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Introduction

The self in experimental social psychology: Multiple theoretical approaches to a complex phenomenon

Delphine Martinot, Markus Brauer, and Magali Ginet

CNRS & Université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, France

Abstract

The introduction to this special issue attempts to bring out the wealth of social psychology research on the self by presenting the three most fruitful approaches in this field and situating the contributions of the nine articles of the special issue. In addressing the self as a cognitive structure, as a biased information-processing system, and as a social construction, we shall see that the three approaches are not competing but mutually enriching, and when combined, offer a relatively comprehensive view of the self.

Key words: self-concept, self-motive, social self.

Correspondence should be sent to Delphine Martinot, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale et Cognitive (LAPSCO), UMR CNRS 6024, Université Blaise Pascal, 34 avenue Carnot, 63000 Clermont-Ferrand, France (e-mail: martinot@srvpsy.univ-bpclermont.fr)

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980's, the self has undoubtedly been one of the most popular research topics in social psychology. This genuine fascination for the study of the self probably results from the large number of psychological variables the concept brings into play. Even today it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to incorporate all of the many self-related variables into a single model. In fact, Higgins suggested in a 1996 article that trying to devise such a model may not even be worth our while, given the many cases where a non-integrative approach has proven highly productive. The aim of the introduction to this special issue is to bring out the wealth of social psychology research on the self by presenting its three most fruitful approaches and situating the contributions of the nine articles published herein. In addressing the self as *a cognitive structure*, as *a biased information-processing system*, and as *a social construction*, we shall see that the three approaches are not competing but mutually enriching, and when combined, offer a relatively comprehensive view of the self.

THE SELF AS A COGNITIVE STRUCTURE

In the cognitive-structure approach, the self is seen as a set of mental representations containing the characteristics individuals use to define and control their own behavior. Constructed from life experiences and their mental elaboration, self-representations are stored in memory just like other representations of objects in the physical or social world, whether real or imaginary. Mental representations of the self are composed of abstract (or semantic) knowledge about one's personal characteristics, and concrete (or episodic) knowledge about particular experiences, thoughts, and behaviors (Kihlstrom, Cantor, Albright, Chew, Klein, & Niedenthal, 1988).

The extraordinary abundance of self-related information acquired throughout life is responsible for the multidimensionality of the self (e.g., Markus, 1977). Based on a multidimensional conception of the self, one can account for individual differences not only by bringing the content and valence of self-representations into the picture, but also by suggesting that individual differences partially result from the organization of self-knowledge. Markus (1977) was one of the first to propose an

organizing principle for self-construals by demonstrating the existence of self-schemata, i.e, cognitive generalizations about the self that organize and guide the processing of the self-related information in an individual's social experience. In the twenty years that followed, researchers proposed numerous concepts to account for the structure of self-construals. For example, Linville (1985, 1987) studied self-complexity, which refers to the number of facets of the self used by an individual to organize his/her self-construals, and the degree of overlap between them. Campbell (1990) introduced the idea of self-clarity, the extent to which the self is clearly defined. Higgins (1996b) explored self-discrepancies, which describe how the actual self differs from an ideal self or "ought" self. Showers (1992, 2002; Showers, Niedenthal, & Nugier, 2002) discussed the compartmentalization property of the self, i.e., the process by which individuals assign self-construals of different valences to distinct categories.

It is crucial to study the self as a cognitive structure when modelling the organization of self-construals in memory, not only to gain insight into the self but also to understand and predict the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses of individuals. For instance, it has been shown that the effects of self-compartmentalization depend on the valence of the self-aspect categories that are currently salient. Greater degrees of self-compartmentalization lead to more positive mood and higher self-esteem when positive self-aspect categories are salient but the opposite is true when negative self-aspect categories are salient (Showers, 2002). From this angle, investigators look at how the various structural characteristics of the self are related to a wide range of other variables like depression (Solomon & Haaga, 2003), attentional resources (e.g., Showers et al., 2002), and self-esteem (Campbell, 1990).

THE SELF AS A BIASED INFORMATION-PROCESSING SYSTEM

Improving our understanding of the self as a cognitive structure implies searching for the reasons and motivations underlying the organization and cognitive functions of the self. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Sedikides and Strube (1997) defined three major motives that guide self-information processing: *self-enhancement, self-verifica-*

tion, and self-assessment.[1] Because these three motives determine how individuals process information about themselves, a number of researchers have likened the self to a biased system of information processing (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Greenwald (1980), one of the most famous advocates of this view, even compared the self to a totalitarian regime that rewrites and deforms one's history to make it compatible with conclusions drawn in advance.

