PART ONE

SOCIAL THINKING

This book unfolds around its definition of social psychology: the scientific study of how we *think about* (part one), *influence* (part two), and *relate to* (part three) one another.

These chapters on social thinking examine how we view ourselves and others. In varying ways, each chapter confronts an overriding question: How reasonable are our social attitudes, explanations, and beliefs? Are our impressions of ourselves and others generally accurate? How is our social thinking prone to bias and error, and how might we bring it closer to reality?

Chapter 2 explores the interplay between our sense of self and our social worlds. How do our social surroundings shape our self-identity? How does self-interest colour our social judgments and motivate our social behaviour?

Chapter 3 looks at the amazing and sometimes rather amusing ways in which we form beliefs about our social worlds. It also alerts us to some pitfalls of social thinking and suggests how to avoid them and think smarter.

Chapter 4 explores the links between attitudes and behaviours: Do our attitudes determine our behaviours? Do our behaviours determine our attitudes? Or does it work both ways?

"There are three things extremely hard, steel, a diamond, and to know one's self."

Benjamin Franklin

CHAPTER TWO

The Self in a Social World

Put yourself in the shoes of the students showing up for a simple experiment by Jacquie Vorauer from the University of Manitoba and Dale Miller from Princeton University

(1997). The experimenter explains to you and one other participant that the study explores students' experiences at the university. By a coin toss, the other participant is sent off to complete a questionnaire while you collect your thoughts before being interviewed. Fifteen minutes later, the experimenter gives you a peek at the other student's glum report:

> I guess I don't really feel like I have had very many positive academic experiences. . . . I've found a lot of the material very difficult. . . . The worst moment I can think of was my French final; I went completely blank at the start. . . . I haven't made many new friends since I got to Princeton. Mostly, I have to rely on the people that I knew before.

Now, it's your turn. Will you self-describe your personal experiences more negatively than had you just read (as other subjects did) a report of someone "doing well in my courses . . . . I have had some wonderful friendships and roommates. . . . I feel more socially accepted than I used to"? So it happened with the actual student subjects. The positivity of their self-presentations echoed those of the other student. Yet, remarkably, they did not recognize this social influence on their self-presentation. They were blind to the interplay between their social surroundings and their self-presentation.

This is but one of many examples of the subtle connections between what's happening in the world around us and what's going on in our heads. Some more examples:

- *Social surroundings shape how we think about ourselves* As individuals in a group of a different culture, race, or sex, we notice how we differ and how others are reacting to our difference. The only woman in an executive meeting or math class is likely to be acutely aware of her gender. One of the authors has noticed this phenomenon when volunteering at his children's school, where almost all the teachers are women. In the teacher's lounge, he is quite aware that he is the only male.
- *Self-interest colours our judgments about others and ourselves* We are not objective, dispassionate judges of events. When problems arise in a close relationship such as marriage, we usually attribute more responsibility to our partners than to ourselves. Few divorced people blame themselves. When things go *well* at home or work or play, we see ourselves as more responsible. In competing for prizes, scientists seldom underrate their own contributions. After Canadians Frederick Banting and John Macleod received a 1923 Nobel Prize for discovering insulin, they both thought the discovery was primarily their own. Banting claimed that Macleod, who headed the laboratory, had been more a hindrance than a help. Macleod omitted Banting's name in speeches about the discovery (Ross, 1981).
- *Looking good to others motivates our social behaviour* Our actions are often strategic. In hopes of making a positive impression, we spend billions on cosmetics and diet programs. Like politicians, we also monitor others' behaviour and expectations and adjust our behaviour accordingly. Concern for self-image drives much of our behaviour.

As these examples suggest, the traffic between self and society runs both ways. Your ideas and feelings about yourself affect how you interpret events, how you recall them, and how you respond to others. Others, in turn, help shape your sense of self (Figure 2–1).

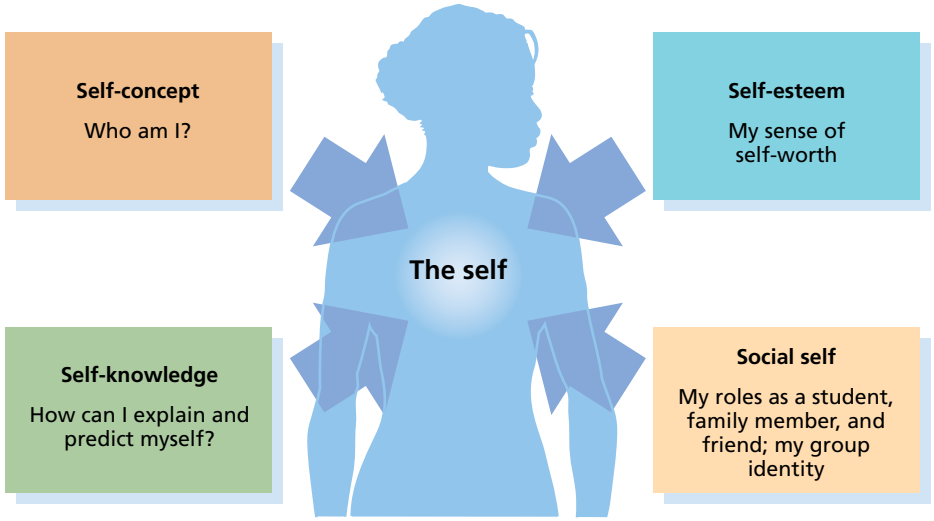


FIGURE 2–1
The self.

For these reasons, no topic in psychology is today more researched than the self. In 2008 the word "self" appeared in 15 073 book and article summaries in *PsychINFO (the online archive of psychological research)*—nine times the number in 1970. Our sense of self organizes our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We therefore begin our tour of social psychology with a look at *self-concept* (how we come to know ourselves) and at *the self in action* (how our sense of self drives our attitudes and actions).

SELF-CONCEPT: WHO AM I?

How do I come to know myself? How accurate is my self-knowledge? What determines my ***self-concept****? In short, how do I know who I am?*

self-concept
a person's answers to the question, "Who am I?"

INTUITION: LOOKING WITHIN

One answer to these questions that people sometimes give is that they "just know" who they are. By examining themselves and looking within themselves they believe they can develop an intuitive sense of who they are. Are our intuitions really the road to self-understanding? Should you as Steve Jobs (2005), the founder of Apple Computers, suggests, "have the courage to follow your heart and intuition?"

To answer this question let's begin by examining the power and perils of our intuitions.

Powers and perils of intuition

What are our powers of intuition—of immediately knowing something without reasoning or analysis? Advocates of "intuitive management" believe we should tune into our hunches. When judging others, they say, we should plug into the nonlogical smarts of our "right brain." When hiring, firing, and investing, we should listen to our premonitions. In making judgments, we should follow the example of *Star Wars*' Luke Skywalker by switching off our computer guidance systems and trusting the force within.

Are the intuitionists correct that important information is immediately available apart from our conscious analysis? Or are the skeptics right in saying that intuition is "our knowing we are right, whether we are or not"?

Priming research suggests that the unconscious indeed controls much of our behaviour. As John Bargh and Tanya Chartrand (1999) explain, "Most of a person's everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices but by mental processes that are put into motion by features of the environment and that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance." When the light turns red, we react and hit the brake before consciously deciding to do so. Indeed, reflect Neil Macrae and Lucy Johnston (1998), "to be able to do just about anything at all (e.g., driving, dating, dancing), action initiation needs to be decoupled from the inefficient (i.e., slow, serial, resource consuming) workings of the conscious mind, otherwise inaction inevitably would prevail."

"The heart has its reasons which reason does not know," observed seventeenth-century philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal. Three centuries later, scientists have proved Pascal correct. We know more than we know we know. Studies of our unconscious information processing confirm our limited access to what's going on in our minds (Bargh, 1997; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Our thinking is partly **controlled** (reflective, deliberate, and conscious) and—more than most of us once supposed—partly **automatic** (impulsive, effortless, and without our awareness). Automatic, intuitive thinking occurs not "on-screen" but off-screen, out of sight, where reason does not go. Consider these examples of automatic thinking:

controlled processing
"explicit" thinking that is deliberate, reflective, and conscious

automatic processing
"implicit" thinking that is effortless, habitual, and without awareness, roughly corresponds to "intuition"

- *Schemas*—mental templates—intuitively guide our perceptions and interpretations of our experience. Whether we hear someone speaking of religious sects or sex depends not only on the word spoken but on how we automatically interpret the sound.
- *Emotional reactions* are often nearly instantaneous, before there is time for deliberate thinking. One neural shortcut takes information from the eye or ear to the brain's sensory switchboard (the thalamus) and out to its emotional control centre (the amygdala) before the thinking cortex has had any chance to intervene (LeDoux, 1994, 1996). Our ancestors who intuitively feared a sound in the bushes were usually fearing nothing, but they were more likely to survive to pass their genes down to us than their more deliberative cousins.
- Some things—facts, names, and past experiences—we remember explicitly (consciously). But other things—skills and conditioned dispositions—we remember *implicitly*, without consciously knowing and declaring that we know. It's true of us all, but most strikingly evident in people with brain damage who cannot form new explicit memories. One such person never could learn to recognize her physician, who would need to reintroduce himself with a handshake each day. One day the physician affixed a tack to his hand, causing the patient to jump with pain. When the physician next returned, he was still unrecognized (explicitly). But the patient, retaining an implicit memory, would not shake his hand (LeDoux, 1996).
- Equally dramatic are the cases of *blindsight*. Having lost a portion of the visual cortex to surgery or stroke, people may be functionally blind in part of their field of vision. Shown a series of sticks in the blind field, they report seeing nothing. After correctly guessing whether the sticks are vertical or horizontal, the patients are astounded when told, "You got them all right." Again, these people know more than they know they know.

- Although below our threshold for conscious awareness, subliminal stimuli may nevertheless have intriguing effects. For example, consider the following study conducted by McGill University's Mark Baldwin and his colleagues (1989). He had Catholic women read a sexually explicit passage and then subliminally flashed either a picture of the Pope frowning, a picture of a stranger frowning, or a blank screen. He then had the women rate themselves on a number of different dimensions of their self-concept. As you can see in Figure 2–2, he found that when the women were exposed to the frowning Pope they rated themselves more negatively than when they were exposed to the frowning stranger or the blank screen. This effect was particularly pronounced for those who reported higher levels of participation in their faith. Evidently, the subliminal priming of a disapproving Pope lowered these women's ratings of themselves.

So, many routine cognitive functions occur automatically, unintentionally, without awareness. Our minds function rather like big corporations. Our CEO—our controlled consciousness—attends to the most important, complex, or novel issues, while subordinates deal with routine affairs and matters requiring instant action. This delegation of resources enables us to react to many situations quickly and efficiently. The bottom line: Our brain knows much more than it tells us.

Intuitions about the self

The powers and perils of our intuitions demonstrate that much of our thinking occurs outside of our awareness and that our conscious thoughts often bear little resemblance to our unconscious thoughts that are controlling our behaviour. Do these findings hold for our intuitions about ourselves? Do our conscious explanations of our behaviours and our conscious understanding of who we are bear little resemblance to our unconscious thoughts and beliefs? Let's examine a number of studies that examine these issues.

Why did you choose your university? Why did you lash out at your roommate? Why did you fall in love with that special person? Sometimes we know. Sometimes we don't. Asked why

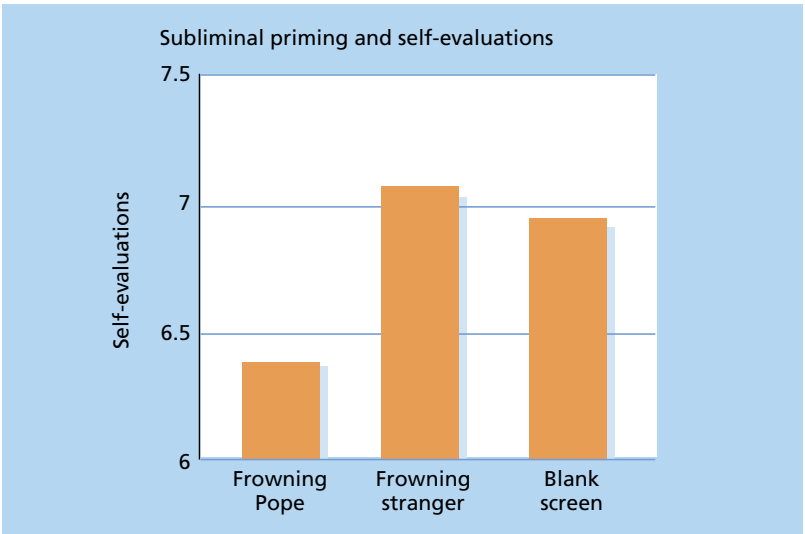


FIGURE 2–2

Subliminal priming and self-evaluations.

