

1 Introduction

1.1 One way of looking at a child's social development is to examine it in the light of two complementary ideas, socialization and individuation. By socialization I simply mean the ways in which a person learns socially relevant patterns of behaviour, learns, in other words, how to fit into society. Social learning in this sense is not, of course, restricted to childhood—as adults, we have to learn new social roles when we take a new job or get married, become parents or retire—but it is a marked and important process that a child must undergo.

1.2 At the same time as the child is learning to fit into society, an essentially *integrating* function, the formation of the child's personal identity is taking place, the process of individuation, an essentially *differentiating* process (Damon, 1983, p. 2). Socialization involves establishing relationships with others, our learning to regulate behaviour according to the rules and standards of the society in which we live. While we are learning to fit into society, we are also learning that we are individual persons, unique in ourselves. You will have heard at some time very young children asserting this separateness with a definite 'no'. So common is this expression of separateness that two-year-old children are commonly referred to as being in 'the terrible twos'.

1.3 It is through the individuating function that we acquire a sense of self and, with that, some feeling of control over our lives. The self-concept lies at the heart of individuation, so in this unit we shall explore the following five questions, fundamental as they are to the understanding of self:

- 1 *What does the term 'self' include?*
- 2 *What influences the formation of the self-concept?*
- 3 *Does the self-concept change over time?*
- 4 *How can we find out about someone's idea of self?*
- 5 *How does the self-concept influence our behaviour?*

2 The nature of the self-concept

2.1 Any discussion of the first of our questions in paragraph 1.3 is fraught with the type of problem discussed at the beginning of Unit 15. Since the Second World War, ever-growing numbers of psychologists (not to mention sociologists, philosophers and others) have studied the self-concept. As a result, the meanings given to such terms as 'self', 'self-image', 'self-knowledge', 'self-esteem' and 'self-awareness' have proliferated. Psychologists have been unable to agree a terminology, in many cases not even attempting to, simply using terms loosely, sometimes synonymously. This has been compounded by the fact that all of us, unsurprisingly, have our own ideas as to who we are, with a corresponding variety of terms.

Activity 1 (Allow about 15 minutes)

To heighten your awareness of what is involved in the self-concept, attempt this activity. Try to give twenty answers to the question, 'Who am I?' Write your responses on a separate piece of paper, starting each with 'I am . . .'

2.2 Now I have no way of knowing your answers to Activity 1, but I will guess the type of responses you have given. First of all, you will see yourself in certain roles such as mother or father, schoolteacher, nurse or labourer, married or single, Methodist or Sikh. Secondly, your answers will be peppered with words redolent of personality or value-laden terms, such as 'happy', 'moody', 'useful' or 'hard-working'. Well, am I right? I hope I am because I have based my guesses on the results of two psychological investigations. Activity 1 is, in fact, the Twenty-Statements Test (or TST) devised by Kuhn and McPartland in 1954. They found that roughly half the responses fell into the roles/other properties category, and roughly half into the personality traits/evaluations category. Figure 1 depicts their findings and those of Mulford and Salisbury (1964), who used the same test and analysed the role answers. The percentages refer to an analysis of the four most frequent answers. Try comparing your answers to Activity 1 with those of other students. Although there are no correct or incorrect answers, this procedure may reveal interesting similarities and differences.

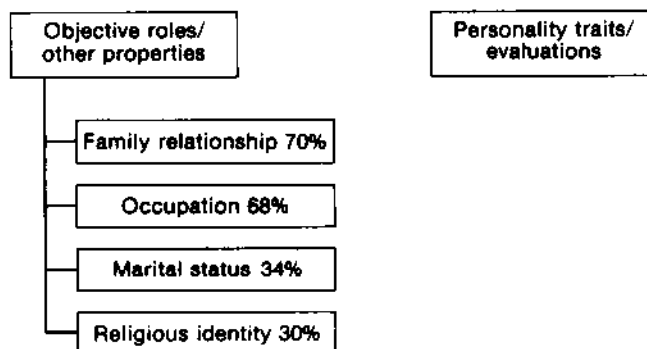


Figure 1 Two main categories of responses to the TST and some subdivisions.

