****

8th SOUTHAMPTON SYMPOSIUM ON SELF AND IDENTITY

“The Self as Sonata: The Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation of Classic Themes”

Thursday 14th July & Friday 15th July, Dept. of Psychology, Shackleton Building, Room 3095

**ABSTRACTS**

*Dr Ian Mortimer* (Moretonhampstead, Devon)

**“The History of Self”**

The development of the self is problematic for both historians and psychologists. Historians are aware that people before 1600 were not ‘just like us’ because society appears far crueller, more violent, and more accepting of social hierarchy than its modern equivalent. However, we (that is, historians) lack the tools to measure or prove these things. Moreover, we justify what we do through a reliance on evidence; trying to judge what the medieval mind was like is to speculate beyond what would normally be perceived as the limits of the evidence. The problems are just as great for psychologists, or so it appears from a close reading of from Baumeister’s 1987 article, ‘How the Self became a Problem’ in The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (vol. 52, 1, pp. 163-76). This is because the language employed is fundamentally anachronistic: the profession does not have the terminology for describing the medieval mind in medieval terms. There is an assumption underlying Baumeister’s work, for example, that the concepts used to describe various aspects of the modern self – self-awareness, self-denial, self-delusion, individualism and identity –can be equally applied to historical periods. The further back one looks, the less reliable this assumption appears to a historian. It leads to a disjuncture between the professional language of psychology (which inevitably represents past people as semi-formed moderns) and the ways in which people in, say, the eleventh century acted and reportedly spoke (according to their fully formed eleventh-century selves). To illustrate the problem by way of analogy: it is as if a modern chef was trying to describe ancient cooking through describing the ancient equivalents for all the electrical appliances to be found in a modern kitchen. In searching for the ancient equivalent of a fridge, for example, the chef ends up assuming that the ancient people needed to keep things cold, and that these things must have included meat, fish and dairy products, and that they had not developed alternatives ways of preserving them. In fact, the ancient society in question could have been nomadic, or vegetarian, or vegan. The point is that we cannot understand the past by simply projecting the perceptions of the present day on to the people of the past. The problems of understanding the self in the distant past thus appear to be insurmountable. However, while it goes without saying we cannot achieve a full understanding of past ways of thinking and ideas of individualism, it would be wrong to say that we can make no progress at all in this regard. The problem may be likened to that of mapping the landscape of medieval disease: we cannot know what diseases have become extinct in the interim nor which modern diseases were not experienced until more recent times; but we can say certain diseases were suffered and that they affected individuals and society in certain ways. Indeed, the most ‘important’ diseases are likely to have made the biggest impact. Similarly the events that had the greatest impact on the development of the self should be discernible. By looking at a timeline of historical phenomena we can come up with a series of hypothetical shifts: these then can be examined more closely to see whether they were widely experienced and proved lasting. This talk will therefore begin by looking at the social and religious framework of eleventh-century life, and then examine a number of possible shifts in the relationship between individuals and society, and self-perception, before 1600. These will include the development of Purgatory in the twelfth century, the commercial revolution (especially in the years around 1200), the Black Death of 1346-49, the spread of the mirror in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the impact of the printed vernacular Bible, literacy and the power of the bureaucratic state in the sixteenth century.

*Adam Pegler, MSc* (University of Southampton)

**“Through Rosenberg-Tinted Glasses: The Definition and Measurement of Self-Esteem in Social**

**Psychology, Past and Future”**

What is self-esteem? And how is it measured? I present meta-research showing that the answer to the first question is researchers disagree, possibly without realizing it. I also argue that the answer to the second question is not very well.  An analysis of the definitions and measurement practices contained within 350 articles that include the term “self-esteem” in their titles, published in eleven of personality and social psychology’s leading journals between 2004 and 2015, shows that although 11 different categories of definition of self-esteem were in evidence, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) accounted for over 70% of measurement occasions. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs for at least three reasons. First, many definitions of the construct are not particularly consonant with the content of the scale. Second, stemming largely from its genesis as a Guttman scale, a story which seemingly has been lost to the field, the scale has repeatedly shown itself to have poor internal consistency. Third, stemming largely from the broad definition of self-esteem which guided its creation fifty years ago, it is likely a multidimensional scale, capable of being dis-aggregated to good effect. I argue that the field can do better, and that new directions in the definition and measurement of self-esteem are needed now more than ever.

