

## Introduction

For the researcher interested in studying the self, there are a number of important and often controversial issues to consider, many of which were first described by William James a century ago in 1890 (Markus 1990). For example, what are the characteristics and dimensions of the self? How best should the self be measured? What are the effects of the self on a person's motivations, behaviors, and processing of information? Contemporary efforts to study the self vary dramatically in their scope and in how they address these issues.

Since the rediscovery of the self as an object of scientific study over the past two decades (Hales 1985), an explosion of theory and research has occurred among clinical, developmental, educational, and social psychologists as well as other social scientists (Gecas 1982; Greenwald & Pratkanis 1984; Rosenberg 1979; Yardley & Honess 1987). This is an exciting period for anyone interested in studying the self. However, it is also a frustrating and difficult time for those who wish to come up with a meaningful picture of the self. There is wide disagreement about how to define the self, measure it, and study its development. Numerous difficulties also arise when one attempts to integrate the differing theoretical, methodological, and developmental perspectives.

A major reason for this state of affairs is that, too often, self-researchers are overly restrictive in their approach to studying the self. One way that problems of studying the self can be addressed is by simultaneously considering theoretical, methodological, and developmental issues. These issues are related to each other in several important ways. Consequently, any discussion of one set of issues necessitates a consideration of the other two. For example, how one defines the self will dictate the methods used to measure it. Differences in how researchers define and measure the self will also increase in importance when the research is couched in terms of developmental issues.

This volume—as well as its companion volume in this series, *Self-Perspectives across the Lifespan*—enlist contributions to studying the self that illustrate and directly address these issues. The contributors describe the theoretical and methodological issues relating to their particular approach to studying the self as well as the lifespan developmental implications of their work.

Our goal is to arrive at a broad understanding of the study of the self. Any approach to studying the self must address a set of important choice points. These primarily concern the questions of *what*, *how*, and *whom* to study. By way of a general introduction to this volume, we would like to describe briefly the first two of these choice points and how the volume addresses them. The companion volume on the self across the lifespan will devote more attention to the issue of whom to study.

As previous theory and research have shown, the self can be defined in many different ways. Thus, when one studies the self, an important initial question concerns exactly what is to be studied. There is a great deal of variety in how this question is answered in this volume. For example, some chapters focus on the structural properties of the self (Ashmore and Ogilvie, chapter 7; L'Écuyer, chapter 3; and Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson, chapter 2); others emphasize the processing aspects of the self (Freeman, chapter 1); and still others consider both the structural and processing aspects of the self (Hart and Edelstein, chapter 8). Similarly, some contributors devote their attention to self-esteem/evaluation (Juhasz, chapter 6); some focus on self-concept/description (Freeman; and L'Écuyer), and others consider both the descriptive and evaluative aspects of the self (Brinthaup and Erwin, chapter 4).

Whatever one's preference for defining the self, this definition of *what* to study both influences and is influenced by *how* it can or should be studied. Thus, even if researchers are in general agreement about what they are studying, there are often disagreements about how to best study it. For example, whereas some contributors who emphasize self-structure prefer to employ standardized questionnaires (Byrne, Shavelson and Marsh, chapter 5; and Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson), others rely on open-ended interviews and self-description tasks (Ashmore and Ogilvie; Hart and Edelstein; and L'Écuyer). Among those contributors who are interested in self-esteem, standardized questionnaires, interviews, or a combination of questionnaire and interview are also used (Brinthaup and Erwin; and Juhasz).

Paralleling the choice points of what and how, this volume is divided into two major parts. "Defining the Self"—or Part I—includes a sampling of contemporary theoretical perspectives. "Measuring the Self"—Part II—examines various measurement and methodological issues and techniques. In the following pages, we describe each of these sections in more detail.

## PART I: DEFINING THE SELF

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

What exactly is the "self?" Previous theory and research have identified several theoretical issues pertaining to this question. For example, one issue is the distinction between the descriptive and evaluative components of the self. How are our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about ourselves related to each other? Several reviewers have addressed this issue in terms of the distinction between self-conception and self-evaluation (Beane & Lipka 1980; Blyth & Traeger 1983; Greenwald 1988; Greenwald, Bellezza & Banaji 1988).

A second issue is the distinction between the self-as-subject (or active agent) and the self-as-object (or observed entity). What is the difference between the *I* and the *me*? In trying to answer this question, theorists have attempted to specify the major dimensions of the self as both subject and object (Damon & Hart 1982, 1986; Harter 1983).

A third theoretical issue concerns the question of change versus stability of self. Is the self purely a reflection of situational and contextual variants (Gergen 1977); or is there a central and stable core self (Markus & Kunda 1986; Markus & Nurius 1986)?