The 'I' and the 'me'

2.3 An important aspect of the self to look at from the very outset is the distinction between 'I' and 'me', a distinction made in 1890 by William James, one of the first psychologists to write powerfully about the self-concept. This aspect was developed in the work of two other important writers in this area, Charles Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934).

2.4 Perhaps the main distinction to emphasize is the difference between the self as subject ('I') and the self as an object of knowledge ('me'). As Sarah Hampson puts it: 'we possess the ability to stand back and observe ourselves . . .' (the Reader, p. 188)—this is the self as 'me'. This is precisely what you did in Activity 1 when you completed the TST: it was the 'me' of the self-concept that you were describing. This 'me' is the self that is largely determined by your social experience in groups, those 'great incubators of human character', as Cooley puts it. The 'me' is the content of what is known, as opposed to the knower or subject, the 'I'. Hampson sums up one of the significant aspects of 'me' in this way: 'For some, it is this capacity to be aware of ourselves and regard ourselves as objects to ourselves that distinguishes man from the other animals' (the Reader, p. 188).

2.5 In separating the 'me' from the 'I' in order to define them more clearly, we must not understress the relationship between them. The individual's responding to behaviour can be equated with 'I', and that behaviour as soon as it becomes an object of interest in itself can be equated with 'me'. However, this relationship operates in both directions: the 'me' also helps to determine the 'I', as what we perceive ourselves to be helps to determine our response in new situations. This is not always so, as there is an element of uncertainty about the 'I'. Take, for example, a woman who in terms of the 'me' thinks she is 'good at cooking' or a man who is 'good at rugby' or a 'good scientist'. They will have learned these

aspects of the 'me' from the attitudes of those around them. This does not mean, however, that the woman always produces a superb meal or that the man always has a good game. In the case of the scientist (see Mead, 1934, p. 177) he may be confronted with two sets of data with conflicting implications. He may know that each set of data demands certain responses on his part, but when they conflict it is impossible to forecast precisely what action the 'I' will take. The 'I' gives the individual his or her freedom.

Self-image, self-esteem and ideal self

2.6 In this unit our concern shall be mainly with 'me' and not with 'I'. There are few methodologically acceptable ways currently available for investigating 'I' (see, for example, Wylie, 1974, p. 1 ff., but also see the beginning of Section 4 of this unit), and, as selection has to be made, we shall limit ourselves mainly to studies dealing with 'me'. This does not devalue the importance of 'I' or underrate the problems involved in the investigation of 'me', problems we take up in Section 5.

2.7 To look at what you were doing in Activity 1 in another way, we can say that you were describing some of the ways in which you see yourself, in other words, describing your *self-image*, an important part of the self-concept. But it is not the only part. Closely connected to self-image is the idea of *self-esteem*, the value you put upon your self-image. Look again at the items you offered in response to Activity 1. Is there anything on that list that is not value-laden? You may have included items that you regard as 'factual' such as your age, height and weight. Even here, however, analysis is not straightforward. If you are a man 6 foot 3 inches in height, you may construe it as a virile aspect, but a woman of the same height may be socially embarrassed by it. It is an arguable point as to whether all aspects of the self-image carry with them value judgements, but so many certainly do that self-esteem is best construed as an important aspect of the self-concept.

2.8 James illustrates the point neatly, stressing the relativity of self-esteem, defining it in the following equation (this equation is not a precise, arithmetical statement, but it is a useful representation of relationships):

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}$$

(James, 1890; 1950 edition, p. 310)

The meaning of 'pretensions' in this context is specialized, and is best illustrated by James's own example:

I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no sense of personal humiliation at all. Had I 'pretensions' to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse. (*Ibid.*)

2.9 A third idea used in connection with the self-concept is the *ideal self*, the way we would *like* to be. The relationship between the self-image and ideal self is an important one, as we shall see in a later section. To summarize, Figure 2 illustrates the relationships of the terms employed so far, as they are used in this unit.