Catholic students primed with a subliminal picture of the Pope frowning rated themselves lower on a number of traits. (Data from Baldwin et al., 1989)

we have felt or acted as we have, we produce plausible answers. Yet, when causes are subtle, our self-explanations are often wrong. We may dismiss factors that matter and perceive others that don't as influential.

"You don't know your own mind."

Jonathan Swift, *Polite Conversation*, 1738

Richard Nisbett and Stanley Schachter (1966) demonstrated this by asking university students to take a series of electric shocks of steadily increasing intensity. Beforehand, some took a fake pill that, they were told, would produce heart palpitations, breathing irregularities, and butterflies in the stomach—the very typical reactions to being shocked. Nisbett and Schachter anticipated that people would attribute the shock symptoms to the pill and thus should tolerate more shock than people not given the pill. Indeed, the effect was enormous. People given the fake pill took four times as much shock. When asked why they withstood so much shock, they didn't mention the fake pill. When told the predicted pill effect, they granted that others might be influenced but denied its influence on them. "I didn't even think about the pill," was a typical reply.

Also thought provoking are studies in which people recorded their moods—every day for two or three months (Stone et al., 1985; Weiss & Brown, 1976; Wilson et al., 1982). They also recorded factors that might affect their moods: the day of the week, the weather, the amount they slept, and so forth. At the end of each study, the people judged how much each factor had affected their moods. Remarkably (given that their attention was being drawn to their daily moods), there was little relationship between their perceptions of how well a factor predicted their mood and how well it actually did so. These findings raise a disconcerting question: How much insight do we really have into what makes us happy or unhappy?

And how much insight do we have into our own freedom of will? As Daniel Wegner shows in *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002), people will *feel* that they have willed an action when their action-related thought precedes a behaviour that seems otherwise unexplainable. In one of Wegner's experiments, two people jointly control a computer mouse that glides over an "I-spy" board covered with little pictures. As the mouse roams, the participants hear the names of objects over headphones, and then stop on any picture they wish. Even when one person is a confederate who, on some trials, forces the mouse to a particular picture, the actual participants will typically perceive that they willed the mouse to the chosen picture. In this and other situations, the brain generates an intuition of personal efficacy. Other times, such as when dowsing for water or when one's arms raise under hypnotic suggestion, people misperceive that some external will is operating upon them. So, whether perceiving that they have (or have not) caused their actions, people sometimes err.

Predicting our behaviour

People also err when predicting their behaviour. If asked whether they would obey demands to deliver severe electric shocks or would hesitate to help a victim if several other people were present, people overwhelmingly deny their vulnerability to such influences. But as we will see, experiments have shown that many of us are vulnerable. Moreover, consider what Sidney Shrauger (1983) discovered when he had college students predict the likelihood that they would experience dozens of different events during the ensuing two months (becoming romantically involved, being sick, and so forth): Their self-predictions were hardly more accurate than predictions based on the average person's experience.

People also err frequently when predicting the fate of their relationships. Dating couples predict the longevity of their relationships through rose-coloured glasses. Focusing on the

positives, lovers may feel sure they will always be lovers. Their friends and family often know better, report Tara MacDonald and Michael Ross (1997) from studies with University of Waterloo students. The less optimistic predictions of their parents and roommates tend to be more accurate. (Many a parent, having seen their child lunge confidently into an ill-fated relationship against all advice, nods yes.) In fact, the people who know you can probably predict your behaviour better than you can (for example, how nervous and chatty you will be when meeting someone new [Kenny, 1994]). So, how can you improve your self-predictions? The best advice is to consider your past behaviour in similar situations (Osberg & Shrauger, 1986, 1990). To predict your future, consider your past.

Nicholas Epley and David Dunning (2000) discovered that we can sometimes better predict people's behaviour by asking them to predict *others'* actions. Five weeks ahead of Cornell University's annual "Daffodil Days" charity event, Epley and Dunning asked students to predict whether they would buy at least one daffodil for charity, and also to predict what proportion of their fellow students would do so. More than four in five predicted they would buy a daffodil. But only 43 percent actually did, which was close to their prediction that 56 percent of others would buy one. In a laboratory game played for money, 84 percent predicted they would cooperate with another for their mutual gain, though only 61 percent did (again, close to their prediction of 64 percent cooperation by others.) If Lao-tzu was right that "He who knows others is learned. He who knows himself is enlightened," then most people, it would seem, are more learned than enlightened.

But do our intuitions always lead us astray? What if instead of deliberating about the right action we simply let time pass and allowed our automatic processes to influence our decisions. Ap Dijkersterhuis and his colleagues (2007) tested this idea. They had people make important decisions such as buying a home or a car and had them either make the decision right away, consciously deliberate on the decision noting the positives and negatives of each choice, or simply let time pass while they were occupied with other tasks. Their reasoning was that allowing time to pass without allowing people to actually think about the decision would allow the automatic or unconscious thought to influence the decision. They found that months later people were happiest with their decisions (both real world decisions and decisions in the lab) when they made the decision after a delay but without consciously deliberating on the decision. It seems that our unconscious intuitions might be better guides than we have previously thought.

Predicting our feelings

Many of life's big decisions involve predicting our future feelings. Would marrying this person lead to lifelong contentment? Would entering this profession make for satisfying work? Would going on this vacation produce a happy experience? Or would the likelier results be divorce, job burnout, and holiday disappointment?

Sometimes we know how we will feel—if we fail that exam, win that big game, or soothe our tensions with a half-hour jog. We know what exhilarates us, and what makes us anxious or bored. Other times we may mispredict our responses. Asked how they would feel if asked sexually harassing questions on a job interview, most women studied by Julie Woodzicka and Marianne LaFrance (2001) said they would feel angry. When actually asked such questions, however, women more often experienced fear. Studies of "affective forecasting" reveal that people nevertheless have greatest difficulty predicting the intensity and the duration of their future emotions

"When a feeling was there, they felt as if it would never go; when it was gone, they felt as if it had never been; when it returned, they felt as if it had never gone."

George MacDonald, *What's Mine's Mine*, 1886

(Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). People have mispredicted how they would feel some time after a romantic breakup, receiving a gift, losing an election, winning a game, and being insulted (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Loewenstein & Schkade 1999). Some examples:

- When male youths are shown sexually arousing photographs, then exposed to a passionate date scenario in which their date asks them to "stop," they admit that they might not stop. If not shown sexually arousing pictures first, they more often deny the possibility of being sexually aggressive. When not aroused, one easily mispredicts how one will feel and act when aroused—a phenomenon that leads to professions of love during lust, to unintended pregnancies, and to repeat offences among sex abusers who have sincerely vowed "never again."
- Hungry shoppers do more impulse buying ("Those doughnuts would be delicious!") than when shopping after scarfing a mega-sized blueberry muffin (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000). When hungry, one mispredicts how gross those deep-fried doughnuts will seem when sated. When stuffed, one mispredicts how yummy a doughnut might be with a late-night glass of milk.
- Only one in seven occasional smokers (of less than a cigarette per day) predicts they will be smoking in five years. But they underestimate the power of their drug cravings, for nearly half will still be smoking (Lynch & Bonnie, 1994).
- People overestimate how much their well-being would be affected by warmer winters, losing weight, more television channels, or more free time. Even extreme events, such as winning a provincial lottery or suffering a paralyzing accident, affect long-term happiness less than most people suppose.

impact bias
overestimating the enduring impact of emotion-causing events

Our intuitive theory seems to be: We want. We get. We are happy. If that were true, this chapter would have fewer words. In reality, note Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson (2000), we often "miswant." People who imagine an idyllic desert island holiday with sun, surf, and sand may be disappointed when they discover "how much they require daily structure, intellectual stimulation, or regular infusions of Pop Tarts." We think that if our candidate or team wins we will be delighted for a long while. But study after study reveals our vulnerability to **impact bias**—overestimating the enduring impact of emotion-causing events. Faster than we expect, the emotional traces of such good tidings evaporate.

Predicting behaviour, even one's own, is no easy matter, which may be why this visitor goes to a tarot card reader in hope of help.

Moreover, we are especially prone to impact bias after *negative* events. When people being tested for HIV predict how they will feel five weeks after getting the results, they expect to be feeling misery over bad news and elation over good news. Yet five weeks later, the bad news recipients are less distraught and the good news recipients are less elated than they anticipated (Sieff et al., 1999). And when Gilbert and his colleagues (1998) asked assistant professors to predict their happiness a few years after achieving tenure or not, most believed a favourable outcome was important for their future happiness. "Losing my job would crush my life's ambitions. It would be terrible." Yet when surveyed several years after the event, those denied tenure were about as happy as those who received it. Impact bias is important,

say Wilson and Gilbert (2005), because people's "affective forecasts"—their predictions of their future emotions—influence their decisions. If people overestimate the intensity and duration of the pleasure they will gain from purchasing a new car or undergoing cosmetic surgery, then they may make ill-advised investments.

Let's make this personal. Gilbert and Wilson invite us to imagine how we might feel a year after losing our nondominant hands. Compared with today, how happy would you be?

Thinking about this, you perhaps focused on what the calamity would mean: no clapping, no shoe tying, no competitive basketball, no speedy keyboarding. Although you likely would forever regret the loss, your general happiness some time after the event would be influenced by "two things: (a) the event, and (b) everything else." In focusing on the negative event, we discount the importance of everything else that contributes to happiness and so overpredict our enduring misery. "Nothing that you focus on will make as much difference as you think," concur researchers David Schkade and Daniel Kahneman (1998). Notably, East Asians, who tend to think more holistically than Westerners—and so are more likely to consider many different factors when predicting their future feelings—are less susceptible to the impact bias (Lam et al., 2005). We will discuss these important differences in the self-concept of Easterners and Westerners in more detail in Chapter 8.

Moreover, say Wilson and Gilbert (2003), people neglect the speed and power of their psychological immune system, which includes their strategies for rationalizing, discounting, forgiving, and limiting emotional trauma. Being largely ignorant of our psychological immune system (a phenomenon Gilbert and Wilson call *immune neglect*), we accommodate to disabilities, romantic breakups, exam failures, tenure denials, and personal and team defeats more readily than we would expect. Ironically, Gilbert and his colleagues report (2004) major negative events (which activate our psychological defences) can be less enduringly distressing than minor irritations (which don't activate our defences). In other words, under most circumstances, we are remarkably resilient.

The wisdom and illusions of self-analysis

So, to a striking extent, our intuitions are often dead wrong about what has influenced us and what we will feel and do. But let's not overstate the case. When the causes of our behaviour are conspicuous and the correct explanation fits our intuition, our self-perceptions will be accurate (Gavanski & Hoffman, 1987). When the causes of behaviour are obvious to an observer, they are usually obvious to us as well.

As Chapter 3 will explore further, we are unaware of much that goes on in our minds. Studies of perception and memory show that we are more aware of the results of our thinking than its process. For example, we experience the results of our mind's unconscious workings when we set a mental clock to record the passage of time and to awaken us at an appointed hour, or when we somehow achieve a spontaneous creative insight after a problem has unconsciously "incubated." Creative scientists and artists, for example, often cannot report the thought processes that produced their insights.

Timothy Wilson (1985, 2002) offers a bold idea: The mental processes that *control* our social behaviour are distinct from the mental processes through which we explain our behaviour. Our rational explanations may therefore omit the gut-level attitudes that actually guide our behaviour. In nine experiments, Wilson and his coworkers (1989) found that expressed attitudes toward things or people usually predicted later behaviour reasonably well. If they first

asked the participants to analyze their feelings, however, their attitude reports became useless. For example, dating couples' happiness with their relationship predicted whether they would still be dating several months later. But other participants first listed all the *reasons* they could think of why their relationship was good or bad before rating their happiness. After doing so, their attitude reports were useless in predicting the future of the relationship! Apparently the process of dissecting the relationship drew attention to easily verbalized factors that actually were less important than aspects of the relationship that were harder to verbalize. We are often "strangers to ourselves," says Wilson (2002).

