

# Theories that explain the formation of self concept



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Social psychologists today are highly interested in understanding certain human behaviours and experiences, whilst attempting to understand why individuals express themselves as they do (Burr, 2002). This is explored by research into how individuals perceive themselves in relation to self, others and on a social level, which is represented throughout different aspects of an individual's life and additionally in the differing societal roles they play (Markus & Wurf, 1987, as cited in Passer et al. 2009). This perception is identified as self concept, which refers to the way in which individuals view and even analyse themselves against their own internal perceptions developed from external experiences (Higgins, 1999).

The knowledge an individual holds to evaluate themselves against certain categories is highly complex with multiple levels (Passer et al. 2009). An individual's self concept is an ever changing and adapting system of schemas (Gross, 1992), recognised as the 'working self-concept' (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987, as cited in Onorato & Turner, 2004). As self awareness alters, certain attributes an individual holds also extends and this development happens throughout an individual's lifetime (Gross, 1992).

Self image and self esteem are components developed from self schemas which complexly store and classify characteristics that an individual holds about themselves, others and the world they live in (Gross, 1992). These characteristics are individualistic and affiliate with that person, for example if being well mannered was central to an individual it would feature in their schema, as that particular element of them is significant and therefore part of their self-concept. The combination of the self schemas present in an

individual's cognitive structure influences their behaviours on a personal and also a social level (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005).

This essay aims to critically compare and contrast two main theories of self concept, the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and the self-categorisation theory (Turner, Higg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherall, 1987, as cited in Brown, 2006). Both theories endeavour to explain how self concept is shaped on a personal and a social level.

The first perspective that is said to form our self concept and how schemas within this are represented is the self-discrepancy theory presented by Higgins (1987), who suggested that knowledge about the self is distinctively separated into different elements which are activated by different aspects of the self (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). These representations of the self are distinguished by who individuals currently are at that moment in time, described as the 'actual self', but additionally who they strive to be, the 'ideal self' or strive not to become the 'ought self' (Passer et al. 2009). The actual self's continuous battle with its 'ideal', centres its attention on goals that will achieve this ultimate state (Passer et al. 2009), whereas the 'ought self' is maintaining a sense of obligation or responsibility to its actual self (Strauman, 1996), and also aspiring to prevent certain outcomes from happening, for example failure (Passer et al. 2009).

The association between the 'actual self' and the remaining two representations can pose conflict (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005), which motivates the 'actual self' to correct and change (Brown, 2006). The promotion of the 'actual self' to the 'ideal self' (Passer et al. 2009) is referred to by Thomas.

Rodebaugh and Donahue (2007) as the 'ideal discrepancy', and is motivated by inspirational and encouraging role models (Passer et al. 2009). However when discrepancies arise between the 'actual' and 'ideal self' and the attempted goal is not achieved, consequently stirred by the positive role model, for example: an attempt to learn a musical instrument (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005); then certain despondency and emotions of disappointment can arise (Strauman & Higgins, 1988).

In contrast the goal between the 'actual self' to the 'ought self' (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) referred to as the 'ought discrepancy' (Rodebaugh & Donahue, 2007), ensures the individual can avoid similarities to a negative potentially harmful role model, and also maintain a sense of responsibility to their 'ideal' (Passer et al. 2009). Once again if this is attempted but is not successful (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005), the emotional outcomes consist of anxiety, agitation and also fear (Strauman & Higgins, 1988).

The self beliefs that are experienced due to the discrepancies between an individual's differing 'selves' has been said to provide an understandable framework of certain emotional behaviours. These have differing magnitudes induced by the conflict (Higgins, 1987), with the self-discrepancy hypothesis stating the easier the self discrepancy is to access the stronger the emotion the individual will experience (Higgins, 1987, 1989a, 1989b; Higgins et al., 1986 as cited in Higgins, 1999). This could then go on to determine an individual's level of self esteem, if the 'ideal self' is vastly different to the persons 'actual self', their self image will be distorted. Hence the larger the gap between 'ideal self' and self image, the more negatively affected an individual's self esteem levels (Gross, 1992).

According to Higgins (1987 as cited in Rodebaugh & Donahue, 2007) there is an essential difference between the types of emotions experienced in relation to the 'ideal' and 'ought' selves with effects to self esteem, therefore the area of self discrepancy is of great interest to the effective treatment of syndromes in relation to depression or anxiety. Self discrepancy can be measured by the Self Questionnaire (SQ) developed by Higgins, Klein and Strauman (1985, as cited in Rodebaugh & Donahue, 2007) which asks participants to list attributes connected to themselves and also their hypothetical self comprising of 'ought' and ideal 'notions'.

However Higgins' theory has been contested by numerous research, one study in particular conducted by Rodebaugh & Donahue (2007) investigated as to whether the relationship between the anxiety expressed from the 'ought' discrepancy actually existed. The results failed to show the expected association between the two variables supporting other research which questioned the effectiveness of the SQ and as to whether it alone is a valid measurement of self discrepancy (Rodebaugh & Donahue, 2007).