2.10 At this juncture it is worth reminding ourselves of the point made in paragraph 2.1: there is no universally agreed terminology. Some writers, for instance, will use 'self' as synonymous with 'self-concept', and you also have to remember that the same phenomena can be abstracted in different ways, so it is often not a question of loose definition at all. Again, different phenomena can be emphasized depending upon the theory being used. Even so, certain aspects of the self such as its *organized* and *dynamic* characteristics (see, for example, Purkey, 1970) do need to be borne in mind.

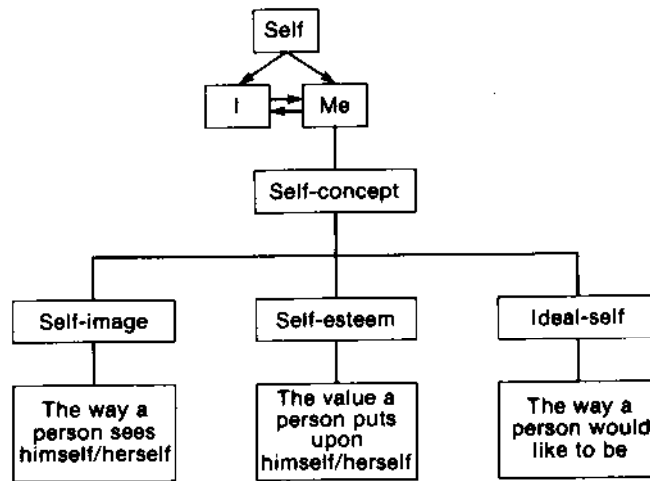


Figure 2 Some relationships and definitions concerned with the self-concept.

The self-concept is organized

2.11 So far, we have been treating the self-concept at a general level, but we have to remember that it can be considered at different levels. In other words, we have multiple self-images, and we evaluate some positively, some negatively. The self-concept is not a single element, for, as Burns (1979, p. 69) puts it, 'each individual possesses a large array of self-concepts relating to specific perceptions'.

2.12 Two common ways of presenting the organization of the self are the concentric and hierarchical models. In the concentric model (Figure 3), the elements close to the centre are regarded as being more important for the individual concerned and so would be less subject to change. In Figure 3, the academic self is considered important, whereas the sporting self is regarded as relatively unimportant. Different individuals may have different self-images, and these can be arranged in different rings and in greater detail.

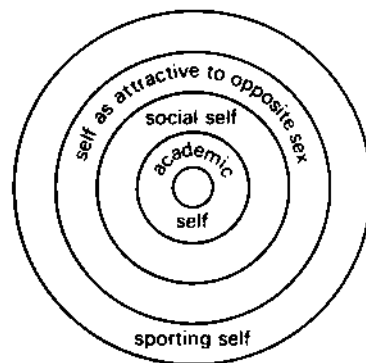


Figure 3 Illustration of the concentric model of the self-concept (Rogers, 1982, p. 146).

2.13 The more frequently found model, the hierarchical model, is illustrated in Figure 4. Human behaviour is immensely complex and when psychologists attempt to portray it, particularly diagrammatically, it is always over-simplified, but Figure 4 should give you some idea of specific aspects of the general self-concept. It is simply an illustration and does not aim at completeness: subjects such as Greek and Latin are not given as part of the 'Arts', for example. The names in the bottom line refer to 'schools' or movements in English Literature—you need not bother about their dates—and these could be added to. Only the 'academic self-concept' has been elaborated in this case.

