

The Sense of self

Scott Brown

Social Psychology

Cheryl Cardinal

07/27/2009

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### The Sense of Self

Everyone deals with self-esteem and confidence in their daily lives. Many people grow up with a poor image of themselves. When a person has a poor sense of self, what determines a person's internal identity; life can be a sad and disappointing existence. I have had my own struggle with my self-image and believe it is important to have a strong sense of self. There are experiences of my life that have most contributed to my former negative sense of self. A positive view of self is important to live a happy life and successful life.

The concept of self is often underdeveloped. Many children struggle to discover their true identities. Some unfortunately develop a false sense of self, believing to be something they are not. This is primarily in the context of something negative. For example: a child who is consistently teased over a long period of time can begin to believe they are bad for being different. Such is why a strong self image is important. Developing, protecting, and revising the self leads to a successful life.

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At an early age, a child begins to understand the world from a personal perspective. As cognitive function improves, children develop their own identity based on various factors, but primarily on genetics and on environmental experiences. Gender, attraction, tastes, philosophy, and politics are some of the things that make up identity. Each person's identity differs with everyone else and despite similarities no identity is completely alike.

Differences in identity are numerous and yet it is human nature to focus on those differences. Being different tends to be celebrated within a group. However, when a group comes in contact with another group, the outgroup is often seen as more similar to each other than the ingroup. Sometimes being different is not something the majority group celebrates. Some children find themselves the target of bullying and teasing. Children can be so cruel in part because of insecurity. When a child is concerned with a perceived weakness or deficiency, the child feels vulnerable and often will choose to bully as a distraction. Many bullies have fears of being bullied. Therefore, they choose to pick on other children to avoid being bullied themselves. Another reason a child becomes a bully is because they see a threat to their social group. They may feel like a leader of the group and entitled to call out someone who does not belong. This gives them a sense of power and control over their peers. Popularity is often the face of one social group claiming dominance over peers. The so called in-crowd is the place to be and those that lead this group decide who is worthy to be a part of the group.

Faced with not fitting in or being worthy of the popular crowd can have negative effects. Children and adults feel a need to belong to something. That is why peer pressure can be quite effective in controlling the will of others. The popular group can influence a person to act, dress, purchase products, or socialize with what the group believes is acceptable. Any action that the  
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group perceives as out of the norm or is unacceptable brings consequences. Such unacceptable behavior can lead to a member being expelled from the majority group. How the individual reacts to this sudden expulsion depends on how important society or the majority group is to that person.

How important society is to an individual depends on said individual's sense of self. Even the most independent and introverted person desires to belong to a group. However, if a person has a low or incorrect sense of self, the need to belong can have negative consequences. For example, children in poor neighborhoods or who are from unstable homes tend to join gangs. The gang give's a child a sense of belonging and relate to others within the group. They may feel justified to participate in criminal acts, because of their loyalty to the gang and because of feelings of entitlement. A child with a low sense of self or a desperate desire to belong is not necessarily doomed to making poor choices of who to associate with. However, without proper guidance, these children often will choose to belong to a questionable group such as a gang.

The best way to prevent a child from joining gangs is to ensure they develop a strong personal identity and give them a healthy group to associate with. Ideally, a child's parents should help guide their children through their self discovery of identity. It is important for parents to not create a child's identity. Self discovery is a personal journey, involving others to a certain extent, which all human beings make. When a person is able to make decisions without the need of others, a strong sense of self exists.

A strong sense of self includes some or all of the following: pride in the cultural background, strong self confidences, self love, self-esteem, and acceptance of self. If one or

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more of these concepts is lacking, it can lead to a loss of a healthy sense of self. For example, women and men with anorexia, a disorder in which a person believes to be fat, are likely to have low self esteem as well as a poor self image. They are afraid of not fitting in with societies views on how one should look. Thus, they will go to extremes in order to lose weight, despite the fact that most of them need to gain weight. Groups can influence this type of behavior by either enforcing the negative view of a person's body image or inspiring acceptance. Associating with the right group is essential to living a healthy life.

Living a healthy life is what most people desire to do and to protect their sense of self; they unconsciously use a process called self-serving bias, the tendency to view oneself positively. This process, for which all humans use, allows us to handle life's little disappointments. When something good happens a person will attribute it positively to one self and a negative outcome is attributed to an outside factor (D. G. Myers, 2008, p. 61). This is called self-serving attributions which allows self confidence to remain intact. Another effect of this is the bias false consensus effect, the overestimation of commonality of one's opinions and of one's undesirable or unsuccessful behavior (D. G. Myers, 2008, p. 65). For example, within a group, a person may assume that most of the group share similar believes or political positions. When one fails a task or uses poor judgment a person may assume such behavior is common and not to be ashamed of. False uniqueness effect is similar; a person will underestimate one's abilities and one's desirable or successful behaviors (D. G. Myers, 2008, p. 56). For example, getting an A plus on a test may make someone feel like the only one capable of such a grade. Self bias even extends to the group. People often see their group as superior and when someone within their group acts negatively, that is associated with the individual and not the group. This

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process is called group-serving bias (D. G. Myers, 2008, p. 68). These processes help explain how an individual sustains a healthy sense of self. However, it can also hinder self improvement if a person believes too strongly in one's self.

