Alexander, 1991), and highly motivated (Smith, Ickes, Hall, & Hodges, 2010). Others are more accurate in perceiving traits that are highly evaluative and that have more observable behavioral manifestations (Vazire, 2010). Perceivers are more accurate when their attentional resources are not divided (Biesanz, Neuberg, Smith, Asher, & Judice, 2001). All of these findings suggest that people could benefit from seeking input from particular other people, under particular circumstances, and about particular traits. However, it remains to be tested whether people are more sensitive to these differences – for example whether people are more willing to incorporate social feedback into their self-views when it comes from smart extraverts.

How Would Others Affect the Self? Some Possible Mechanisms

What psychological and interpersonal mechanisms might make it possible for others' perceptions to feed into self-knowledge? Research on behavioral confirmation has shown that after perceivers form an impression of someone, the perceivers often act in ways that elicit behavior that is consistent with their initial perception. Some of the earliest research on behavioral confirmation involved observations of teachers bringing their students' behavior in line with the teachers' initial impressions (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Subsequent laboratory experiments expanded on this framework, for example by showing that perceivers elicited socially engaged behavior from targets they believed to be attractive (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). In over 4 decades of work, researchers have demonstrated that behavioral confirmation can occur across a wide range of situations and attributes (see Snyder & Stukas, 1999, for a review).

A variety of psychological and social mechanisms appear to be involved in mediating behavioral confirmation effects. For example, Chen and Bargh (1997) showed that when social stereotypes are implicitly activated in perceivers, the perceivers can unintentionally and automatically act out those stereotypes and elicit reciprocal behavior (for example, behaving with hostility toward an interaction partner after a Black stereotype is implicitly activated). At a more fine-grained level, a meta-analysis by Harris and Rosenthal (1985) identified a variety of nonverbal behaviors, including smiling, eye contact, and speech rate, that appear to mediate the link between perceivers' expectations and targets' behavior. Such behaviors can function as reinforcers: when the target behaves as expected, the perceiver

responds in ways that the target finds rewarding. Such low-level reinforcement processes do not need to involve formation of a meta-perception. That could explain why, for example, Srivastava and Beer (2005) found that being liked by others made people evaluate themselves positively, but the effect was not mediated by reflected appraisals.

After perceivers have elicited confirmatory behavior, the self-concept can subsequently be updated through a variety of mechanisms. When elicited behavior clashes with what were previously well-established (though not necessarily accurate) components of the self-concept, cognitive dissonance can be reduced by revising the self-concept (Festinger, 1957). Alternatively, when behavior is elicited in a domain where the individual was not already committed to a particular self-view, self-perception of the behavior might lead an individual to infer a new self-view as a result (Bem, 1967; Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981).

Behavioral confirmation is not the only mechanism by which others may influence self-views. In social situations, people often need to share certain beliefs and perceptions in order to feel connected to others and to accomplish collective goals (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). According to the affiliative social tuning hypothesis, one of the ways that a person can try to build a shared reality is by adjusting his or her beliefs to be more in “tune” with what that person thinks others think (Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005). In a series of experiments, Sinclair et al. (2005) found that when people were motivated to affiliate with another person, they adjusted their self-views to be more consistent with their meta-perceptions – in this case, with others’ ostensible gender- and race-based stereotypes. In contrast

to behavioral confirmation processes, the perceivers in these experiments did not have to behave in any way that elicited stereotype-consistent behavior (other than expressing their endorsement of the stereotypes).

The study by Sinclair and her colleagues (2005) focused on how believing that others hold inaccurate stereotypes can distort self-views. But the same social tuning mechanism would increase accuracy (rather than decreasing it) when meta-perceptions are accurate. Thus, in circumstances when meta-perceptions are derived from others' accurate perceptions, social tuning would be another mechanism by which others can promote accurate self-knowledge.

An Example: Social Influences on Self-Knowledge of Status

One area in which other people may exert a substantial influence on self-knowledge is in the domain of status perceptions. Status, as I am using the term here, is defined as respect and influence in the eyes of other people (Srivastava & Anderson, 2010). In a variety of studies of naturalistic group interactions, status self-perceptions have been found to depend upon social input in some interesting ways.

Status has several of the characteristics discussed earlier that make it a prime candidate for being open to influences through social input. It is a reputational attribute – that is, it is defined by what other people think. Status is also context-specific: a person can have high status in one group and low status in another. And people often encounter new contexts where they must figure out their new, context-specific status, such as through changes in the workplace. The novelty of the associated situation-specific self-views may make them malleable.

A less obvious but crucial characteristic of status is that it is connected to social rejection. Specifically, a number of studies have found that overestimation of one's own status incurs social costs in the form of rejection by the group (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006; Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008). This probably happens for a number of reasons. Status is typically organized in hierarchies, so when individuals act as though they have high status, they are implying that others have lower status (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). And individuals with high status also can claim a number of privileges, such as speaking whenever they please and telling others what to do (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Because groups reject individuals who overestimate their status, the threat of rejection seems to dampen self-enhancement and self-verification biases. Overestimation of one's own status can also come with more tangible sanctions, such as being denied resources and rewards by other group members (Anderson et al., 2008).

As a result of these incentives and sanctions, people are typically quite accurate in perceiving their own status – more so than in perceiving other attributes, such as Big Five personality characteristics (Srivastava & Anderson, 2010). Indeed, individuals who have an especially strong need to belong to social groups are especially likely to be accurate in perceiving their own status (Anderson et al., 2006). Their motivation probably makes them especially responsive to the prospect of rejection, and willing to revise their self-views as a result. By contrast, narcissists tend to persist in overestimating their status, even in the face of group sanctions (Anderson et al., 2008). Narcissists' difficulties with impulse control,

combined with their need to maintain high self-esteem, probably make it difficult for them to defer to other people's directives or even to acknowledge that they ought to do so.

Conclusions

People may be able to learn about themselves from other people – but in healthy adults, there are significant limitations to this potential. A mostly stable sense of self helps in predicting and planning future behavior and provides a sense of epistemic stability. But a completely calcified sense of self would not be adaptive either. Nevertheless, people may be open to using social feedback to acquire self-knowledge when they think that others are in a position to offer valuable information, when the resulting changes to the self-concept would be circumscribed, and when updating their self-knowledge would serve some important goal or function.

Having made a case for social input to accurate self-views, I want to conclude by acknowledge some shortcomings of this case. The process I have discussed here is an almost-complete loop – from actual attributes of an individual to others' perceptions and back to the individual's self-knowledge, with many intermediate steps along the way. Most of the studies and theories I have cited are piecemeal, addressing just one or another bit of this proposed cycle. A valuable direction for future research would be to complete the loop – that is, to coherently demonstrate the entire cycle in action at once. Doing so would help illuminate a social self that is truly social – not just in mentally representing the social world, but in a deeper sense of being interconnected with other people.

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