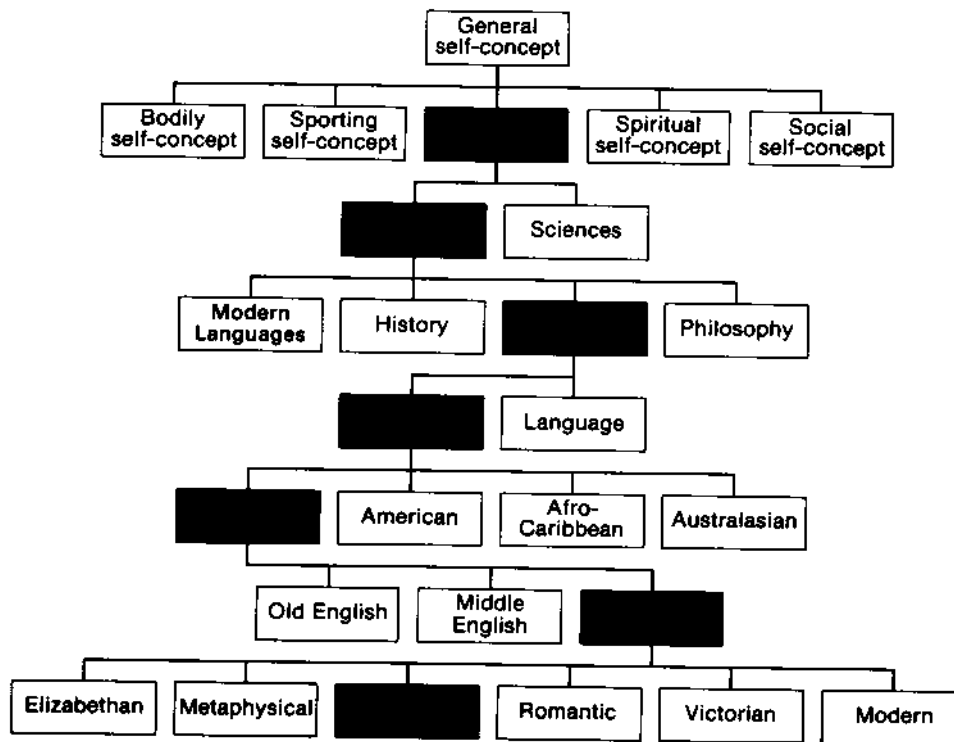


Figure 4 An example of a hierarchical model of the self-concept.

2.14 The main point about Figure 4 is that the general self-concept is at the top of the hierarchy and the further down you go the more specialized and differentiated the aspects become. So, for example, someone pursuing English at a postgraduate level may regard him/herself as an Augustan scholar above all else. If they had a negative evaluation of this aspect of their self-image, this would affect their general self-concept more radically than would positive evaluations of less central aspects of the academic self-concept.

2.15 In life, we are often made to choose between different selves, for they can be in conflict. James puts it thus:

With most objects of desire, physical nature restricts our choice to but one of many represented goods, and even so it is here. I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon-vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a 'tone poet' and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the *bon-vivant* and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. (James, 1890; 1950 edition, pp. 309–10)

2.16 Important in this context are the ideas of *consistency* and *self-enhancement* (Rogers, 1982, p. 144). Do you like to be flattered? Do you like to hear nice things said about you even if you think they are untrue? There is some evidence to suggest that such behaviour can enhance the self-concept but there is also evidence to suggest that where an individual perceives a new idea to be inconsistent with his or her self-concept then the new idea is rejected. This argument will be taken up in the section on the self-fulfilling prophecy in Unit 17, but relevant here is a piece of research by Felker (1974). He records the case of a boy doing badly at school and who had a low academic self-concept. The boy was told that intelligence tests revealed his IQ to be 120, in the hope that his performance would improve. The only noticeable change on re-testing was a drop in IQ to just over 90. In terms of a concentric view of the self-concept, it looks as if the academic self-concept simply was not central to the boy's world picture, although we always have to bear in mind the possibility that it is an artefact of the unreliability of psychological testing. It was as if he adapted his behaviour to be consistent with that self-concept.

The self-concept is a hypothetical construct

2.17 When we think of what the self-concept includes, we need to remember that it does not refer to anything tangible or directly observable. You cannot put your finger on it; it is a hypothetical construct. As such, there is a certain arbitrariness in the way we select and form definitions from our own experience. It is worth bearing that arbitrariness in mind when various research findings are discussed later in the unit. To conclude this section, however, let us look at an example of the self-concept.

The self-concept: an illustration

2.18 McCandless (1969, pp. 255–6) gives the following illustration (in an American context) of the self-concept of a young girl:

Let us examine a portion of the day of a rather bright and attractive 4½-year-old girl, whose self-concept is as yet vaguely formed. Dimly, she knows that she is well-loved and attractive. Upon awakening, she goes to her parents' room, is patted and kissed and sent on her way to get dressed for nursery school. She achieves this but neglects to brush her hair. She is sent back and, upon her return, although still not well-brushed, is told, 'How pretty you look'.