"Self-contemplation is a curse that makes an old confusion worse."

Theodore Roethke, *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, 1975

In a later study, Wilson and his coworkers (1993) had people choose one of two art posters to take home. Those asked first to identify reasons for their choice preferred a humorous poster (whose positive features they could more easily verbalize). But a few weeks later, they were less satisfied with their choice than were those who just went by their gut feelings and generally chose the other poster. Compared with reasoned judgments of people with various facial attributes, gut-level reactions also are more consistent, report Gary Levine and colleagues (1996). First impressions can be telling.

dual attitudes
differing implicit (automatic) and explicit (consciously controlled) attitudes toward the same object. Verbalized explicit attitudes may change with education and persuasion; implicit attitudes change slowly, with practice that forms new habits.

Such findings illustrate that we have a **dual attitude system**, say Wilson and his colleagues (2000). Our automatic *implicit* attitudes regarding someone or something often differ from our consciously controlled, *explicit* attitudes. From childhood, for example, we may retain a habitual, automatic fear or dislike of people for whom we now verbalize respect and appreciation. Although explicit attitudes may change with relative ease, notes Wilson, "implicit attitudes, like old habits, change more slowly." With repeated practice—acting on the new attitude—new habitual attitudes can, however, replace old ones.

Murray Millar and Abraham Tesser (1992) believe that Wilson overstates our ignorance of self. Their research suggests that, yes, drawing people's attention to reasons diminishes the usefulness of attitude reports in predicting behaviours that are driven by *feelings*. If, instead of having people analyze their romantic relationships, Wilson had first asked them to get more in touch with their feelings ("How do you feel when you are with and apart from your partner?"), the attitude reports might have been more insightful. Other behaviour domains—say, choosing which school to attend based on considerations of cost, career advancement, and so forth—seem more cognitively driven. For these, an analysis of reasons rather than feelings may be most useful. Although the heart has its reasons, sometimes the mind's own reasons are decisive.

This research on the limits of our self-knowledge has two practical implications. The first is for psychological inquiry. *Self-reports are often untrustworthy*. Errors in self-understanding limit the scientific usefulness of subjective personal reports.

The second implication is for our everyday lives. The sincerity with which people report and interpret their experiences is no guarantee of the validity of these reports. Personal testimonies are powerfully persuasive (as we will see in Module C, "Social Psychology in Court"). But they may also be wrong. Keeping this potential for error in mind can help us feel less intimidated by others and be less gullible.

FITTING IN: LOOKING TO OTHERS

As we try to answer the question, "Who am I?", maybe the answer isn't to be found so much by looking within our selves, but rather by looking at others. Several prominent theories and much research support the idea that how we are viewed by others and how we fit into our social groups

are central to how we define ourselves. When people think well of us, it helps us think well of ourselves. Children whom others label as gifted, hard working, or helpful tend to incorporate such ideas into their self-concepts and behaviour (see Chapter 3). If minority students feel threatened by negative stereotypes of their academic ability, or if women feel threatened by low expectations for their math and science performance, they may "disidentify" with these realms. Rather than fight such prejudgments, they may identify their interests elsewhere (Steele, 1997).

The *looking-glass self* is how sociologist Charles H. Cooley (1902) described our using others as a mirror for perceiving ourselves. We see our reflection in how we appear to others, said Cooley. Fellow sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934) refined this concept, noting that what matters for our self-concept is not what others actually think of us, but the way we imagine they see us. Partly because most people feel freer to praise than criticize us, we may overestimate their appraisal, and our self-appraisals may become inflated.

Our ancestors' fate depended on what others thought of them. Their survival chances increased when protected by their group. Thus there was wisdom to their feeling shame and low self-esteem when perceiving their group's disapproval. As their heirs, we have a similar deep-seated need to belong (Mark Leary et al., 1995).

Social comparison

Not surprisingly given this theorizing, how we stack up compared to others is an important source of how we come to know who we are. Take, for example, a study conducted by Penelope Lockwood from the University of Toronto and Ziva Kunda from the University of Waterloo (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). They exposed first-year or fourth-year accounting students to an article about a star accounting student who had won numerous awards, attained a very high grade average, and landed a spectacular job. For first-year students this role model represented an achievement they could hope to attain. If all went well, they too could have such a fantastic future. For fourth-year students, however, this role model did not present such hope. They knew all too well that at this point in their studies they would never measure up to such a superstar student. As you can see in Figure 2–3, such comparisons had strong effects on these

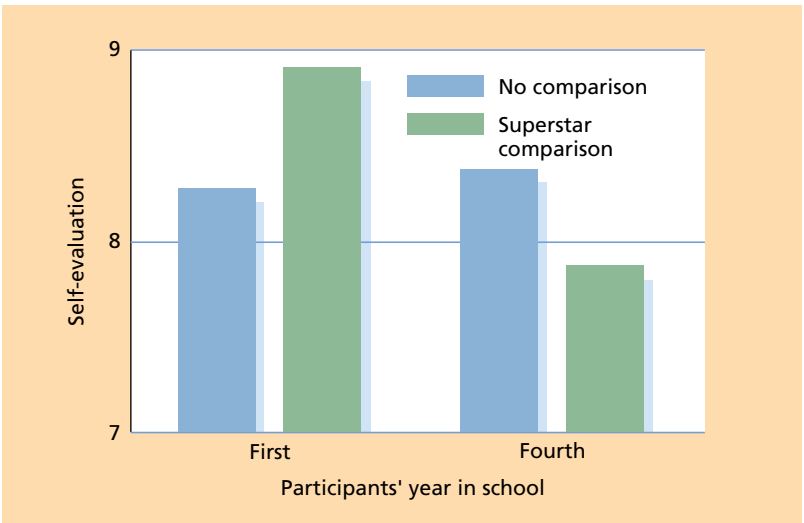


FIGURE 2–3

Social comparison and self-evaluation.

People are inspired by a role model if they can attain similar success but demoralized if they cannot. (Data from Lockwood & Kunda, 1997)

students' self- evaluations. When first- and fourth-year students did not compare to the superstar they had similar self-evaluations, but when they were exposed to the superstar, first-year students seemed inspired; their self-evaluations rose dramatically. Fourth-year students, on the other hand, seemed dejected; their self-evaluations dropped steeply. This research demonstrates the fundamental principle that our comparisons to others are a strong determinant of our self-views.

social comparison
evaluating one's abilities and opinions by comparing oneself to others

These **social comparisons** shape our identities as rich or poor, smart or dumb, tall or short: We compare ourselves with those around us and become conscious of how we differ. We then use others as a benchmark by which we can evaluate our performance and our beliefs. Social comparisons can profoundly affect our self-feelings. People who are concerned about their weight feel worse about themselves after just reading about a thin peer (Trottier, Polivy, & Herman, 2007).

Social comparison helps explain why students tend to have a higher academic self-concept if they attend a school with few exceptionally capable students (Marsh & Parker, 1984). After finishing secondary school near the top of their class, many academically confident students find their academic self-esteem threatened after entering big, selective universities where many students graduated near the top of their class. Given a little pond, a fish feels bigger.

self-esteem
a person's overall self-evaluation or sense of self-worth

Comparing ourselves to others in this way and seeing how we stack up to others is an important source of how we feel about ourselves. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) note **self-esteem**—our overall self-evaluation—is a psychological gauge by which we monitor and react to how others appraise us. Indeed our self-esteem tracks how we see ourselves on traits that we believe are valued by others. People believe that social acceptance often depends on easily observable traits, like physical appearance and social skills. Though people say they value communal traits, like kindness and understanding, they recognize that appearance is often what attracts others. And self-esteem corresponds more closely to such superficial traits than to communal qualities (Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, 2007). But self-esteem is also predicted by communal qualities for people whose roles make these qualities attractive to others. Our society values kindness and caring in women (more so than men) and in people in romantic relationships. For these individuals, self-esteem tracks communal qualities. Self-esteem thus depends on whether or not we believe we have traits that make us attractive to others, and not necessarily on the traits that we say we value most.

Abraham Tesser (1988) reports that a "self-esteem maintenance" motive predicts a variety of interesting findings, even friction among brothers and sisters. Do you have a sibling of the same gender who is close to you in age? If so, people probably compared the two of you as you grew up. Tesser presumes that people's perceiving one of you as more capable than the other will motivate the less able one to act in ways that maintain his or her self-esteem. (Tesser thinks the threat to self-esteem is greatest for an older child with a highly capable younger sibling.) Men with a brother with markedly different ability typically recall not getting along well with him; men with a similarly able brother are more likely to recall very little friction.

Self-esteem threats occur among friends, whose success can be more threatening than that of strangers (Zuckerman & Jost, 2001). And it can occur among married partners, too. Although shared interests are healthy, identical career goals may produce tension or jealousy (Clark & Bennett, 1992). When a partner outperforms us in a domain important to both our identities, we may reduce the threat by affirming our relationship, saying, "My capable partner, with whom I'm very close, is part of who I am" (Lockwood et al., 2004).

Among sibling relationships, the threat to self-esteem is greatest for an older child with a highly capable younger brother or sister.

Low self-esteem predicts increased risk of depression, drug abuse, and some forms of delinquency. For a low-self-esteem person, even public success can be aversive, by provoking anxiety that he or she will never live up to others' heightened expectations (Wood et al., 2005). (Have you ever done so well in a game, a recital, or a school exam that you worried about disappointing others on the next occasion?) High self-esteem fosters initiative, resilience, and pleasant feelings (Baumeister et al., 2003). Yet self-esteem can have a dark side as well. Teen males who engage in sexual activity at an "inappropriately young age" tend to have *higher* than average self-esteem. So do teen gang leaders, extreme ethnocentrists, and terrorists, notes Robyn Dawes (1994, 1998).

Finding their favourable self-esteem threatened, people often react by putting others down, sometimes with violence. A youth who develops a big ego, which then gets threatened or deflated by social rejection, is potentially dangerous. In one experiment, Todd Heatherton and Kathleen Vohs (2000) threatened some undergraduate men, but not those in a control condition, with a failure experience on an aptitude test. In response to the failure, only high-self-esteem men became considerably more antagonistic (Figure 2–4).

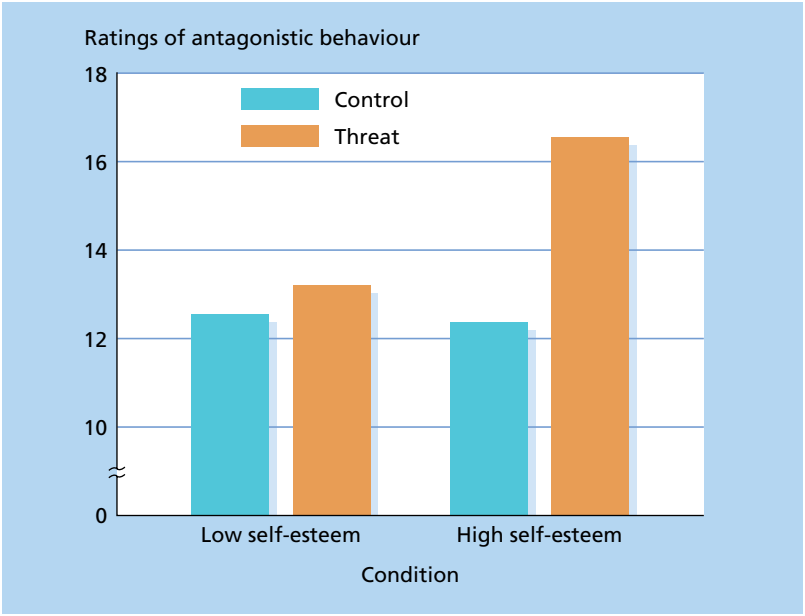
In another experiment, Brad Bushman and Roy Baumeister (1998) had 540 undergraduate volunteers write a paragraph, in response to which another supposed student gave them either praise ("great essay!") or stinging criticism ("one of the worst essays I have read!"). Then each essay writer played a reaction time game against the other student. When the opponent lost, the writer could assault him or her with noise of any intensity and for any duration. After criticism, the people with the biggest egos—those who agreed with "narcissistic" statements such as "I am more capable than other people"— were "exceptionally aggressive." They delivered three times the auditory torture of those with normal self-esteem. Wounded pride motivates retaliation.

