

Importance of self knowledge in understanding the self



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There has been an abundance of literature surrounding the importance of self-esteem in developing a greater understanding of the self. The present paper introduces an alternative perspective on the self which incorporates important features of previous perspectives and shares many theories with them. The functions of self-knowledge, however, are highlighted and rather than the drive for self-esteem this paper argues for the need of self-knowledge in acquiring a more elaborate understanding of the self.

According to Neisser (1988) there are several types of self knowledge, the ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self and the conceptual self. Each 'self' operates in unison with the other, with each exhibiting fundamental importance, however, this paper concentrates on the extended self and how a person's life narrative identity can affect various aspects of the individual including interpersonal relations, self-presentations and the "need to belong" thus leading to a more clarified idea of the self.

The extended self, is the self as it was in the past and as we expect it to be in the future, distinguished primarily on the basis of memory (Neisser, 1988).

Belk (1988; cited in Ahuvia, 2005) uses the terms "self," "sense of self," and "identity" to describe how an individual subjectively distinguishes who he or she is. Belk refuses to accept any definition of the self that can relate consistently across individuals and cultures because according to him what comprises the self is a personal appraisal that differs among people and across time.

Self-knowledge – The extended self

Bluck (2003; cited in Conway, 2005, p. 596) claimed "A stable, integrated, self with a confirmatory past that yields a consistent and rich life story

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constitutes a self that is able to operate effectively, achieve goals, and relate to others in productive ways.” According to such a perspective, memories and stories of an individual’s life experiences thus affect various aspects of life and develop other features of the self. Interest in the past enhances as the child starts to grasp the social relevance of autobiographical recollection, for example, its ability for developing and continuing relationships beyond the here and now. The main adaptive purpose of memory is perhaps that it allows for the making of permanent interpersonal relations, and therefore to a great extent strengthens the unity of individual groups (Neisser, 1988). The findings of Swann and Predmore (1985) suggest that relationships provide stability to the private self. In their study partners in a relationship actively helped people sustain a stable consistent view of themselves by working to discredit contrary evidence. Having a long term, stable relationship is thus a potentially powerful source of self concept stability. Also Tice and Baumeister (2001) claim that the human mind is devised for interpersonal relations and that developing and sustaining interpersonal relationships is a key function of the human being. With the individual’s memory and narrative identity contributing to such relations the extended self becomes more and more significant as we grow older.

According to Negele & Habermas (2009), “ Life narratives are manifestations of the subjective representation of one’s life course. They interpret a life through explicit statements on the narrator’s identity and self-concept as well as by selecting specific personal experiences to be included in the narrative.” (p. 1). Along with this view, McAdams (2006) claims a person’s life story offers a life with a general sense of unity and reason. There are

many different views on the importance of life stories and memories in relation to the self but there seems to be an overall standpoint that such stories allow people a way to explain who they are, how they came to be and where they believe their lives may be going (Bruner, 1990), which are all essential questions to be tackled in the quest for self clarification. Research by McLean and Thorne (2003) concentrate on what constituted self-defining memories of 19-year olds regarding their experience of relationships. Results showed that memories of parents were more inclined to highlight issues relating to separation however self-defining memories of friends highlighted closeness and romantic relationships. Therefore, memories of teenage years are often of occasions in which identity creation is at its greatest, a period that Arnett (2000) labelled emerging adulthood. Many theorists including Habermas & Bluck (2000) suggest that this period, in which identity formation is at its peak, entails the development of a more distinguished and integrated knowledge of their own self. Singer and Salovey (1993) suggest that each person creates self-concepts from the information enclosed in the life experiences they choose to share. As they do so, they expand a remarkable source of knowledge, including knowledge about their individual capabilities, accomplishments, desires, values, and aims. This creation of the self-concept does not come about by chance; the information is precise, original, and inspired to each person. Disparity in the content and order of self-knowledge portrays crucial variations among individuals in social histories, insights, and behaviour. It is from this knowledge that self-images materialize, which are defined as mental ideas of the self regarding the past, present, and future ambitions and make up part of the conceptual self (Conway, 2005).

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The main argument throughout this paper is that human memory is a key element of the self and there has been much research carried out supporting the notion that memory can be reconstructive in order to support current aspects of the self, e. g., Loftus (1993), Loftus & Ketcham (1994). According to Conway (2005) this is done in order to make memory coherent with an individual's present goals, self-images, and self-beliefs. Therefore, memory and key features of the self shape a system in which, regarding healthy persons, ideas about, and knowledge of, the self are verified and sustained by memories of particular incidents. According to Neisser (1988) what information we remember is dependent on what we currently believe along with what has been stored. What we recall and what we decide to share with others is crucial as it influences others' perception of us. This can be related to our " need to belong" and studies such as Tice (1992) and Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty (1994) suggest that people use self-presentations to uphold a certain identity, and how they portray themselves to others determines how they end up viewing themselves. Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, and Skelton (1981) provided a biased scanning model suggesting that certain behaviours cause people to scan their memories for certain kinds of information, and these scans can leave a biased example of one's own behaviour in memory, thereby determining how the person thinks of himself or herself. McLean et al. (2007) claimed that " To witness the construction of situated stories is to understand the dynamic development of the self. Indeed, sharing stories is the mechanism through which people become selves." (p. 275). This final quote sums up the argument of the paper in that the self can never fully be appreciated without the memories and experiences with which it is defined.

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Conclusion

The argument presented in this paper introduces the importance of self knowledge and in particular the extended self in developing a greater understanding of the self. While incorporating other theorists' views, self knowledge is emphasized in that it can shape and is inter-related with various other aspects of the self. Autobiographical memories and life stories of the extended self affects interpersonal relations, which in turn can affect an individual's " need to belong" and self presentations or vice versa and so on, thus, is at the heart of the discovery of the self. As stated in the introduction, the view portrayed in the present paper is similar to that of Belk's, that the ' self' cannot simply be viewed through components which are universal. Self knowledge and specifically an individual's extended self is a vital contributor to a greater understanding of the self, one that is completely unique to the person and thus defines the self through their own personal life stories and experiences. This does not mean to deny the important contribution of self-esteem and a variety of other components in understanding the self but merely addresses the significance of another perspective which incorporates the contribution of self-knowledge in the construction and perception of the self.