Self-enhancement

The self-enhancement motive refers to the need to establish and maintain the best possible image of oneself and to think well of oneself. To this end, individuals encode, store, and evaluate their self-construals in a biased way, as demonstrated in many studies (e.g., Dunning & McElwee, 1995; Greenwald, 1980). A perfect illustration of self-enhancement is found in Sanitioso's study (this issue), which shows that individuals judge their past behaviors in a biased way in order to fit with their desired self. Moreover, people process information about their interactions with others in a biased way, too (e.g., Baumeister & Cairns, 1992; Sanitioso & Wlodarski, in press).

Self-verification

The self-verification motive refers to the desire to maintain a relatively stable and consistent self-image across situations and time. Many findings indicate that people select, interpret, and recall information about themselves in a way that will confirm their self-construals (e.g., Swann, 1983). This desire to validate one's self-construals can obviously conflict with the need for self-enhancement (e.g., Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). Glen and Banse (this issue) address this issue by looking at the implicit and explicit aspects of self-esteem. They hypothesize that explicit self-esteem is kept more stable in order to satisfy the need for self-verification, while implicit self-esteem is more malleable and serves the need for self-enhancement.

1. They also defined a fourth motivation, self-improvement, which corresponds to people's motivation to improve what they are, their abilities, performance, well-being, health, and so on. It will not be addressed here because it has generated little interest in the literature.

Self-assessment

The self-assessment motive refers to the desire to develop accurate self-construals, to seek the truth, and to see oneself in an unbiased and undistorted manner. This need is thought to be aimed at increasing people's certainty about their self-knowledge. Research has shown that the self-assessment motivation orients people's preferences and causes them to choose tasks likely to lead to the best possible self-appraisal (e.g., Trope, 1983). However, in the case of downward comparisons (social comparisons with others who are doing more poorly than the self), the fear of being seen as a braggart may conflict with the need for self-assessment, as the first experiment reported by Muller and Butera (this issue) illustrates. In their second experiment, these authors show that under a self-evaluation threat (a situation in which performance level is below standard), individuals no longer hesitate to present themselves as superior to others when they are so, which means that self-assessment can override the fear of making a bad impression on others.

As these studies by Sanitioso, Glen and Banse, and Muller and Butera show, the fundamental question raised by researchers interested in self-related motivations no longer concerns whether such motivations exist, but when and where they take effect and how they are interrelated.

THE SELF AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Knowing the organization and cognitive functions of the self, along with the reasons and motivations behind them, is not sufficient for understanding the self. Clearly, validation by others is a prerequisite to the development of the self (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1986). This fact has provided the rationale for a vast body of social psychology research on the self as a social construction. The roles played by a person's culture, groups of membership, and interaction partners are studied.

The culture

The self is dependent upon the culture in which a person lives and grows. Cross-cultural research has shown that members of collectivist societies – where the relationship to the group is fundamental – develop a more *interdependent* self, whereas members of individualist societies – where value is placed on personal uniqueness – develop a more *independent* self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1993; Triandis, 1989). Cultural differences in self-development lead to differences in the flexibility of the self. Accordingly, Choi and Choi (2002) showed recently that the self-construals of Koreans are more context-dependent than those of Americans and therefore vary more across situations. The effects of bi-culturalism on the self are addressed in this special issue by Gardner, Gabriel, and Dean, who look at the coexistence of independent and interdependent self-construal in Asian-Americans. They study the flexibility of the self in this population as compared to the self of European-Americans (a mono-cultural group).

The group

The view that prevailed for twenty years in social psychological theories of the self gradually evolved, particularly under the influence of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), which grants social identity a fundamental role (Hogg, 2001; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). The extent to which a person brings his/her social identity to bear in self-definitions is conceptualized by ingroup identification, i.e., the degree to which the ingroup is included in the self (Tropp & Wright, 2001). Ingroup identification allows the individual to protect the self in threatening situations. For example, African-Americans who acknowledge having been victims of discrimination will suffer a direct negative impact on their self-esteem, but ingroup identification can indirectly counteract this effect by raising their self-esteem (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). The self-protecting role of ingroup identification is addressed in this special issue by Redersdorff, Martinot, and Branscombe. Their study tested the hypothesis that female group identification increases, for self-protection purposes, when women think of the disadvantages of their gender membership in the workplace.