"The enthusiastic claims of the self-esteem movement mostly range from fantasy to hogwash," says Baumeister (1996), who suspects he has "probably published more studies on self-esteem than anybody else." "The effects of self-esteem are small, limited, and not all good." High-self-esteem folks, he reports, are more likely to be obnoxious, to interrupt, and to talk at

FIGURE 2–4

When big egos get challenged.

When feeling threatened, only high-self-esteem people became significantly more antagonistic—arrogant, rude, and unfriendly. (Data from Heatherton & Vohs, 2000)



people rather than with them (in contrast to the more shy, modest, self-effacing folks with low self-esteem). "My conclusion is that self-control is worth 10 times as much as self-esteem."

Do the big egos of people who sometimes do bad things conceal inner insecurity and low self-esteem? Do assertive, narcissistic people actually have weak egos that are hidden by a self-inflating veneer? Many researchers have tried to find low self-esteem beneath such an outer crust. But studies of bullies, gang members, genocidal dictators, and obnoxious narcissists have turned up no sign of it. "Hitler had very high self-esteem," note Baumeister and his co-authors (2003).

What Baumeister and his colleagues call "the dark side of high self-esteem" exists in tension with the findings that people expressing low self-esteem are somewhat more vulnerable to assorted clinical problems, including anxiety, loneliness, and eating disorders. When feeling bad or threatened, they are more likely to view everything through dark glasses—to notice and remember others' worst behaviours and to think their partners don't love them (Murray et al., 1998, 2002; Ybarra, 1999).

Christian Jordan from Wilfrid Laurier University and his colleagues (2003, 2005) suggest that this tension may be more apparent than real. They suggest that not all high-self-esteem people are alike. New research indicates that self-esteem, like attitudes, comes in two forms—*explicit* (consciously controlled) and *implicit* (automatic or intuitive). Psychologists measure explicit self-esteem using questionnaires ("I feel I am a person of worth"), and measure implicit self-esteem with a variety of subtler measures, ranging from preference for the alphabet letters in one's name to computer-measured reaction times in classifying positive and negative words associated with oneself. Jordan and colleagues argue that when people have conscious views of themselves that are positive, but have low implicit self-esteem, they are likely to have fragile self-esteem. In several studies they found that people with such fragile high self-esteem

are more narcissistic, favour their own group more, and discriminate more against Native-Canadians than other people. In similar experiments, Ian MacGregor and his colleagues (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor et al., 2005) found that York University students with defensive self-esteem responded to uncertainty by compensating with increased convictions in their political and social attitudes and by perceiving greater popularity for their views. In fact, when they feel threatened, people with low implicit self-esteem adopt more extreme views on controversial issues (like the war in Iraq and suicide bombing) and also believe that these views are more widely shared (McGregor & Jordan, 2007). Together this research suggests that some high-self-esteem people (those with negative implicit views of themselves) are prone to react defensively, whereas other high-self-esteem people (those with positive implicit views of themselves) are less likely to react in this way.

Unlike a fragile self-esteem, a secure self-esteem—one rooted more in feeling good about who one is than on grades, looks, money, or others' approval—is conducive to long-term well-being (Kernis, 2003; Schimel et al., 2001). Jennifer Crocker and her colleagues (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) confirmed this in studies with University of Michigan students. Those whose self-worth was most fragile—most contingent on external sources—experienced more stress, anger, relationship problems, drug and alcohol use, and eating disorders than did those whose worth was rooted more on internal sources, such as personal virtues. Ironically, note Crocker and Lora Park (2004), those who pursue self-esteem, perhaps by seeking to become beautiful, rich, or popular, may lose sight of what really makes for quality of life. Moreover, if feeling good about ourselves is our goal, then we may become less open to criticism, more likely to blame than empathize with others, and more pressured to succeed at rather than simply to enjoy activities. Over time, such pursuit of self-esteem can fail to satisfy our deep needs for competence, relationship, and autonomy, note Crocker and Park. To focus less on one's self-image, and more on developing one's talents and relationships, eventually leads to greater well-being.

Social identity

Our self-concept—our sense of who we are—contains not just our personal identity (our sense of our personal attributes) but our **social identity**. The social definition of who you are—your race, religion, sex, academic major, and so forth—implies, too, a definition of who you are not.

social identity the "we" aspect of our self-concept. The part of our answer to "Who am I?" that comes from our group memberships. Examples: "I am Australian." "I am Catholic."

When we're part of a small group surrounded by a larger group, we are often conscious of our social identity; when our social group is the majority, we think less about it. As a solo female in a group of men, or as a solo Canadian in a group of Europeans, we are conscious of our uniqueness. To be a Black student on a mostly White campus, or a White student on a mostly Black campus, is to feel one's ethnic identity more keenly and to react accordingly. In Canada, most people identify themselves as "Canadian"—except in Quebec, where francophones are more likely to identify themselves as "Québécois" (Kalin & Berry, 1995).

In Britain, where the English outnumber the Scots 10 to 1, Scottish identity defines itself partly by differences with the English. "To be Scottish is, to some degree, to dislike or resent the English" (Meech & Kilborn, 1992). The English, as the majority, are less conscious of being not-Scottish. In the guest book of a Scottish hotel where one of the authors checked in recently, all the English guests reported "British" nationality, and all the Scots (who are equally British) reported their nationality as "Scottish."

SUMMING UP: SELF-CONCEPT

When we decide who we are and develop our self-concept one important source of information is our intuitions, which are curiously flawed. When powerful influences upon our behaviour are not so conspicuous that any observer could spot them, we, too, can miss them. The subtle implicit processes that control our behaviour may differ from our conscious explicit explanations of it.

A second important source of information that shapes our self-concepts is how we are viewed by others. The views of others are important building blocks of the self-concept although we heavily interpret these views as we define ourselves. Further whether we fit in and are seen positively by others forms an important basis of our self-esteem. How we compare to others and how our groups are viewed by others are two important ways that others shape our self-concepts.

SELF-ORGANIZATION: HOW THE SELF OPERATES

As people learn about themselves through looking within and looking without they gain a tremendous amount of information about themselves. In order to use and make sense of this information it needs to be organized. Bits of information that go with other bits need to develop connections in the brain and all those bits and connections need to be arranged so that the self-concept can influences people's thoughts and judgments. As we will see this organization of the self-concept has a strong influence on how the self operates.

AT THE CENTRE OF OUR WORLDS: OUR SENSE OF SELF

self-schema
beliefs about self that organize and guide the processing of self-relevant information

The elements of your self-concept, the specific beliefs by which you define yourself, are your **self-schemas** (Markus & Wurf, 1987). *Schemas* are mental templates by which we organize our worlds. Our *self*-schemas—our perceiving ourselves as athletic, overweight, smart, or whatever—powerfully affect, perceive, remember, and evaluate both other people and ourselves. If athletics is a central part of your self-concept (if being an athlete is one of your self-schemas), then you will tend to notice others' bodies and skills. You will quickly recall sports-related experiences. And you will welcome information that is consistent with your self-schema (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984). The self-schemas that make up our self-concepts help us organize and retrieve our experiences.

Self-reference

self-reference effect
the tendency to process efficiently and remember well information related to oneself

Consider how the self influences memory, a phenomenon known as the **self-reference effect**: *When information is relevant to our self-concepts, we process it quickly and remember it well* (Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Kuiper & Rogers, 1979; Symons & Johnson, 1997). If asked whether a specific word, such as "outgoing," describes us, we later remember that word better than if asked whether it describes someone else. If asked to compare ourselves with a character in a short story, we remember that character better. Two days after a conversation with someone, our recall is best for what the person said about us (Kahan & Johnson, 1992). Thus, memories

form around our primary interest: ourselves. When we think about something in relation to ourselves, we remember it better.

The self-reference effect illustrates a basic fact of life: Our sense of self is at the centre of our worlds. Because we tend to see ourselves on centre stage, we overestimate the extent to which others' behaviour is aimed at us. We often see ourselves as responsible for events in which we played only a small part (Fenigstein, 1984). When judging someone else's performance or behaviour, we often spontaneously compare it with our own (Dunning & Hayes, 1996). And if, while talking to one person, we overhear our name spoken by another in the room, our auditory radar instantly shifts our attention.

Possible selves

Our self-concepts include not only our self-schemas about who we currently are, they also include who we might become—our **possible selves**. Hazel Markus and her colleagues (Inglehart et al., 1989; Markus & Nurius, 1986) note that our possible selves include our visions of the self we dream of becoming—the rich self, the thin self, the passionately loved and loving self. They also include the self we fear becoming—the underemployed self, the unloved self, the academically failed self. Such possible selves motivate us with specific goals for a vision of the life we long for.

possible selves
images of what we dream of or dread becoming in the future

Self-organization and self-esteem

Is self-esteem—our overall self-evaluation—the sum of all our self-schemas and possible selves? If we see ourselves as attractive, athletic, smart, and destined to be rich and loved, will we have high self-esteem? That's what psychologists assume when they suggest that to help people feel better about themselves, we should first make them feel more attractive, athletic, smarter, and so forth. This is especially so, Jennifer Crocker and Connie Wolfe (2001) argue, for the particular domains important to their self-esteem. "One person may have self-esteem that is highly contingent on doing well in school and being physically attractive, whereas another may have self-esteem that is contingent on being loved by God and adhering to moral standards." Thus the first person will feel high self-esteem when made to feel smart and good looking, the second person when made to feel moral.

But Jonathon Brown and Keith Dutton (1994) argue that this "bottom-up" view of self-esteem is not the whole story. The causal arrow, they believe, also goes the other way. People who value themselves in a general way—those with high self-esteem—are more likely then to value their looks, abilities, and so forth. They are like new parents who, loving their infant, delight in its fingers, toes, and hair: The parents do not first evaluate their infant's fingers or toes and then decide how much to value the whole baby.

To test their idea that global self-esteem affects specific self-perceptions ("top down"), Brown and Dutton introduced University of Washington students to a supposed trait called "integrative ability." They gave the students sets of three words—for example, "car," "swimming," "cue"—and challenged them to think of a word that linked the three words. (Hint: The word begins with p.) High-self-esteem people were more likely to report having this ability if told it was very important than if told it was useless. Feeling good about oneself in a general way, it seems, casts a rosy glow over one's specific self-schemas ("I have integrative ability") and possible selves.

THE SELF IN ACTION

So far we have considered what our self-concept is, how it develops, and how well we know ourselves. Now let's see why our self-concepts matter, by viewing the self in action.

Self-control

The self's action capacity has limits, note Roy Baumeister and his colleagues (1998; Muraven et al., 1998). People who exert self-control—by forcing themselves to eat radishes rather than chocolates, or by suppressing forbidden thoughts—subsequently quit faster when given unsolvable puzzles. People who try to control their emotions to an upsetting movie exhibit decreased physical stamina. Effortful self-control depletes our limited willpower reserves, it seems. Self-control operates like muscular strength, conclude Baumeister and Julia Exline (2000): Both are weaker after exertion, replenished with rest, and strengthened by exercise.

Nevertheless, our self-concept does influence our behaviour (Graziano et al., 1997). Given challenging tasks, people who imagine themselves as hardworking and successful outperform those who imagine themselves as failures (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Envision your positive possibilities and you become more likely to plan and enact a successful strategy. Perceived self-control matters.

Although exerting control over our thoughts and behaviours often seems like a difficult and demanding task, it need not always be so. Grainne Fitzsimons and John Bargh (2004) have shown that regulating our thoughts and actions in this way can at times become well learned and pursuing the goals that foster exerting control can become automatic. So for those who are on a diet long enough there is hope that avoiding a roommate's stash of candy can get easier over time and require less mental energy.

Self-determination

The benefits of feelings of control also appear in animal research. Dogs taught that they cannot escape shocks while confined will learn a sense of helplessness. Later these dogs cower passively in other situations when they *could* escape punishment. Dogs that learn personal control (by escaping their first shocks successfully) adapt easily to a new situation. Researcher Martin Seligman (1975, 1991) notes similarities to this **learned helplessness** in human situations. Depressed or oppressed people, for example, become passive because they believe their efforts have no effect. Helpless dogs and depressed people both suffer paralysis of the will, passive resignation, even motionless apathy (Figure 2–5).

learned helplessness the hopelessness and resignation learned when a human or animal perceives no control over repeated bad events

On the other hand, people benefit by training their self-control "muscles." That's the conclusion of studies by Megan Oaten and Ken Cheng (2006) at Sydney's Macquarie University. For example, students who were engaged in practising self-control by daily exercise, regular study, and time management became more capable of self-control in other settings, both in the laboratory and when taking exams.