Is the self part of the ego, personality, identity, consciousness, or soul? Or is it separate from these concepts? In their attempts to specify the characteristics and dimensions of the self, theorists have emphasized its structural properties, its processes, or both of these components. For example, self researchers have variously defined the self as (1) a schema (Markus 1983), prototype (Rogers 1981), or cognitive representation (Kihlstrom et al. 1988); (2) a multidimensional hierarchical construct (Marsh & Shavelson 1985); (3) a narrative sequence (Gergen & Gergen 1988); (4) a linguistic description of subjective experience (Young-Eisendrath & Hall 1987); and (5) an elaborate theory (Epstein 1973).

Some theorists are interested in describing and differentiating specific components of the self (Greenwald & Pratkanis 1984); some are cognitively oriented, emphasizing the information-processing characteristics of the self (Kihlstrom et al. 1988); and some are motivationally-oriented, focusing on the self's tendencies for enhancement, consistency, and/or distortion (Sorrentino & Higgins 1986).

Fundamental theoretical issues such as these have stimulated a renewed and active interest in defining the self. As the preceding paragraphs suggest, the field is replete with alternative and sometimes contradictory perspectives. In this section of the volume, we present three very different but representative contributions to defining the self.

In the first selection, Freeman focuses on the claim that the adult self (and, more generally, adult development) is essentially a random phenomenon without any clear trajectory. Drawing on a wide variety of philosophical, psychological, and literary sources, he defines the self as an ongoing story, narrative, or interpretive creation. According to this perspective, the self is closely tied to past experiences, with its defining characteristics fitting together into a coherent package. As Freeman notes, an important implication of such a definition is that the self researcher must be both a historian and a scientist.

If the self is defined in narrative terms, then how can it be studied? In attempting to answer this question, Freeman reviews several potential criticisms of his definition of the self. For example, a person may embellish, distort, or deceive in his or her self-narrative. Freeman points out that, first, even if present experience affects one's interpretations of the past, this does not necessarily falsify them. Second, and more importantly, it is precisely through these self-narrative processes that a better understanding of the self as a meaning-maker and a significance-generator can be obtained.

Chapter 2 by Marsh and his colleagues is, in some ways, diametrically opposed to the Freeman selection. Rather than focusing on the broader phenomenological and experiential issues related to defining and studying the self, Marsh and colleagues focus on the structure and content of the self. They define the self in terms of its multidimensionality (for example, with physical, social, academic, and nonacademic components) and its hierarchical organization. They assume that there is a set of components that we all share and that is structured in a similar manner across individuals.

Given this structural definition of the self, how can it be studied? Marsh and colleagues describe how their model of the self led to the construction and validation of a set of multidimensional measures of the self. They then review a wide array of research designed to establish the usefulness of their model and the validity of their measures, which they called "Self Description Questionnaires." Much of their review supports the contention that the multidimensionality of the self must be taken into account by researchers of the self. They illustrate how the relationship between theoretical and methodological issues has guided their efforts to define and study the self. Sometimes, their theoretical conceptualization of the self is revised, while at other times, their measures are revised.

In the final contribution to this section, L'Écuyer describes in chapter 3 an approach to defining and studying the self that draws on both the traditions exemplified by Freeman and by Marsh and colleagues. L'Écuyer is unique in that he is one of the few researchers who are actively engaged in studying the self all across the lifespan. In accomplishing this, he has had to deal with several theoretical and methodological issues, and his chapter describes the many choices that he made in addressing these issues.

As do Marsh and colleagues in chapter 2, L'Écuyer defines the self in multidimensional and hierarchical terms. But, as does Freeman in chapter 1, L'Écuyer also allows his subjects to describe themselves in an open-ended fashion. The result is a definition of the self across the lifespan that identifies structure by relying on the self as experienced and described by respondents. It is interesting to note the similarities and differences between his dimensions of the self and those of Marsh and colleagues. In addition, as do Marsh and colleagues, L'Écuyer illustrates one of the major themes of this volume: how one defines the self affects one's preferred methodology and instrumentation, which, in turn, affect how one comes to subsequently define the self.

## PART II: MEASURING THE SELF

### *Methodological Approaches*

As the contributions to the "Defining the Self" part of this volume suggest, different theoretical perspectives are associated with quite different approaches to measuring the self. Is there a best way to measure the self?

In answering this question, several methodological issues must be addressed by the researcher of the self (Wells & Marwell 1976; Wylie 1974, 1989). Most of these issues apply equally well to research on other topics. For example, do the instruments being used have sound psychometric properties, such as high reliability and validity, and can the findings be easily replicated?

In addition, researchers of the self must be concerned with social desirability and other response biases. They can choose among methods that differ in the amount of time and effort required of both researcher and participant. Furthermore, it is clear that various methods produce dramatically different quantitative and qualitative data related to the self (Jackson 1984).

Among the approaches available to the researcher of the self are scales and questionnaires, sorting tasks, structured or unstructured interviews, prospective or retrospective tasks, memory and reaction-time experiments, projection measures, experiential sampling, and even psychophysiological and neurological techniques. Throughout this volume, we have selected contributions that reflect this variety of approaches to studying the self. The five contributions in part II focus on a set of general measurement issues, ranging from such theoretical issues as the impact of others on the self to the multidimensional structure of the self.