The looking glass self

In reference to Cooley's (1902) theory of the looking glass self, researchers have shown that the individuals in our surroundings also contribute to the development of the self, by acting as a social mirror (e.g., Harter, 1986). During social relations, the image of ourselves that others send back to us through their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses have an impact on the self, which in turn affects our own cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Taking an interest in the emotional dimension, Fischer, Rotteveel, Evers, and Manstead (this issue) examine the effects of the emotional reactions of others on one's own emotions and how this can lead the individual to focus either on him/herself or on others. Similarly, Hess, Senécal, and Thibault (this issue) study how individuals perceive their own emotional expressivity. The authors look at how well these perceptions match self-judgments made later when the individuals watched a videotape of themselves. They also assess the correspondence between self-judgments and judgments made by other observers. This is an interesting question, especially since earlier work has shown that such discrepancies can be great (e.g., Kenny & De Paulo, 1993). Kemmelmeier, Bless, Schwarz, and Bohner (this issue) focus more on behavioral responses, particularly performance. Their study analyzes the effects of being rewarded by others (here, the experimenter) on a reasoning task.

Social comparisons

Although the social-comparison research leaves no doubt about the impact of social comparisons on the self, their effects on self-evaluations are much less clear. Several studies have nevertheless identified the main variables that modulate the effects of interpersonal comparisons on self-evaluations. Among the variables recognized by all authors, we find the relevance of the comparison dimensions (Tesser, 1988), psychological proximity to the comparison target (e.g., Brewer & Weber, 1994; Collins, 2000; Tesser, 1988), assumed similarity or dissimilarity between the self and the target, measured during the comparison process (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mussweiler, 2003), and comparison direction (upward vs. downward). As a function of these variables, self-evaluating individuals will engage either in an assimilating process (in which case they see their performance as like that of the comparison

target) or a contrasting process (in which case they see their performance as different from that of the comparison target). Assimilation and contrast are the processes that determine the impact of social comparisons on self-evaluations (see the SA model for example: Mussweiler, 2003). Kühnen and Haberstroh (this issue) further our knowledge of these two processes by showing that they depend on the focus of comparison and on self-construal activation.

Social comparisons can also take place among groups. During such comparisons, individuals' social identity is activated and the influence of the group on self-evaluations becomes fundamental. Social-comparison effects may be very different in this case from those noted in situations where personal identity is salient (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000; Schmitt, Silvia, & Branscombe, 2000). Recent studies have shown that intergroup-comparison effects on self-evaluations are also contingent upon the status of the groups in question (Martinot, Redersdorff, Guimond, & Dif, 2002; Redersdorff & Martinot, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This brief overview of the state-of-the-art in matters of the self clearly brings out the diversity of research on this subject. Despite this diversity and the lack of an integrative model, it is possible to relate the different perspectives to each other. We have seen that the self can be studied as a cognitive structure whose organization is undeniably based on the motivations that drive self-related information processing. The self is also a social construction, which –being a product of the groups, societies, and cultures to which we belong – is built through the views others have of us and the social comparisons we make with others. Furthermore, our interactions with others are often controlled by multiple strategies aimed at serving our need for self-enhancement, self-verification, or self-assessment. Added to this is the fact that membership in social groups appears to condition the precedence of a given self-related motivational goal over another (e.g., Roccas, 2003). Finally, our relationships with others also structure our self-concepts (e.g., Niedenthal & Beike, 1997).

Thus, the three approaches to the self proposed in this special issue can easily be articulated, and it seems that multiple approaches are useful for maintaining the vitality of research on the self.

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif dans cette introduction à ce numéro spécial sur le soi est de mettre en évidence la richesse de la recherche en psychologie sociale dans le domaine du soi à travers l'évocation des trois approches les plus fécondes, et de situer la contribution des 9 articles proposés. En abordant le soi en tant que structure cognitive, en tant que système biaisé de traitement de l'information et en tant que construction sociale, nous verrons que, loin d'être rivales ou concurrentielles, ces trois approches s'enrichissent mutuellement et s'articulent pour nous offrir une vision du soi assez complète.

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Desired self and biased judgment of past behaviors

Rasyid Bo Sanitioso

Université Paris V & LAPSCO-CNRS, Paris, France

Abstract

The present article concerns the influence of desired self on the judgment of one's own past behavior. In the experiment, university student participants first took part in a group discussion. Next, in an allegedly separate study, they were led to believe that either extraversion or introversion is conducive of success. Finally, participants had to estimate their contribution to the discussion as measured by the time they thought they had spent talking during it. Extraversion-success participants estimated their contribution to the discussion to be significantly higher than did introversion-success participants. The results thus suggest that people judge their past behaviors in a biased manner to render these behaviors supportive of a desired self, namely as characterized by success-promoting attributes.

Key words: motivated self-concept, motivation and cognition, motivated judgment.

Correspondence should be sent to Rasyid Bo Sanitioso, Institut de Psychologie, Université René Descartes – Paris V, 71 avenue Edouard Vaillant, 92774 Boulogne Cedex, France
(sanitioso@psycho.univ-paris5.fr)