Self-concept: meaning of life and ideal self

Experience, Meaning of Life

" Self-Concept" written by Barry Joel Desaine (March 2010) Email: com SELF-CONCEPT Sensing that he is a distinct and separate existence from others through time and space, a man becomes aware of his existential self from infancy. As he matures he also becomes aware of his categorical self through the realization that he has characteristics or attributes that distinguishes him from other objects in hisenvironment. These two aspects – the existential self and the categorical self – constitute the initial ways in which an individual begins the self-perception process that leads to his self-concept (Lewis and Brooks-Gunn, 1979).

However, because the idea of self-concept is utilized in many disciplines includingpsychology, philosophy, sociology, nursing, biology and anthropology, there is no consensus as to how to define " self-concept" using terms of specificity. As illustrative of this, the concept of self-identity is referred by theorists using a diversity of terms such as: the authentic self; the cohesive self; the core self; the saturated self; and the possible selves.

Additionally, in describing the components of self-concept, the influential humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, used global terms such as: self-image; self-esteem; and the ideal self, while educational psychologist Gary D. Phye and other theorists used more specific terms such as: the physical component; the social component; theacademicor intellectual component; etc. Suffice it to say, most of the research literature suggests that self-concept may be generally defined as the sum total of what an individual thinks or perceives about himself.

Using this general definition as a foundation this essay proposes to examine the components of a man's self-concept in terms of his: personhood; place in society; perfection; and purpose. Personhood – Who am I? Who am I? This is the most fundamental question which an individual can ask about himself and in endeavoring to determine an answer, whether conscientiously or unconscientiously, his self-image is created. A man's conscientiousness bears witness that he is more than just a chemical composition of matter – more than mere physical existence.

He is aware that he is made up of both material and immaterial constituencies and, as a result, his self-image is also comprised of factors of both. These factors include physical, moral, social, emotional and intellectual traits. Firstly, a person's self-image includes a mental picture of his physical appearance or what is termed body image. It is made up of his perception of his body, both internally and externally. He may think of himself as being too skinny, having beautiful eyes, a nice face, a nose that is too big or any combination of approval or disapproval of a vast variety of physical attributes and abilities.

Inherent in this is also the feelings and attitudes he has about his body. Body image is affected by a number of factors including: normal developmental growth; one's perception of what others think of his body; and cultural and social attitudes and values. For example: A child's body image is very different from that of an adolescent teen. Similarly, the wife of an abusive husband who speaks ill of her body can develop a poor body image. Additionally, in some cultures a fat person is considered to be a healthy

person so that a skinny person in thatculturemay tend to have a poorer body image based on societal values.

Secondly, a person's self-image also includes his moral traits such as his core values and beliefs. He may view himself as being honest and upright or he may be confident of his voracity and godliness. On the other hand, he may even think that he is wicked and vile or generally of an evil disposition. As with his physical traits his perception of his morality is a part of his self-image and is not an inevitably accurate reflection of his personhood. In a similar manner, a person's self-image includes perceptions of his social, emotional and intellectual traits.

From a social perspective he may see himself as being a good father, loving husband and competent worker. Emotionally, he may think he has a sanguinepersonalitywith a measured temperament. Finally, from an intellectual perspective he may think he is very smart, or of average intellect, or may lack confidence in his academic abilities. In summary, a person's self-image helps him understand his personhood and helps him to define who he is in his own eyes. It is a major component of his self-concept.

Place in Society – How do I fit in? How do I fit into society? This is another question that is internalized by an individual, whether conscientiously or not. It leads to the development of his self-esteem. Self-esteem is very important as it affects how we think, act and relate to other people. It may be defined as having a favourable perception of oneself and may be qualitatively described according to the degree of favorability. High self-esteem is a good opinion of oneself whereas low self-esteem is its antithesis.

In finding his place in society an individual would generally focus on: his relationship with others; his value to them; the role models who influence him; and his ability to influence others. These domains all constitute the conditions for his self-esteem development which is a major component of self-image (Rogers, 1979). Although a person's self-concept starts with understanding his personhood, this existential-anthropological view of the individualistic self may give way to his acceptance that he is an integral part of a larger society.