Ellen Langer and Judith Rodin (1976) tested the importance of personal control by treating elderly patients in a high-rated nursing home in one of two ways. With one group the

FIGURE 2–5

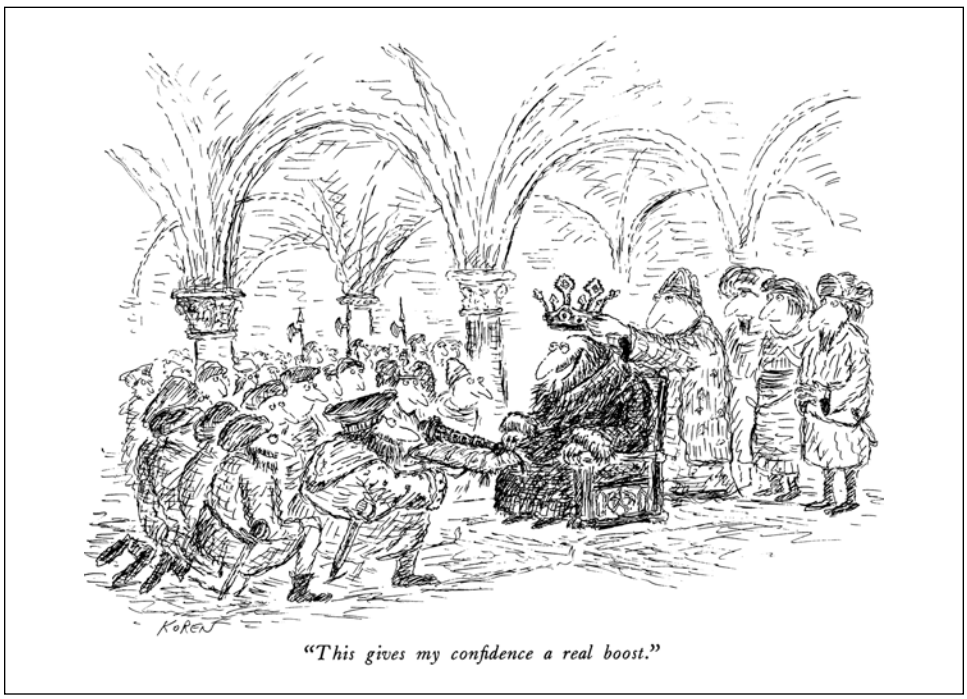
Learned helplessness.

When animals and people experience uncontrollable bad events, they learn to feel helpless and resigned.

benevolent caregivers stressed "our responsibility to make this a home you can be proud of and happy in." They gave the passive patients their normal well-intentioned, sympathetic care. Three weeks later, most were rated by themselves, by interviewers, and by nurses as further debilitated. Langer and Rodin's other treatment promoted personal control. It stressed opportunities for choice, the possibilities for influencing nursing-home policy, and the person's responsibility "to make of your life whatever you want." These patients were given small decisions to make and responsibilities to fulfill. Over the ensuing three weeks, 93 percent of this group showed improved alertness, activity, and happiness.

Studies confirm that systems of governing or managing people that promote self-efficacy will indeed promote health and happiness (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

- University students who develop a sense of control over school gain a greater sense of control over their lives (Guay, Mageau, Vallerand, 2003).
- Prisoners given some control over their environments—by being able to move chairs, control TV sets, and switch the lights—experience less stress, exhibit fewer health problems, and commit less vandalism (Ruback et al., 1986; Wener et al., 1987).
- Workers given leeway in carrying out tasks and making decisions experience improved morale (Miller & Monge, 1986).
- Institutionalized residents allowed choice in such matters as what to eat for breakfast, when to go to a movie, whether to sleep late or get up early, may live longer and certainly are happier (Timko & Moos, 1989).
- Homeless shelter residents who perceive little choice in when to eat and sleep, and little control over their privacy, are more likely to have a passive, helpless attitude regarding finding housing and work (Burn, 1992).



Confidence and feelings of self-efficacy grow from successes.

- In all countries studied, including Canada, people who perceive themselves as having free choice experience greater satisfaction with their lives. And countries where people experience more freedom have more satisfied citizens (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Although this psychological research on perceived self-control is new, the emphasis on taking charge of one's life and realizing one's potential is not. The notion that "you can do it if you try hard enough" has permeated our culture. When we were little children most of us were taught the story about the Little Engine That Could. The cultural lesson is clear: If you try hard enough and keep a positive attitude you can achieve whatever you dream. The same lesson we find in many self-help books and videos.

"Argue for your limitations, and sure enough they're yours."

Richard Bach, *Illusions: Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, 1977

Research on self-control gives us greater confidence in traditional virtues such as perseverance and hope. A sense of self-control does not grow primarily by self-persuasion ("I think I can, I think I can") or by puffing people up like hot-air balloons ("You're terrific!). Its chief source is the experience of success. If your initial efforts to lose weight, stop smoking, or improve your grades succeed, your self-efficacy increases.

SUMMING UP: SELF-ORGANIZATION

Our sense of self helps organize our thoughts and actions. When we process information with reference to ourselves, we remember it well (a phenomenon called the *self-reference* effect). The elements of our self-concept are the specific *self-schemas* that guide our processing of self-relevant information and the *possible selves* that we dream of or dread.

Our self-esteem appears to be shaped by both top-down views of the self derived from our self-schemas and bottom processing of how we see ourselves. When the self is in action we see that the organization of the self can affect our sense of self-control and self-regulation

People who believe in their own competence and effectiveness cope better and achieve more than do those who have learned a helpless, pessimistic outlook.

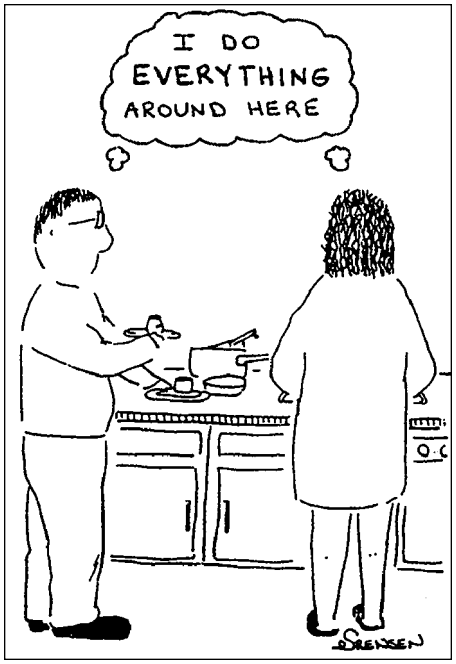
SELF-SERVING BIAS: SEEING THE SELF POSITIVELY

As we process self-relevant information, a potent bias intrudes. We readily excuse our failures, accept credit for our successes, and in many ways see ourselves as better than average. Such self-enhancing perceptions enable most people to enjoy the benefits of high self-esteem, while occasionally suffering the perils of pride.

It is widely believed that most of us suffer low self-esteem. A generation ago, humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1958) concluded that most people he knew "despise themselves, regard themselves as worthless and unlovable." Many popularizers of humanistic psychology concur. "All of us have inferiority complexes," contends John Powell (1989). "Those who seem not to have such a complex are only pretending." As Groucho Marx (1960) lampooned, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would accept me as a member."

Actually, most of us have a good reputation with ourselves. In studies of self-esteem, even low-scoring people respond in the midrange of possible scores. (A low-self-esteem person

responds to such statements as "I have good ideas" with a qualifying adjective, such as "somewhat" or "sometimes.") Moreover, one of social psychology's most provocative yet firmly established conclusions concerns the potency of **self-serving bias**.



The self-serving bias.
© Jean Sorensen.

EVALUATING THE SELF

When evaluating the self do we act as dispassionate observers or do we look to see ourselves in the most positive light possible? We do tend to view ourselves positively, but is this self-serving bias a simple inference from our beliefs about ourselves or is it a motivated bias? There is actually evidence that both types of processes occur. If a dispassionate observer had the same information about us that we have, they would often make the same inferences we make. Self-serving biases can be solely the result of our cognitive machinery.

Nevertheless, a motivational engine powers our cognitive machinery (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990). We are not just cool, information-processing machines. We are motivated to see ourselves positive and adept at doing so.

Explanations for positive and negative events

Time and again, experimenters have found that people readily accept credit when told they have succeeded (attributing the success to their ability and effort), yet attribute failure to such external factors as bad luck or the problem's inherent "impossibility" (Whitley & Frieze, 1985; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Similarly, in explaining their victories, athletes commonly credit themselves, but they attribute losses to something else: bad breaks, bad referee calls, or the other team's super effort or dirty play (Grove et al., 1991; Lalonde, 1992; Mullen & Riordan, 1988). And how much responsibility do you suppose car drivers tend to accept for their accidents? On insurance forms, drivers have described their accidents in words such as these: "An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my car and vanished," "As I reached an intersection, a hedge sprang up, obscuring my vision, and I did not see the other car," "A pedestrian hit me and went under my car" (*Toronto News*, 1977).

self-serving bias the tendency to perceive oneself favourably

Situations that combine skill and chance (games, exams, job applications) are especially prone to the phenomenon: Winners can easily attribute their successes to their skill, while losers can attribute their losses to chance. When one wins at Scrabble, it's because of one's verbal dexterity; when one loses, it's because "Who could get anywhere with a Q but no U?" Politicians similarly tend to attribute their wins to themselves (hard work, constituent service, reputation, and strategy) and their losses to factors beyond their control (their district's party makeup, their opponent's name, political trends) (Kingdon, 1967). This phenomenon of **self-serving attributions** (attributing positive outcomes to oneself and negative outcomes to something else) is one of the most potent of human biases.

self-serving attributions a form of self-serving bias; the tendency to attribute positive outcomes to oneself and negative outcomes to other factors

Self-serving attributions contribute to marital discord, worker dissatisfaction, and bargaining impasses (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999). Small wonder that divorced people usually blame their partner for the breakup (Gray & Silver, 1990), or that managers usually blame poor

performance on workers' lack of ability or effort (Imai, 1994; Rice, 1985). (Workers are more likely to blame something external—inadequate supplies, excessive workload, difficult coworkers, or ambiguous assignments.) Small wonder, too, that people evaluate reward distributions such as pay raises as fairer when they receive more than most others rather than less (Diekmann et al., 1997).

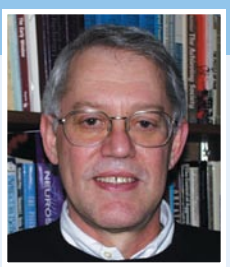
Students also exhibit self-serving bias. After receiving an exam grade, those who do well tend to accept personal credit. They judge the exam to be a valid measure of their competence (Arkin & Maruyama, 1979; Briere & Vallerand, 1990; Davis & Stephan, 1980; Gilmor & Reid, 1979; Griffin et al., 1983). Those who do poorly are much more likely to criticize the exam.

Reading this research, we couldn't resist a satisfied "knew-it-all-along" feeling. But consider teachers' ways of explaining students' good and bad performances. When there is no need to feign modesty, those assigned the role of teacher tend to take credit for positive outcomes and blame failure on the student (Arkin et al., 1980; Davis, 1979). Teachers, it seems, are likely to think, "With my help, Maria graduated with honours. Despite all my help, Melinda flunked out."

Can we all be better than average?

Self-serving bias also appears when people compare themselves with others. If the sixth-century B.C. Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu was right that "at no time in the world will a man who is sane over-reach himself, over-spend himself, over-rate himself," then most of us are a little insane. For on most subjective and socially desirable dimensions, most people see themselves as better

STORY BEHIND THE RESEARCH



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University of Waterloo

Suppose that you have collaborated on a project with another student and that the two of you evaluated each other's contributions to the final product. You may be disappointed to discover that your partner is less impressed with the quality and extent of your contribution than you are. In the history of science, there are many examples of such disagreements; erstwhile friends and colleagues become bitter enemies as they contest each other's contributions to important discoveries. Sicoly and I suggested that individuals generally tend to accept more responsibility for a joint product than other contributors attribute to them. In many everyday activities, participants are unaware of their divergent views because they don't share their opinions with each other. After cleaning the kitchen, for example, spouses don't usually discuss how much each contributed to the cleanup. When such opinions are voiced, people are likely to be upset because they believe that the other person is not giving them sufficient credit. If the consequences are high (e.g., academic grades, job promotions, or Nobel prizes at stake), they may well assume that their partner is deliberately downgrading their contributions to enhance his or her own achievements. In our research, Sicoly and I showed that differences in assessments of responsibility are common in many everyday contests, and that contrasting judgments may reflect normal cognitive processes rather than deliberate deceit. Differences in judgment can result from honest evaluations of information that is differentially available to the two participants.