The level at which self-serving bias operates varies depending on a person's self-esteem. The more positive a view one has of oneself the stronger self bias will be, and in turn the less positive view one has the weaker self bias will be. A strong sense of self will balance the need of protecting one's confidence while still allowing personal change when needed. There is nothing wrong with using self-serving bias to an extent as long as one is not blinded to issues that should or need to be changed. Said bias can also affect feeling of superiority or inferiority. However, a strong balance of self will negate feelings of being superior or inferior.

This writer has experienced the feeling of inferiority all too well. When I was young, I had a best friend whom I played with all the time at school. One day, my friend was balancing a rock on his neck. The rock wobbled on his neck before falling off and stuck another kid from school who also had been a friend. Word got around school and because of that the cool kids began to tease my best friend. Soon after, he became a social outcast and I as well since I was associated with him. Thus the bullying began and lasted for about six years.

This writer's experience with bullying shaped his sense of self. However, unlike most children, I saw it as my struggle. Instead of showing weakness I stood up for myself. It is important for children who are victims of bullying to get help. The family circle is crucial for this because many children do not know how to get help. Many kids feel ashamed and embarrassed about being bullied. Because of these feelings, many kids do not seek the help they need and

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instead turn to violence. The two suspects in the Columbine school shooting had made claims of being outcasts. They had voiced in personal journals that spoke about the jocks picking on them. These alleged outcasts believed, for the most part, that everyone at school was against them. Feeling hopeless to being able to make any change, without knowing how to handle the stress, these two kids decided to act out violently.

Looking at my situation one could wonder why I did not in fact act out violently, but instead got help when I needed it. This writer believes that it comes down to a strong need of survival. This writer was able to identify what needed to be done to get through this difficult experience. There are some major differences between this writer's experience and the suspects from the Columbine shooting. First, my experience occurred during elementary school while the latter occurred in high school. I was still young and the physical threats to me were mild compared to what could have occurred in a high school. Second, my temperament differed from that of the teenage shooters. I have always held a strong sense of hope no matter what the situation. Instead of dwelling on the negative I look for ways to solve problems or at the very least survive through them. The teenage shooters had lost all sense of hope as evident with the fact that they eventually committed suicide after their rampage.

Third, I had a strong support system from church, family, and school faculty. The adult playground supervisors were helpful in stopping the bullying that they could see. Having strong positive adult figures in a child's life is essential and a child needs to feel safe to talk about their troubles with family members. Finally, I learned how to stand up for myself where as the teenage shooters did not. Standing up for one's self does not necessarily mean one must engage in a fight. Although I did show strength when I was bullied by not showing them fear, when faced

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with a physical threat I ran away. The old adage, “run to live and fight another day,” is a personal motto. One should not be forced into violence unless defending one’s self. For the most part, I did not need to do more but to show that I would not fear my bullies and in many cases they became my friends. Since most bullies are afraid of being bullied, sometimes all one needs to do is to relate to them. Showing a bully that it is ok to have weakness often eases their anxiety. Ultimately, teaching children to accept their faults will help reduce bullying.

This writer’s experience with bullying, although unfortunate, has helped create a strong sense of self. When a child has a strong identity said child should have the strength to get the help needed. I have been successful in combating peer pressure my whole life. Sadly, most kids are unable to resist peer pressure. The best way to help a child handle this is by building their self confidence. Most children who feel a strong need to be accepted by the crowd do not accept themselves. Although most people want a group to belong to, with low self confidence, a person is susceptible to joining a bad group. Peer pressure is not necessarily always negative. It depends on the group giving the pressure. However, any type of pressure from a group to conform should be analyzed carefully. Conforming has its advantages and drawbacks.

When I was faced with the pressure to conform to standard norms I complied most of the time. As I grew older and left high school I began to rebel against some of the norms I once accepted. For example, when I was a child I was politically more conservative, as my family was. Now, I am much more liberal even though I try to stay more to the middle. I can see how my views may seem right when compared to others because of my self-serving bias. Such is why this writer is happy with this new awareness. With the knowledge of how this bias functions I can be better prepared to analyze my views and determine whether I am being fair with my  
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perceptions. Knowing that my perspective is important to me and that I have difficulties looking past my bias allows me new insight. It is nearly impossible to eliminate bias, because everyone sees the world through their own eyes. However, with the ability to see one's own bias, one can better relate to others and to look at the perspective of another.

Seeing the other perspective helps with dealing with life's little disappointments. When faced with romantic rejection, men and women can respond differently. Rejection is common in one's life and it is important to take it for what it is. Rejection is one person's opinion or judgment about another person or situation. However, when I fell in love for the first time, I took rejection much too personal. I had my first heart break in junior high, blaming myself for it. I became a totally different person. It took many years for me to move past this negative defining moment in my life. People who are most affected by rejection are those that put an emotional significance on the experience. One with a strong sense of self will not put much importance on rejection. Writers, actors, musicians, and other creative people have to face rejection throughout their careers. Many are never able to have successful careers, but those that do are able to get through their experiences with rejection. The point being that rejection is seen as a failure. However, failure itself is temporary. Those who have succeeded in their endeavors have most likely failed many times before. It is often forgotten that failure is normal and common for most people. Only after accepting rejection can one find success.

Success in life requires a strong and healthy sense of self. Personal identity helps us belong to a group and to express our uniqueness. This writer has had challenges to his sense of self and has come out as a better person. Because of having this positive view of self, I have already begun to enjoy a more successful and happy life.

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