*Dr Jochen Gebauer* (Universität Mannheim)

**“Societal Standing as Self-Esteem: Rosenberg Revisited”**

Societal standing is a classic and persistent contender for self-esteem’s chief source. In the most frequently cited work on self-esteem, Rosenberg (1965) examined self-esteem as an output of societal standing’s two pillars: Person-culture fit and social class. The results were unexpectedly weak. Person-culture fit and social class were modest predictors of self-esteem at best. The effect sizes were nowhere near the threshold necessary to uphold the claim that societal standing is key for self-esteem. This talk will revisit the relation between societal standing and self-esteem. The first part is on person-culture fit and self-esteem. The results show that the fit-esteem relation waxes and wanes as a function of theory-derived moderators, including domain of fit and definition of culture. The second part of this talk is on social class and self-esteem. Analog to the first part, the results show that the class-esteem relation waxes and wanes as a function of theory-derived moderators, including self-centrality of social class and anti-wealth norms in society. Together, there are conditions under which societal standing is virtually irrelevant for self-esteem, just as Rosenberg (1965) found. Of importance, however, there are also conditions under which societal standing (person-culture fit and social class) determine the lion share of variance in self-esteem.

*Dr Aiden P Gregg* (University of Southampton, UK)

**“Can Urges to Verify the Self Themselves be Verified? Empirical Support for a Contrarian Perspective”**

Human beings experience, not only biological desires, but also, as self-conscious beings, desires relating to their identity, to who they are. These desires are, moreover, epistemic in character: people want to discover information about themselves. What information? Sometimes, the bare truth: people want to objectively self-assess. Other times, a positive fantasy: people wish to biasedly self-enhance. Provocatively, it has also claimed that people wish to discover another type information about themselves, namely, that which confirms their existing self-view, regardless of its truth or positivity. That is, people allegedly wish to self-verify. The underlying idea is that a solid identity, whatever its content, matters per se because it affords its bearer a sense of intrapsychic coherence, and renders their interpersonal interactions more predictable and controllable for all parties involved. The evidence adduced in favour of self-verification theory derives from various sources. However, one key strand derives from the feedback choices made by people with negative self-views. Such people commonly opt for negative feedback over positive feedback, all else equal. In so doing, they forsake information liable to enhance their self-views for information liable to verify them, suggesting that self-enhancement urges are overpowered, or at least heavily moderated, by self-verification urges. Taking a contrarian position, I summarize a set of studies conducted over the last three years with colleagues at the Centre for Research of Identity that casts doubt on the standard interpretation of such findings. In particular, we find that, even though we replicate the finding, in studies presenting both hypothetical and real feedback, that people with negative self-views disproportionately opt for negative over positive feedback, they nonetheless report that they wish for such negative feedback to be false, and the negative feedback to be true—which is incompatible with epistemically striving for self-verification. We also report on additional studies that (a) find scant evidence of self-verification cross-culturally in spontaneously reported identity, (b) show that the anticipated gain of positive self-views and the anticipated loss of negative self-views facilitates rather than undermines anticipated level of control or coherence, and (c) show that when people are offered the chance of choose positive or negative feedback versus not, as opposed to positive versus negative feedback, patterns less consistent with verification strivings emerge.