FOCUS ON

SELF-SERVING BIAS—HOW DO I LOVE ME? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

"The one thing that unites all human beings, regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background," notes Dave Barry (1998), "is that deep down inside, we all believe that we are above average drivers." We also believe we are above average on most any other subjective and desirable trait. Among the many faces of self-serving bias are these:

- *Ethics*. Most businesspeople see themselves as more ethical than the average businessperson (Baumhart, 1968; Brenner & Molander, 1977). One national survey asked, "How would you rate your own morals and values on a scale from 1 to 100 (100 being perfect)?" Fifty percent of people rated themselves 90 or above; only 11 percent said 74 or less (Lovett, 1997).
- *Professional competence*. Ninety percent of business managers rate their performance as superior to their average peer (French, 1968). In Australia, 86 percent of people rate their job performance as above average, 1 percent as below average (Headey & Wearing, 1987). Most surgeons believe their patients' mortality rate to be lower than average (Gawande, 2002).
- *Virtues*. In the Netherlands, most high school students rate themselves as more honest, persistent, original, friendly, and reliable than the average high school student (Hoorens, 1993, 1995).
- *Intelligence*. Most people perceive themselves as more intelligent, better looking, and much less prejudiced than their average peer (Public Opinion, 1984; Wylie, 1979). When someone outperforms them, people tend to think of the other as a genius (Lassiter & Munhall, 2001).
- *Parental support*. Most adults believe they support their aging parents more than do their siblings (Lerner et al., 1991).
- *Health*. Los Angeles residents view themselves as healthier than most of their neighbours, and most university students believe they will outlive their actuarially predicted age of death by about 10 years (Larwood, 1978; C. R. Snyder, 1978).
- *Insight*. Others' words and deeds reveal their natures, we presume. Our private thoughts do the same. Thus, most of us believe we know and understand others better than they know and understand us. We also believe we know ourselves better than others know themselves (Pronin et al., 2001). Few university students see themselves as more naïve or more gullible than others; many more think they're less naïve and gullible (Levine, 2003).
- *Driving*. Most drivers—even most drivers who have been hospitalized for accidents—believe themselves to be safer and more skilled than the average driver (Guerin, 1994; McKenna & Myers, 1997; Svenson, 1981). Dave Barry got it right!

than the average person. Compared with people in general, most people see themselves as more ethical, more competent at their job, friendlier, more intelligent, better looking, less prejudiced, healthier, and even more insightful and less biased in their self-assessments (see "Focus on: Self-Serving Bias—How Do I Love Me? Let Me Count the Ways").

Every community, it seems, is like Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon, where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average." Perhaps one reason for this optimism is that although 12 percent of people feel old for their

age, many more—66 percent—think they are young for their age (Public Opinion, 1984). All of which calls to mind Freud's joke about the husband who told his wife, "If one of us should die, I think I would go live in Paris."

Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly (1979) observed a marital version of self-serving bias. They found that young married Canadians usually felt they took more responsibility for such activities as cleaning the house and caring for the children than their spouses credited them for. In one survey, 91 percent of wives but only 76 percent of husbands credited the wife with doing most of the food shopping (Burros, 1988). In other studies, wives estimated they did proportionally more of the housework than their husbands credited them with (Bird, 1999; Fiebert, 1990). Every night, one of the authors and his wife used to pitch their laundry at the foot of their bedroom clothes hamper. In the morning, one of them would put it in the hamper. When the wife suggested that the author take more responsibility for this, he thought, "Huh? I already do it 75 percent of the time." So he asked her how often she thought she picked up the clothes. "Oh," she replied, "about 75 percent of the time."

Subjective behaviour dimensions (such as "disciplined") trigger greater self-serving bias than objective behavioural dimensions (such as "punctual"). Students are more likely to rate themselves superior in "moral goodness" than in "intelligence" (Allison et al., 1989; Van Lange, 1991). And community residents overwhelmingly see themselves as caring more than most others about the environment, about hunger, and about other social issues, though they don't see themselves as doing more, such as contributing time or money to those issues (White & Plous, 1995). Education doesn't eliminate self-serving bias; even social psychologists exhibit it, by believing themselves more ethical than most social psychologists (Van Lange et al., 1997).

Subjective qualities give us leeway in constructing our own definitions of success (Dunning et al., 1989, 1991). Rating my "athletic ability," I ponder my basketball play, not the agonizing weeks I spent as a Little League baseball player hiding in right field. Assessing my "leadership ability," I conjure up an image of a great leader whose style is similar to mine. By defining ambiguous criteria in our own terms, each of us can see ourselves as relatively successful. In one University Entrance Examination Board survey of 829 000 high school seniors, 0 percent rated themselves below average in "ability to get along with others" (a subjective, desirable trait), 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent saw themselves among the top 1 percent!

We also support our self-images by assigning importance to the things we're good at. Over a semester, those who ace an introductory computer science course come to place a higher value on being a computer-literate person in today's world. Those who do poorly are more likely to scorn computer geeks and to exclude computer skills as pertinent to their self-images (Hill et al., 1989).

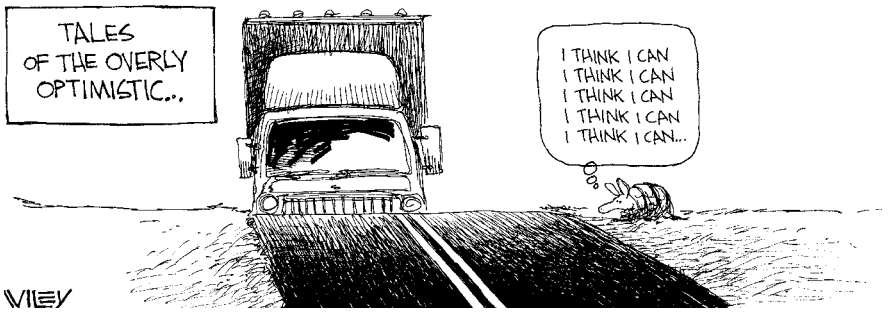
People display one other ironic bias: Most people see themselves as freer from bias than most people (Ehrlinger et al., 2005; Pronin et al., 2002). Indeed, they even see themselves as less vulnerable to self-serving bias! They will admit to some bias in the abstract, and they see others as biased. But when asked about specific traits and behaviours, such as when rating their own ethics or likeability, they judge their self-assessments as untainted.

"Views of the future are so rosy that they would make Pollyanna blush."

Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions,* 1989

Unrealistic optimism

Optimism predisposes a positive approach to life. "The optimist," notes H. Jackson Brown (1990, p. 79), "goes to the window every morning and says, 'Good morning,



God.' The pessimist goes to the window and says, 'good god, morning.'" Many of us however, have what researcher Neil Weinstein (1980, 1982) terms "an unrealistic optimism about future life events." Partly because of their relative pessimism about others' fates (Shepperd, 2003), students perceive themselves as far more likely than their classmates to get a good job, draw a good salary, and own a home, and as far less likely to experience negative events, such as developing a drinking problem, having a heart attack before age 40, or being fired.

Linda Perloff (1987) notes how illusory optimism increases our vulnerability. Believing ourselves immune to misfortune, we do not take sensible precautions. In one survey, 137 marriage licence applicants accurately estimated that half of marriages end in divorce, yet most assessed their chance of divorce as zero percent (Baker & Emery, 1993). Sexually active undergraduate women who don't consistently use contraceptives perceive themselves, compared to other women at their university, as much less vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy (Burger & Burns, 1988). In Scotland, most older teens think they are much less likely than their peers to become infected by HIV (Abrams, 1991; Pryor & Reeder, 1993).

Those who cheerfully shun seat belts deny the effects of smoking, and stumble into ill-fated relationships remind us that blind optimism, like pride, may go before a fall. When gambling, optimists more than pessimists persist, even when piling up losses (Gibson & Sanbonmatsu, 2004). If those who deal in the stock market or in real estate perceive their business intuition to be superior to that of their competitors, they, too, may be in for severe disappointment. Even the seventeenth-century economist Adam Smith, a defender of human economic rationality, foresaw that people would overestimate their chances of gain. This "absurd presumption in their own good fortune," he said, arises from "the overweening conceit which the greater part of men have of their own abilities" (Spiegel, 1971, p. 243).

Optimism definitely beats pessimism in promoting self-efficacy, health, and well-being (Armor & Taylor, 1996). If our optimistic ancestors were more likely than their pessimistic neighbours to surmount challenges and survive, then small wonder that we are disposed to optimism (Haselton & Nettle, 2006). Yet a dash of realism can save us from the perils of unrealistic optimism. Self-doubt can energize students, most of whom—especially those destined for low grades—exhibit excess optimism about upcoming exams (Prohaska, 1994; Sparrell & Shrauger, 1984). (Such illusory optimism often disappears as the time approaches for receiving

"O God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Serenity Prayer," 1943

Penthouse *publisher Bob Guccione, responding to a national survey revealing that 83 percent of adults reported zero or one sexual partner in the past year: "Positively, outrageously stupid and unbelievable. I would say five partners a year is the average for men."*

(Elmer-DeWitt, 1994)

the exam back—Shepperd et al., 1996.) Students who are overconfident tend to underprepare. Their equally able but more anxious peers, fearing that they are going to bomb on the upcoming exam, study furiously and get higher grades (Goodhart, 1986; Norem & Cantor, 1986; Showers & Ruben, 1987). The moral: Success in school and beyond requires enough optimism to sustain hope and enough pessimism to motivate concern.

false consensus effect the tendency to overestimate the commonality of one's opinions and one's undesirable or unsuccessful behaviours

False consensus and uniqueness

We have a curious tendency to further enhance our self-images by overestimating or underestimating the extent to which others think and act as we do. On matters of *opinion*, we find support for our positions by overestimating the extent to which others agree—a phenomenon called the **false consensus effect** (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen & Goethals, 1990). Those who have favoured a Canadian referendum or supported New Zealand's National Party wishfully overestimated the extent to which others agree (Babad et al., 1992; Koestner, 1993). The sense we make of the world seems like common sense.

"I think few people have conventional family relationships."

Madonna, 2000

When we behave badly or fail in a task, we reassure ourselves by thinking that such lapses also are common. After one person lies to another, the liar begins to perceive the *other* person as dishonest (Sagarin et al., 1998). They guess that others think and act as they do: "I lie, but doesn't everyone?" If we cheat on our income taxes or smoke, we are likely to overestimate the number of other people who do likewise. If we feel sexual desire toward another, we may overestimate the other's reciprocal desire. Four recent studies illustrate:

- People who sneak a shower during a shower ban believe (more than nonbathers) lots of others are doing the same (Monin & Norton, 2003).
- Those thirsty after hard exercise imagine that lost hikers would become more bothered by thirst than by hunger. That's what 88 percent of thirsty post exercisers guessed in a study by Leaf Van Boven and George Lowenstein (2003), compared with 57 percent of people who were about to exercise.

Illusory optimism: Most couples marry feeling confident of long-term love. Actually, in individualistic cultures, new marriages often fail.

- As people's own lives change, they see the world changing. Protective new parents come to see the world as a more dangerous place. People who go on a diet judge food ads to be more prevalent (Eibach et al., 2003).
- People who harbour negative ideas about another racial group presume that many others also have negative stereotypes (Krueger, 1996). Thus our perceptions of others' stereotypes may reveal something of our own.

"Everybody says I'm plastic from head to toe. Can't stand next to a radiator or I'll melt. I had (breast) implants, but so has every single person in L.A" (Talbert, 1997).