He learns how to define the self by comparing himself with others around him (Festinger, 1954). Within this framework, he recognizes the importance of various associations or relationships includingfamilyrelations, careerrelations, community relations, and other relations. This " connectiveness" to the society may lead to a more systemic view of the self as the individual considers his role in its holistic development. Inherent in this is his understanding of his value to the society and his ability to influence others towards its development.

The degree to which he is able to succeed in these ventures highly impacts his level of self-esteem. Consistent put-downs, discounting, threat, loneliness, powerlessness, frustration, and intolerance are the seeds of low self-esteem that leads to a harvest of these negative characteristics. On the other hand, developing high self-esteem requires: encouragement; acceptance of oneself and others; perceptiveness; an appreciation of life; reassurance; and faith in oneself and others; and ultimately trust in God.

All of these factors are based on interpersonal relationships. Perfection –
Who do I want to be? Am I the person I want to be? This is another question
that is internalized by an individual in the development of his self-concept. A
person's self-image does not always match the image of what he would like
to be or what is termed his " ideal self" (Rogers, 1979) nor what he thinks he
should be or what is termed his " ought-to-be self". This sometimes affects
the degree to which he values himself as there is a very close relationship
between self-image and self-esteem.

The ideal self and the ought-to-be self are sometimes collectively referred to
as the " possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These are generally not
consistent with the actual life experiences of a person. Psychologists refer to
a large difference between self-image and the idea self as " incongruence"
while a relatively small difference is called " congruence. " All individuals
experience a certain degree of incongruence. Carl Rogers believed that the
greater the degree of incongruence the more difficult it is for a person to
arrive at self-actualization.

As a result, the individual always strives to make changes in order to come
as close as possible to his ideal self or ought-to-be self. Social comparison
theorists have a different view in regards to man's perfection. They contend
that many individuals do not have an image of perfection or an ideal self but
instead they compare themselves to " similar others" to validate their own
attitudes and values (Jetten, Spears, and Manstead, 1996). However, the
general idea is the same i. e. comparison of oneself to a perfect other,

whether the ideal self, ought self or similar others, is another component of self-concept.

Purpose – Why am I here? Why am I here? Since the meaning of life is an issue that is debated philosophically, scientifically and theologically there are various answers to this question. However, despite the diversity of answers the question is of vital importance since the answer determines how one sees the world and how one sees the world also determines how he sees himself. One's religious belief about the meaning of life is a powerful influence on his self-concept (Blaine, Trivedi & Eshleman, 1998).

Additionally, religion may be an underlying method for organizing self-concept principles since it encompasses all facets of life. A major contribution of religion to self-concept development is its role in affecting one's self-esteem. Research has shown that students who abandon traditional religious practice in order to become involved in the occult were much more likely to have: low self-esteem; negative feelings about school; poor self-concept; a higher tolerance for deviance; negative feelings about the future; and little desire to be a good person (Tenant-Clark, C.

M. , Fritz, J. J. , & Beauvais, F. , 1989). In contrast, students who are affiliated with a traditional religious persuasion are less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour (Rhodes & Reiss, 1970). Additionally, the question of the purpose of life is significant in determining an individual's self-value. For example, atheism postulates that since there is no god there is no intrinsic value to life: Life is as meaningful as you want to make it (Dawkins, 2006).

The question of purpose is pointless and one is worth as much as he thinks he is.

In contrast, theism postulates that life comes from God and therefore has an intrinsic value that is determined by Him: Life is meaningful because God created you for His purpose. Self-value is not determined by what people think but on knowing that God has a purpose for everyone. Ultimately, one's self-concept is influenced by his understanding of the purpose for his life. In summary, self-concept is the view one has of himself and is determined by his experiences and the value placed on them. The components of one's self-concept include his: personhood; place in society; view of perfection and his view of his life's purpose.