*Ben Tappin, MSc* (Royal Holloway, UK)

**“The Moral-Self Illusions”**

Positive illusions are conceived of as inaccurately positive self-perceptions; perhaps promoting wellbeing (Taylor & Brown, 1988). The empirical phenomenon of self-enhancement is part consistent with this—along various trait dimensions, individuals hold positively-inflated views of themselves with respect to others. But are these truly “illusions”? This implies error, inaccuracy, or irrationality. Using the logic of social projection, we partitioned conventional self-enhancement into rational and irrational components along the trait dimensions of morality, agency, and sociability. Our results revealed that irrational self-enhancement was greatest for moral qualities, whereas sociability self-enhancement was fully accounted for by rational processes of social perception. Inconsistent with Taylor and Brown (1988), the irrational component of moral self-perception was not related to self-esteem. Our data indicate that beliefs regarding the moral character of oneself present the strongest case for positive illusions, but the underlying function remains unknown.

*Dr Leslie van der Leer* (Regents University, UK)

**“The Optimist Within”**

The nature and existence of self-deception is controversial. On a classic conception, self-deceived individuals carry two conflicting representations of reality. Proponents of an alternative, deflationary account dispute this, arguing that putative cases of self-deception simply reflect distorted information processing. To investigate these alternatives, we combined paradigms from the “optimism bias” and “crowd-within” literatures. Participants provided two different estimates – without intervening directional feedback – for a series of incentivized questions. Half of the questions were neutral in content, while half referred to undesirable future events. Whereas the first and second estimates for neutral questions did not differ systematically, second estimates for undesirable questions were more optimistic than first estimates. This result indicates that participants were sampling selectively from an internal probability distribution when providing estimates for undesirable events, implying they had access to a less rosy representation of their future prospects than their individual estimates conveyed. In short, self-deception is real.

*Dr Lusia Stopa* (University of Southampton, UK)

**“Mirrors of the Mind: How Imagery Reveals the Self”**

Distorted views of self are at the heart of many clinical disorders. These self-views are often encapsulated by a mental image that both represents the individual’s view of self and is associated with a set of autobiographical memories that reinforce those views. Although traditionally cognitive therapy has discussed these negative self-views in terms of core beliefs or schema, the focus of this talk is on the benefits of using more dynamic models of the self, namely, the self-memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), self-organisation (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2006), and retrieval competition (Brewin, 2006) to explain and understand the image-self relationship. The talk will examine experimental research into self-images in social anxiety, eating disorders and paranoia that looks at how self-images affect a range of self-constructs including implicit and explicit self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and self-discrepancies. This experimental work tested the hypothesis that images represent an individuals’ ‘working self’, which describes a current ‘on-line’ self that is only one of many possible self-representations. The final part of the talk will focus on the use of imagery in treatment and will evaluate how dynamic models of imagery and the self can contribute to understanding the mechanisms of therapeutic change.

*Dr Dorina Winter* (University of Southampton, UK)

**“Mechanisms of Low Self-Esteem and Negative Self-Evaluations in Borderline Personality Disorder”**

Borderline personality disorder is characterized by affective, behavioral and interpersonal instability. In addition, affected individuals show an instable self-image, persuasive self-devaluation and low self-esteem. However, the mechanisms of self-esteem and self-evaluations in borderline personality disorder are not yet well understood. My presentation will start with an overview over the current state of research on this issue including explicit in comparison with implicit measures. Then, current data from our group on self-awareness, self-evaluation and self-esteem will be presented. On this basis, I would like to discuss with the audience whether there is tendency for self-verification or a lack of self-enhancement in borderline personality disorder. Open questions for future research will be highlighted.