Most researchers rely on the self-reports of participants as the primary source of data about the self. In chapter 4, Brinthaup and Erwin extensively review the factors that affect the process of self-report. These factors include the accessibility and organization of self-relevant knowledge; contextual, situational, and cultural factors; and individual and developmental differences. Then, they focus on two popular self-report methodologies for studying the self: the so-called reactive and spontaneous approaches (McGuire 1984). The reactive approach requires subjects to locate themselves on one or more dimensions determined by the experimenter to be important. The spontaneous approach requires subjects to respond to a very general or vague prompt (such as "Who are you?") in a minimally structured format. After evaluating and comparing the spontaneous and reactive approaches to measuring the self, Brinthaup and Erwin describe a study that compares data obtained from each approach.

A great deal of interest in research on the self concerns the study of differences between groups. For example, does one group of children have higher self-esteem than does another group? For the researcher who defines the self in terms of multiple components,

there are certain methodological assumptions that accompany this definition. Two of these assumptions are that the relations among self-components are the same across different groups and that the measuring instrument is perceived in the same way by different groups.

As Byrne and her colleagues note in chapter 5, these assumptions can be violated in several ways. In fact, this may account for some of the inconsistency in research on the self. Using statistical advances such as confirmatory factor analysis and the analysis of covariance structures, Byrne and colleagues demonstrate, first, that the structure of the self can vary across gender. In particular, they report research in which relations among self-related abilities, such as English and mathematics, are not the same for adolescent males as they are for females.

Second, Byrne and colleagues show that the properties of a measure of self can vary across age groups. For example, a study of gifted children illustrates differences in the perception of item content by fifth- and eighth-graders. These issues have important implications for the study of mean-group differences in research on the self as well as on research into a variety of other topics.

One of the defining characteristics of the self on which nearly all researchers agree is that social interaction and the reactions of other persons play a key role in self-perception (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Stryker 1987; Vallacher 1980). Despite this agreement, there has been very little attention devoted to the measurement and conceptualization of these so-called significant others.

In chapter 6, Juhasz reviews how another person can assume a significant role in an individual's self-evaluation. Using student-teacher perceptions as an example, she points out the highly subjective and personal nature of determining the significance of another and the potential for self-perceptual biases in the interpretation of feedback from others. In addition, Juhasz reviews and critiques a wide variety of measures that either assess the perceived significance of others in some way or can be so adapted. Throughout her review, she shows how the multifaceted nature of the self—as well as the situational and temporal influences on the perceptions of others—make measuring significance a formidable task.

In chapter 7, Ashmore and Ogilvie present an important new approach to measuring the self in the context of its relationship with others. They begin with the assumption that the dimensions of evaluation (good/bad) and gender (man/woman) underlie

personal identity in terms of how individuals organize their interpersonal self.

Assuming that an adequate understanding of the self must include an individual's internal representations of past and present social relationships, Ashmore and Ogilvie propose a unique unit of measurement, which they call "self-with-other representations." After a thorough description of the methods and procedures designed to operationalize this unit of measurement, Ashmore and Ogilvie demonstrate how these data can be analyzed using hierarchical classes analysis. In so doing, they demonstrate how self-with-other representations can be assessed and visually depicted, even illustrating the feelings of ambivalence that characterize the self in relationship to others. The inferences that can be drawn about self-structure from the resulting hierarchical configurations will be of interest to social, cognitive, developmental, and clinical psychologists.

In the final chapter of this volume, Hart and Edelstein examine the effects of different cultural contexts on the self by reviewing and critiquing theoretical and methodological approaches to cross-cultural research on the self. Then they apply their own approach to defining and measuring the self in different cultural contexts, describing their research with Puerto Rican and Icelandic children and adolescents. Among their conclusions is that, at least in part, cultural ideology and social-class memberships determine adolescents' self-perceptions, such as whether they understand themselves primarily in individual versus social terms. More importantly, they suggest that traditional descriptions of developmental changes in the self must be qualified by the effects of cultural contexts. What are interpreted as developmental changes or advances may, in fact, reflect the effects of cultural socialization and experience. Finally, they make the case that finding—or failing to find—cultural effects on the self is heavily dependent upon the methodology employed.

In summary, each contribution to this volume presents a systematic analysis of specific theoretical and methodological disputes related to the study of the self. The contributors vary in their emphasis on the structural and processing aspects of the self, and a good deal of variety in terms of the methodologies employed and the methodological questions addressed also exists. Theory and research on the self have increasingly come to occupy the attention and interest of several disciplines. As a much-needed sourcebook for those who are interested in studying the self, we intend this book to provide a clear and wide-ranging discussion of many of the issues which researchers of the self will need to confront.



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