Her first period at school is an out-of-doors one. Her concept of her physical proficiency is poor, since she is small for her age and not particularly agile or graceful. She protests to her teacher that she does not want to go out, but is sent along. She finds almost all the children who are present running faster than she can run and climbing higher than she can climb. Someone runs into her and knocks her down; she sobs, then goes to the safety of the sandbox and plays quietly, perhaps alone, for the remainder of this period. The next period is an indoor activity period, where the choice of activity is free. The girl knows, in a poorly articulated fashion, that she is proficient at several things, among them the morning's offerings of woodwork, clay work, and painting. She chooses woodwork, and in half an hour has produced an object of several pieces and many nails that is accepted by her peers as a fine jet plane. She is admired for this by her teachers.

The next period is 'the circle', when all children group around the teacher for general demonstrations, discussion, and 'sharing'. The girl is a little ill at ease in large groups and has a soft voice. She sits in the circle, attempting, for security, to get as close to the teacher as she can. Her turn comes when the subject of jet planes arises; she eagerly extends her jet plane, but the big boy next to her with the big voice says, as he takes it from her, 'See, she has the wheels too far back', and the conversation and attention move on around the circle from her.

The rest of the morning is free; the weather is such that indoor equipment can be moved outside. She is verbal, imaginative, and proficient at dramatic play, so she takes several dolls, a carriage, and a baby bed outside and is soon the center and arbiter of a long and elaborate sequence of family play with three other girls and two boys. This lasts until she goes home.

Most of this girl's expectancies, rather soundly based on her credits and debits, have been confirmed on this particular morning: she has found parental love and admiration, has been defeated in large-muscle activity, has done well with finely coordinated small-muscle activity, has not excelled in the formal and competitive 'circle', but has had a minor triumph in quiet, dramatic play.

Here are McCandless's predictions and evaluations:

Projecting into the future and oversimplifying, one might predict a generally positive self-concept for this girl. Her 'failures' are not those that society regards as very serious for a girl; her successes are those that society holds to be desirable for females. We can almost see her as a young adult, looking prettily down her nose at **gross motor activities**—scorning tennis,

for example; and, by this age, not being particularly affected if, when she is forced into a game of tennis, she does poorly. She may shun large, formal groups; speak up seldom in college classes, but do well on exams; and come vividly to life in individual creative enterprises and small informal groups. She may well be popular, a respected group member, but not a leader.

Nine years later, the author continues to know this child well. His predictions have been supported as she has developed. As a 13-year-old adolescent, she is popular, an indifferent student except when strong intellectual challenge is presented, despises all forms of formal physical education/competition, is well-liked by boys, continues to be so nervous when making a formal presentation (such as a poetry reading or extemporaneous speech in front of her class) that she spends days in preparation and rehearsal with any intimate who will listen, emerges from such presentations with excellent marks but consistent comments by teachers and peers to the effect that 'You showed how nervous you were—don't let people see that your hands shake—your voice broke because of nervousness several times—I noticed you were sweating' and so on. How influential were the insensitive teacher and the big boy with the big voice in 'sharing' when she was four? She exerts substantial influence in her class, but it is of the behind-the-scenes sort: the official class leaders find her rewarding to talk to, reflect her ideas (usually rather good ones), seldom give her credit, and such a situation is exactly what she wants. Once, nominated for class office, she demanded that her name be stricken from the ballot.

2.19 Although this example may be useful in the context of the development of the self-concept, it must be remembered that predictions of future personality are *very* hazardous; there usually are so many unknown circumstances such as possible change of parental attitudes or the influence of new teachers and so on. The *complexity* of the determinants of the self-concept should be borne in mind as you read paragraphs 3.1—3.3.

2.20 Even so, the above passages from McCandless should give you some insight into the type of issues involved in discussions of the development of the self-concept, a theme we will take up in the fourth section of this unit. They also raise issues concerning the second of our questions in paragraph 1.3, and it is to that question that we now turn: What influences the formation of the self-concept? In other words, in Section 3, we will be examining the *agents* involved in the formation of the self-concept: in Section 4, we will be looking at the *processes* involved in the development of self.