*Dr Netta Weinstein* (Cardiff University, UK)

**“When It’s Truly OK to Be Me: Evaluating the Role of Autonomy-Support in Conflictual Identities”**

Extensive theorizing posits that important others’ perceptions of oneself influence self-perceptions. This presents a challenge for the critical developmental task of integrating all aspects of one’s identity, as identities that are devalued or stigmatized by society (conflictual ones) are harder to accept than other identities (non-conflictual ones). Being autonomy- supported may buffer such negative self-perceptions, but this idea has not been directly tested in previous research. In this talk I will present a series of studies exploring the idea that conflictual identities are harder to own than non-conflictual ones, and which also examine how being autonomy-supported for an identity can facilitate ownership of conflictual and non-conflictual identities. Across these cross-sectional, experience sampling, and experimental studies, data converged in showing that conflictual identities are indeed harder to own than non-conflictual ones, but that autonomy support promotes ownership especially for conflictual identities. Ownership of identity and autonomy support were also related to higher well-being, particularly when such support was provided for conflictual identities. In this talk, I will also consider implications of identity ownership and the relevance of the social context in facilitating the identity integration process.

*Dr Janina Steinmitz* (University of Utrecht, The Netherlands)

**“If at First You Do Succeed: The Paradox of Naturally Successful People”**

Whereas past research has shown many self-oriented benefits of success, we highlight some unforeseen interpersonal costs. We do so by investigating the concept of naturally successful others who succeed without much struggle or effort. While previous research finds that the natural gifts and achievements of others indeed seem impressive, we reveal quite a different pattern in terms of social evaluations of the other people themselves. Compared to others who have to work hard for their success, naturally successful others are perceived as less socially warm, seem disconnected from everyday human experiences, and are generally liked less. Critically, people do not fully anticipate these drawbacks, and mistakenly seek favor from others by framing their success as naturally (versus effortfully) attained. These findings fill important gaps in the achievement motivation literature and raise novel implications for interpersonal communication. The positive effects of success may be undermined if it appears too easily achieved.

*Dr Madoka Kumashiro* (Goldsmiths University, UK)

**“The Michelangelo Phenomenon: Partner Affirmation and Sculpting of the Ideal Self”**

Work on the Michelangelo phenomenon (Rusbult et al., 2007) has shown that close partners can help individuals move closer to their ideal self and facilitate progress toward their most important goals and aspirations. Drawing on three classical traditions of behavioral confirmation principles, self-discrepancy theory, and interdependent theory, the model posits that affirming partner behaviours that are aligned with the self’s ideals promote personal growth and enhance well-being. First, the behavioral confirmation tradition suggests that individuals often exhibit behaviors that confirm other people’s expectations. Next, the interdependence theory suggests that close relationship partners, with their frequent interactions and influence across a diverse range of human activities, are in the best position to facilitate such confirmation processes over a long period of time. Finally, the self- discrepancy theory suggests positive outcomes for the self to the extent that the long-term sculpting process is aligned with the individuals’ own ideal self. This talk will present latest developments, including mediators and moderators of the model, with a special focus on various personality processes that facilitate or impede the sculpting process. Implications of findings for general positive development of the self and new areas for development will be discussed.

*Dr Paul Elvers* (Max Planck Institute, Germany)

**“Songs for the Ego: Theorizing Musical Self-Enhancement”**

This talk outlines a theoretical account of musical self-enhancement. I claim that listening to music serves as a resource for actively manipulating affective states so that a positive self-view is maintained and a sense of optimism is provided. Self-enhancement—the process by which individuals modify their self-worth and gain self-esteem—typically takes place in social interactions. I argue that experiencing music may serve as a unique “esthetic surrogate” for interaction, which equally enables self-enhancement. This ability relies on three main characteristics of the musical experience, namely, its capacity to (a) evoke empathetic feelings, (b) elicit social cohesion and affiliation, and (c) elicit feelings of reward. I outline how these characteristics relate to theories of music cognition and empirical findings in psychology and neuroscience research. I also explain the specifics of musical self-enhancement and how it differs from music’s other regulatory functions such as mood- and emotion regulation. My aim in introducing the notion of musical self-enhancement is to broaden our understanding of how music functions as an environmental resource entailing access to unique affective states and how musical experiences are co-constituted by both the agent and the sonic environment. This specific use of music for self-enhancement can be regarded as a form of affective niche construction, providing the external conditions in which people can experience themselves more positively and maintain high self-esteem.