Actress Pamela Lee

"We don't see things as they are," says the Talmud. "We see things as we are." False consensus may occur because we generalize from a limited sample, which prominently includes ourselves (Dawes, 1990). Lacking other information, why not "project" ourselves; why not impute our own knowledge to others and use our responses as a clue to their likely responses? Also, we're more likely to associate with people who share our attitudes and behaviours and then to judge the world from the people we know.

On matters of *ability* or when we behave well or successfully, a **false uniqueness effect** more often occurs (Goethals et al., 1991). We serve our self-image by seeing our talents and moral behaviours as relatively unusual. Thus those who drink heavily but use seat belts will *overestimate* (false consensus) the number of other heavy drinkers and *underestimate* (false uniqueness) the commonality of seat belt use (Suls et al., 1988). Thus we may see our failings as relatively normal and our virtues as less commonplace than they are.

false uniqueness effect
the tendency to underestimate the commonality of one's abilities and one's desirable or successful behaviours

Temporal comparison

Not only our comparisons with others, but also our comparisons with who we used to be and who we want to be can be potent sources of self-serving bias. These **temporal comparisons** with our past and future selves also portray the current self in a positive light.

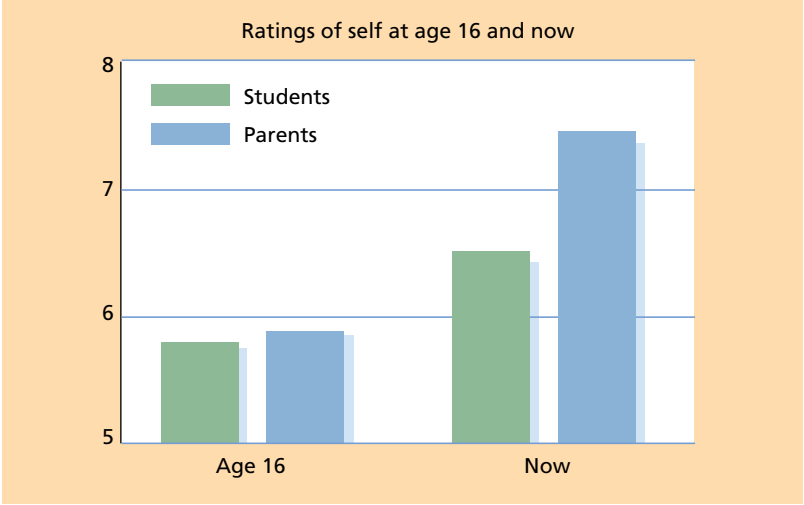
temporal comparison
a comparison between how the self is viewed now and how the self was viewed in the past or how the self is expected to be viewed in the future

Anne Wilson from Wilfrid Laurier University and Mike Ross from the University of Waterloo (Wilson & Ross, 2001; Ross & Wilson, 2002) have studied temporal comparisons extensively. They have found that people maintain a positive view of themselves by disparaging their distant past selves and complimenting their recent past selves. For example, in one experiment Wilson and Ross had university students and their parents rate the students on a number of traits both as they currently were and as they were when they were 16. As can be seen in Figure 2–6, both students and their parents believed that they had improved significantly with time. This evidence would seem to indicate that people disparage their past selves and compliment their future selves, but it could also simply indicate a developmental trend—perhaps people just get better with time. Wilson and Ross (2001) conducted several other studies to rule out this possibility. They showed that while students perceive dramatic improvements in themselves, they do not perceive similar improvement in their acquaintances and siblings. In addition, when students rate themselves at the beginning of term and then retrospectively rate their beginning-of-term self at the end of term, they remember themselves as being much worse at the beginning of term than they rated themselves at the time, suggesting that students create an illusion of improvement that is more apparent than real.

Ross and Wilson (2002) also found that we perceive positive past selves as closer in time and negative past selves as more distant. In one study, they had students rate their social success in high school and later rate how psychologically distant high school seemed. Those who were popular in high school saw it as much more recent than those who were less popular, and the

FIGURE 2–6

Both university students and their parents believe they have improved with time. (Wilson & Ross, 2001)



effect was especially strong for people high in self-esteem. As we will see later in this chapter, high-self-esteem people engage in a number of self-enhancing strategies more frequently than do low-self-esteem people. It seems that bringing positive selves closer and pushing away negative selves is one of those strategies. These high-self-esteem people seem to view their glory days as having just occurred, while their days as a geek are part of the ancient past.

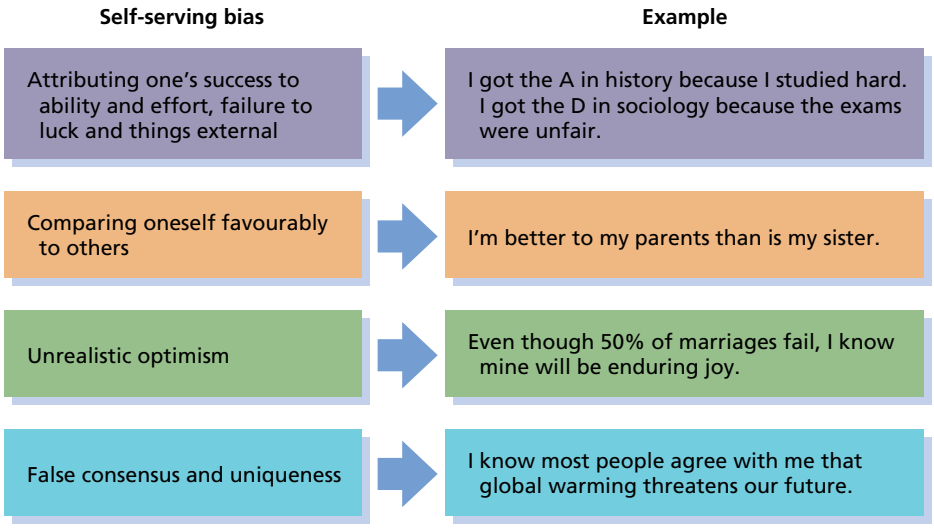
To sum up, these tendencies toward self-serving attributions, self-congratulatory comparisons, illusory optimism, and false consensus for our failings are major sources of self-serving bias (Figure 2–7).

EXPLAINING SELF-SERVING BIAS

Why do people perceive themselves in self-enhancing ways? One explanation sees the self-serving bias as a by-product of how we process and remember information about ourselves.

FIGURE 2–7

How self-serving bias works.



Comparing ourselves with others requires us to notice, assess, and recall their behaviour and ours. Thus, there are multiple opportunities for flaws in our information processing (Chambers & Wincdschitl, 2004). Recall the study in which married people gave themselves credit for doing more housework than their spouses did. Might this not be due, as Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly (1979) believe, to our greater recall for what we've actively done and our lesser recall for what we've not done or merely observed others doing? I can easily picture myself picking up the laundry, but I am less aware of the times when I absentmindedly overlooked it.

Can we all be better than average?

(William W. Haefeli, *Saturday Review*, 1/20/79). Reprinted with permission of General Media Magazines.

Are the biased perceptions, then, simply a perceptual error, an emotion-free glitch in how we process information? Or are self-serving *motives* also involved? It's now clear from research that we have multiple motives. Questing for self-knowledge, we're eager to assess our competence (Dunning, 1995). Questing for self-confirmation, we're eager to verify our self-conceptions (Sanitioso et al., 1990; Swann, 1996, 1997). Questing for self-affirmation, we're especially motivated to enhance our self-image (Sedikides, 1993). Self-esteem motivation helps power self-serving bias. As social psychologist Daniel Batson (2006) surmises, "The head is an extension of the heart."

REFLECTIONS ON SELF-SERVING BIAS

No doubt many readers are finding all this either depressing or contrary to their own occasional feelings of inadequacy. Even people who exhibit the self-serving bias may feel inferior to specific individuals, especially those who are a step or two higher on the ladder of success, attractiveness, or skill. And not everyone operates with a self-serving bias. Some people *do* suffer from low self-esteem.

"Narcissism, like selfishness, is an overcompensation for the basic lack of self-love."

Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 1941

In experiments, people whose self-esteem is temporarily bruised—say by being told they did miserably on an intelligence test—are more likely to disparage others (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998). Those whose egos have recently been wounded also are more prone to self-serving explanations of success or failure than are those whose egos have recently received a boost (McCarrey et al., 1982). So threats to self-esteem may provoke self-protective defensiveness. When they feel unaffirmed, people may offer self-affirming boasts, excuses, and put-downs of others (Fein & Spencer, 1997). More generally, people who are down on themselves tend also to be down on others (Wills, 1981). Mockery says as much about the mocker as the one who is mocked.

The self-serving bias as adaptive

Self-esteem has its dark side, but also its bright side. When good things happen, high- more than low-self-esteem people tend to savour and sustain the good feelings (Wood et al., 2003). "Believing one has more talents and positive qualities than one's peers allows one to feel good

about oneself and to enter the stressful circumstances of daily life with the resources conferred by a positive sense of self," note Shelley Taylor and her co-researchers (2003).

Self-serving bias and its accompanying excuses also help protect people from depression (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Nondepressed people excuse their failures on laboratory tasks or perceive themselves as being more in control than they are. Depressed people's self-appraisals are more accurate: sadder but wiser. (More on this in Module B.)

Self-serving bias additionally helps buffer stress. Bonnano and colleagues (2005) assessed the emotional resiliency of workers who escaped the World Trade Center or its environs on September 11, 2001. They found that those who displayed self-enhancing tendencies were the most resilient.

In their "terror management theory," Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski (1997) propose another reason why positive self-esteem is adaptive—it buffers anxiety, including anxiety related to our certain death. In childhood we learn that when we meet the standards taught us by our parents, we are loved and protected; when we don't, love and protection may be withdrawn. We therefore come to associate viewing ourselves as good with feeling secure. Greenberg and colleagues argue that positive self-esteem—viewing oneself as good and secure—even protects us from feeling terror over our eventual death. Their research shows that reminding people of their mortality (say, by writing a short essay on dying) motivates them to affirm their self-worth. Moreover, when facing threats, increased self-esteem leads to decreased anxiety.

As this new research on depression and anxiety suggests, there may be some practical wisdom in self-serving perceptions. It may be strategic to believe we are smarter, stronger, and more socially successful than we are. Cheaters may give a more convincing display of honesty if they believe themselves honourable. Belief in our superiority can also motivate us to achieve—creating a self-fulfilling prophecy—and can sustain a sense of hope in difficult times.

Self-serving pride in group settings can become especially dangerous.

"Then we're in agreement. There's nothing rotten in Denmark. Something is rotten everywhere else."

The self-serving bias as maladaptive

Although self-serving pride may help protect us from depression, it can at times be maladaptive. People who blame others for their social difficulties are often unhappier than people who can acknowledge their mistakes (C. A. Anderson et al., 1983; Newman & Langer, 1981; Peterson et al., 1981).

Research by Barry Schlenker (1976; Schlenker & Miller, 1977a, 1977b) has also shown how self-serving perceptions can poison a group. As a rock band guitarist during his college days, Schlenker noted that "rock band members typically overestimated their contributions to a group's success and underestimated their contributions to failure. I saw many good bands disintegrate from the problems caused by these self-glorifying tendencies." In his later life as a University of Florida social psychologist, Schlenker

explored group members' self-serving perceptions. In nine experiments, he had people work together on some task. He then falsely informed them that their group had done either well or poorly. In every one of these studies, the members of successful groups claimed more responsibility for their group's performance than did members of groups that supposedly failed at the task.

If most group members believe they are underpaid and underappreciated relative to their better-than-average contributions, disharmony and envy are likely. College presidents and academic deans will readily recognize the phenomenon. Ninety percent or more of college faculty members rate themselves as superior to their average colleague (Blackburn et al., 1980; Cross, 1977). It is therefore inevitable that when merit salary raises are announced and half receive an average raise or less, many will feel themselves victims of injustice.

"Victory finds a hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan."

Count Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 1938

Self-serving biases also inflate people's judgments of their groups. When groups are comparable, most people consider their own group superior (Codol, 1976; Jourden & Heath, 1996; Taylor & Doria, 1981). Thus,

- most university sorority members perceive those in their sorority as far less likely to be conceited and snobby than those in other sororities (Biernat et al., 1996).
- 53 percent of Dutch adults rate their marriage or partnership as better than that of most others; only 1 percent rate it as worse than most (Buunk & van der Eijnden, 1997).
- most corporation presidents and production managers overpredict their own firms' productivity and growth (Kidd & Morgan, 1969; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977).