Taking this into consideration it could be recognised that there are other factors present in defining the self concept of an individual, or in fact how the selves within the self-discrepancy theory are formed. A study by Stauman (1996) suggested that the construction of the 'ideal' and 'ought' selves is acquired through certain experiences, for example childhood memories which effectively involve others, therefore group experiences and community influence could have a major effect in the formation of self concept.

In addition to this the process in which individuals self categorise themselves identified by the self-discrepancy theory has been said to have an influence on the judgements and evaluations of others (Hastorf, Richardson, & Dornbusch 1958 cited in Higgins. 1987). Therefore self-discrepancy even though it focuses on the personal internal conflict of an individual's self concept, could potentially go on to have an effect on more general implications such as how individuals behave and function within group situations (Higgins, 1987).

The different categories of self that influences individuals on a personal level found in the self-discrepancy theory is in contrast to the group perception of self (Strauman, 1996) represented in the alternative theory of self concept, self-categorisation developed by Turner (1985, as cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) describing the formation of self concept on a group basis,

Self-categorisation is a significant extension of the social identity theory therefore comes under the social identity approach. Social identity examines the intergroup constructions, relations and specific intergroup behaviours that define an individual's social identity. Turner (1982, as cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2005), states that personal identity is quite a separate notion to social identity, and intergroup processes cannot be explained in terms of individual characteristics and idiosyncrasies but on a more collective level (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005).

In contrast to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) the classification of the 'self' into schemas in the self-categorisation theory is on a group level, and is reflected in the tendency of individuals to categorise themselves and each

other into groups of belonging 'in groups' and those of which they do not belong 'out groups' (Passer et al. 2009).. From these classifications in addition to our personal identity and concept (Passer et al. 2009), a sense of social identity is also developed, alongside specific intergroup behaviours (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005).

The categories represented are at the centre of this theory, with individuals characterising groups in which they belong as 'prototypes', in other words a characteristic or quality that defines the group and additionally differentiates it from others, this is recognised by Campbell (1958, cited in (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) as a distinctive entity he calls 'entitativity'.

Using the 'in group' or 'out group' prototype as a means of categorisation, individuals perceive not only themselves but other group members and subsequently their behaviours as "prototypical embodiments of a social group." (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, p. 410). Therefore individuals stereotypically 'act' in accordance to a manner specific to the group they belong, therefore displaying 'in group behaviours' (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). The result of these behaviours according to Turner (1991, as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1999) is conformity and group compliances but also solidarity and group unity (Hogg, 1992, as cited in Abrams & Hogg, 1999).

The development and enhancement of an individual's self image and social identity is dependent on group membership (Burr, 2002) and in group-out group prominence, with an individual's value of themselves directly corresponding to the value they place on their in-group position, leading to

the emergence of positive and self affirmative emotions represented by self esteem (Turner, 1999, as cited in Voci, 2006).

This is contrasting to the notion of self esteem recognised by the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which is determined by the extent of the discrepancies between the actual self and the other two selves, on a more personal cognitive level (Gross, 1992). Therefore self esteem in the theory of self-categorisation is closely related to an individual's social identity, their position within their in-group and their similarities to others inside their group, rather than being comparable to their 'ideal' self (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005).

Although feelings associated with negative self esteem show certain similarities to the self-discrepancy theory, if the individual within a group considers they have an extensive discrepancy between themselves and other group members or the group as an entirety as they have to their 'ideal', then a positive self esteem is not likely to be experienced (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Therefore the two theories collectively evaluate the self to an ultimate model, either to 'ideal' self or to 'ideal' social group.

In conclusion the two theories outlined in this essay each explain the development of self concept from an individual and collective centred approach (Burr, 2002). The self-discrepancy theory recognises three cognitive dimensions that are said to represent who we are, which are shaped from schemas (Passer et al. 2009), whereas the self-categorisation recognises that self knowledge is established from membership to a group, which generates an individuals' sense of social identity (Brown, 2006).



The two theories both explain how self representations are formed with research evidence to support both their assumptions. The way in which self concept is formed in the self-discrepancy theory, provides a clear cognitive representation of the self, which is subsequently developed through the many schemas each individual possess'. However these schemas are said to be derived from the interactions individuals have with their environment and the ways in which they are treated in their social world (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001).

It has been argued that an individual's self perception is central to the collective world they experience (Gross, 1992) and the roles they have in society (Markus and Wurf, 1987, as cited in Passer et al. 2009). Taking this into consideration it could be argued that the self categorisation theory provides a stronger principle to the formation of self concept (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). However both of the theories discussed provide a valuable insight into how self concept is established, with elements of both successfully grasping the nature of ' self' perception.