That people see themselves with a favourable bias is hardly new—the tragic flaw portrayed in ancient Greek drama was hubris, or pride. Like the subjects of our experiments, the Greek tragic figures were not self-consciously evil; they merely thought too highly of themselves. In literature, the pitfalls of pride are portrayed again and again. In theology, pride has long been first among the "seven deadly sins."

If pride is akin to the self-serving bias, then what is humility? Is it self-contempt? Or can we be self-affirming and self-accepting without a self-serving bias? To paraphrase the English scholar-writer C. S. Lewis, humility is not handsome people trying to believe they are ugly and clever people trying to believe they are fools. False modesty can actually be a cover for pride in one's better-than-average humility. (James Friedrich [1996] reports that most students congratulate themselves on being better than average at not thinking themselves better than average!) True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty. It leaves people free to rejoice in their special talents and, with the same honesty, to recognize others.

After just one brief conversation with a prospective employee, interviewers are prone to overconfidence in their intuitive judgments.

SUMMING UP: SELF-SERVING BIAS

Contrary to the presumption that most people suffer from feelings of inferiority, researchers consistently find that most people exhibit a *self-serving bias*. In experiments and everyday life we often blame failures on the situation while taking credit for successes. We typically rate ourselves as better than average on subjective, desirable traits and abilities. Believing in ourselves, we exhibit unrealistic optimism about our futures. And we overestimate the commonality of our opinions and foibles (*false consensus*) while underestimating the commonality of our abilities and virtues (*false uniqueness*). We also remember ourselves in the past and project ourselves into the future in ways that portray a positive image of the current self. Self-serving bias can be adaptive in that it allows us to savour the good things that happen in our lives. When bad things happen, however, self-serving bias can have the maladaptive effect of causing us to blame others or feel cheated out of something we "deserved."

SELF-PRESENTATION: LOOKING GOOD TO OTHERS

We humans seem motivated not only to perceive ourselves in self-enhancing ways but also to present ourselves to others in desired ways. How might our tactics of "impression management" lead to false modesty or to self-defeating behaviour?

So far we have seen that the self is at the centre of our social worlds, that self-esteem and self-efficacy pay dividends, and that self-serving pride biases self-evaluations. But are self-enhancing expressions always sincere? Do people have the same feelings privately as they express publicly? Or are they just putting on a positive face even while living with self-doubt?

FALSE MODESTY

There is indeed evidence that people sometimes present a different self than they feel. The clearest example, however, is not false pride but false modesty. Perhaps you have by now recalled times when someone was not self-praising but self-disparaging. Such put-downs can be subtly self-serving, for often they elicit reassurance. "I felt like a fool" may trigger a friend to say, "You did fine!" Even a remark such as "I wish I weren't so ugly" may elicit at least a "Come now. I know a couple of people who are uglier than you."

There is another reason people disparage themselves and praise others. Think of the coach who, before the big game, extols the opponent's strength. Is the coach utterly sincere? When coaches publicly exalt their opponents, they convey an image of modesty and good sportsmanship and set the stage for a favourable evaluation no matter what the outcome. A win becomes a praiseworthy achievement; a loss is attributable to the opponent's "great defence." Modesty, said the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon, is but one of the "arts of ostentation." Thus, Robert Gould, Paul Brounstein, and Harold Sigall (1977) found that, in a laboratory contest, their students similarly aggrandized their anticipated opponent, but only when the assessment was made publicly. Anonymously, they credited their future opponent with much less ability.

False modesty also appears in people's autobiographical accounts of their achievements. At awards ceremonies, honorees graciously thank others for their support. Upon receiving an Academy Award, Maureen Stapleton thanked "my family, my children, my friends, and everyone I have ever met in my entire life." Does such generous sharing of credit contradict the common finding that people readily attribute success to their own effort and competence?

"Humility is often but a trick whereby pride abases itself only to exalt itself later."

La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, 1665

To find out, Roy Baumeister and Stacey Ilko (1995) invited students to write a description of "an important success experience." Those whom they asked to sign their names and who anticipated reading their story to others often acknowledged the help or emotional support they had received. Those who wrote anonymously rarely made such mentions; rather, they portrayed themselves achieving their successes on their own. To Baumeister and Ilko, these results suggest "shallow gratitude"—superficial gratitude offered to *appear* humble, while "in the privacy of their own minds" the subjects credited themselves.

SELF-HANDICAPPING

Sometimes people sabotage their chances for success by creating impediments that make success less likely. Far from being deliberately self-destructive, such behaviours typically have a self-protective aim (Arkin et al., 1986; Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Rhodewalt, 1987): "I'm really not a failure—I would have done well except for this problem."

Why would people handicap themselves with self-defeating behaviour? Recall that we eagerly protect our self-images by attributing failures to external factors. Can you see why, *fearing failure*, people might handicap themselves by partying half the night before a job interview or playing video games instead of studying before a big exam? When self-image is tied up with performance, it can be more self-deflating to try hard and fail than to procrastinate and have a ready excuse. If we fail while working under a handicap, we can cling to a sense of competence; if we succeed under such conditions, it can only boost our self-image. Handicaps protect both self-esteem and public image by allowing us to attribute failures to something temporary or external ("I was feeling sick"; "I was out too late the night before") rather than to lack of talent or ability.

This analysis of **self-handicapping**, proposed by Steven Berglas and Edward Jones (1978), has been confirmed. One experiment was said to concern "drugs and intellectual performance." Imagine yourself in the position of their participants. You guess answers to some difficult aptitude questions and then are told, "Yours was one of the best scores seen to date!" Feeling incredibly lucky, you are then offered a choice between two drugs before answering more of these items. One drug will aid intellectual performance and the other will inhibit it. Which drug do you want? Most students wanted the drug that would supposedly disrupt their thinking and thus provide a handy excuse for anticipated poorer performance.

self-handicapping protecting one's self-image with behaviours that create a handy excuse for later failure

Researchers have documented other ways in which people self-handicap. Fearing failure, people will:

- Reduce their preparation for important individual athletic events (Rhodewalt et al., 1984).
- Give their opponent an advantage (Shepperd & Arkin, 1991).

- Perform poorly at the beginning of a task in order not to create unreachable expectations (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987).
- Not try as hard as they could during a tough, ego-involving task (Hormuth, 1986; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Riggs, 1992; Turner & Pratkanis, 1993).

self-presentation the act of expressing oneself and behaving in ways designed to create a favourable impression or an impression that corresponds to one's ideals

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Self-serving bias, false modesty, and self-handicapping reveal the depth of our concern for self-image. To varying degrees, we are continually managing the impressions we create. Whether we wish to impress, to intimidate, or to seem helpless, we are social animals, playing to an audience.

"With no attempt there can be no failure; with no failure no humiliation."

William James, *Principles of Psychology,* 1890

"Public opinion is always more tyrannical towards those who obviously fear it than towards those who feel indifferent to it."

Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness,* 1930

"It is not, therefore, necessary for a prince to have all the desirable qualities . . . but it is very necessary to seem to have them."

Niccolo Machiavelli, 1469–1527

Self-presentation refers to our wanting to present a desired image both to an external audience (other people) and to an internal audience (ourselves). We work at managing the impressions we create. We excuse, justify, or apologize as necessary to shore up our self-esteem and verify our self-images (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). In familiar situations, this happens without conscious effort. In unfamiliar situations, perhaps at a party with people we would like to impress or in conversation with someone of the other sex, we are acutely self-conscious of the impressions we are creating and we are therefore less modest than when among friends who know us well (Leary et al., 1994; Tice et al., 1995). Preparing to present ourselves in a photograph, we may even try out different faces in a mirror. We do so even though active self-presentation depletes energy, which often leads to diminished effectiveness—for example, to less persistence on a tedious experimental task or more difficulty stifling emotional expressions (Vohs et al., 2005).

Given our concern for self-presentation, it's no wonder, say self-presentation researchers, that people will self-handicap when failure might make them look bad (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). It's no wonder that people take health risks—tanning their skin with wrinkle- and cancer-causing radiation; becoming anorexic; failing to obtain and use condoms; yielding to peer pressures to smoke, get drunk, and do drugs (Leary et al., 1994). It's no wonder that people express more modesty when their self-flattery is vulnerable to being debunked, perhaps by experts who will be scrutinizing their self-evaluations (Arkin et al., 1980; Riess et al., 1981; Weary et al., 1982). Professor Smith will express less confidence in the significance of her work when presenting it to professional colleagues than when presenting to students.

For some people, conscious self-presentation is a way of life. They continually monitor their own behaviour and note how others react, then adjust their social performance to gain a desired effect. Those who score high on a scale of **self-monitoring** tendency (who, for example, agree that "I tend to be what people expect me to be") act like social chameleons—they adjust their behaviour in response to external situations (Snyder, 1987). Having attuned their behaviour to the situation, they are more likely to espouse attitudes they don't really hold (Zanna & Olson, 1982). Being conscious of others, they are less likely to act on their own attitudes. As Mark Leary (2004) observed, the self they know often differs from the self they show.

self-monitoring being attuned to the way one presents oneself in social situations and adjusting one's performance to create the desired impression

Those who score low in self-monitoring care less about what others think. They are more internally guided and thus more likely to talk and act as they feel and believe (McCann & Hancock, 1983). For example, if asked to list their thoughts about gay couples, they simply express

what they think, regardless of the attitudes of their anticipated audience (Klein et al., 2004). As you might imagine, someone who is extremely low in self-monitoring could come across as an insensitive boor, whereas extremely high self-monitoring could result in dishonest behaviour worthy of a con artist. Most of us fall somewhere between those two extremes.

Presenting oneself in ways that create a desired impression is a very delicate matter. People want to be seen as able, but also as modest and honest (Carlston & Shovar, 1983). Modesty creates a good impression, and unsolicited boasting creates a bad impression (Forsyth et al., 1981; Holtgraves & Srull, 1989; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Thus, the false modesty phenomenon: We often display less self-esteem than we privately feel (Miller & Schlenker, 1985). But when we have obviously done extremely well, false disclaimers ("I did well, but it's no big deal") may come across as feigned humility. To make good impressions—as modest yet competent—requires social skill.

In Asian countries, self-presentation is restrained. Children learn to identify themselves with their groups.

Self-presented modesty is greatest in cultures that value self-restraint, such as those of China and Japan (Heine & Lehman, 1995, 1997; Lee & Seligman, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wu & Tsseng, 1985). In China and Japan, people exhibit less self-serving bias. Unlike Westerners, who (as we have seen in this chapter) tend to take credit for successes and attribute failures to the situation, Japanese children learn to share credit for success and to accept responsibility for failures. "When I fail, it's my fault, not my group's" is a typical Japanese attitude (Anderson, 1999).

Despite such self-presentational concerns, people worldwide are privately self-enhancing. Self-serving bias has been noted among Dutch high-school and university students, Belgian basketball players, Indian Hindus, Japanese drivers, Israeli and Singaporean schoolchildren, Australian students and workers, Chinese students, Hong Kong sports writers, and French people of all ages (Codol, 1976; de Vries & van Knippenberg, 1987; Falbo et al., 1997; Feather, 1983; Hagiwara, 1983; Hallahan et al., 1997; Jain, 1990; Liebrand et al., 1986; Lefebvre, 1979; Murphy-Berman & Sharma, 1986; and Ruzzene & Noller, 1986, respectively).

"If an American is hit on the head by a ball at the ballpark, he sues. If a Japanese person is hit on the head he says, 'It's my honor. It's my fault. I shouldn't have been standing there.'"

Japanese bar-association official Koji Yanase, explaining why there are half as many lawyers in his country as in the Greater Washington area alone, *Newsweek,* February 26, 1996

SUMMING UP: SELF-PRESENTATION

As social animals, we adjust our words and actions to suit our audiences. To varying degrees, we *self-monitor;* we note our performance and adjust it to create a desired impression. Such *impression management* tactics explain examples of false modesty, in which people put themselves down, extol future competitors, or publicly credit others when privately they credit themselves. Sometimes people will even *self-handicap* with self-defeating behaviours that protect self-esteem by providing excuses for failure. Self-presentation refers to our wanting to present a favourable image both to an external audience (other people) and to an internal audience (ourselves). With regard to an external audience, those who score high on a scale of self-monitoring adjust their behaviour to each situation, whereas those low in self-monitoring may do so little social adjusting that they seem insensitive.