

Chapter 1: Self-Concept

Human Relations can be defined as relations with or between people. The study of human relations is particularly interested in how people relate with others in workplace settings. Throughout this text, we will explore various topics that will help us understand ourselves and how to relate with others in personal and professional contexts.

To understand and develop strong human relations skills, you will begin by learning more about how you view yourself. In this chapter you will explore the question “Who am I?” as you learn about the psychological concepts of identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and how they inform your overall self-concept. This will provide you with a strong foundation to build upon in subsequent chapters. First, you will examine your self-concept.

1.1 Understanding the Self

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
- Apply self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy to personal experiences.
- Compare and contrast how social and family influences, culture, and media influence self-perception.

Self-Concept

Self-concept refers to the overall idea of who a person thinks he or she is. If I said, “Tell me who you are,” your answers would be clues as to how you see yourself, your self-concept. Each person has an overall self-concept that might be encapsulated in a short list of overarching characteristics that he or she finds important. But each person’s self-concept is also influenced by context, meaning we think differently about ourselves depending on the situation we are in. In some situations, personal characteristics, such as our abilities, personality, and other distinguishing features, will best describe who we are. You might consider yourself laid back, traditional, funny, open minded, or driven, or you might label yourself a leader or a thrill seeker. In other situations, our self-concept may be tied to group or cultural membership. For example, you might consider yourself a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity, a Southerner, or a member of the track team (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Men are more likely than women to include group memberships in their self-concept descriptions.– [In Control](#) – [Stefano Ravalli](#) – [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Our self-concept is also formed through our interactions with others and their reactions to us. The concept of the **looking glass self** explains that we see ourselves reflected in other people’s reactions to us and then form our self-concept based on how we believe

other people see us (Cooley, 1902). This reflective process of building our self-concept is based on what other people have actually said, such as “You’re a good listener,” and other people’s actions, such as coming to you for advice. These thoughts evoke emotional responses that feed into our self-concept. For example, you may think, “I’m glad that people can count on me to listen to their problems.”

We also develop our self-concept through comparisons to other people. **Social comparison theory** states that we describe and evaluate ourselves in terms of how we compare to other people. Social comparisons are based on two dimensions: superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Hargie, 2011). In terms of superiority and inferiority, we evaluate characteristics like attractiveness, intelligence, athletic ability, and so on. For example, you may judge yourself to be more intelligent than your brother or less athletic than your best friend, and these judgments are incorporated into your self-concept. This process of comparison and evaluation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it can have negative consequences if our reference group isn’t appropriate. Reference groups are the groups we use for social comparison, and they typically change based on what we are evaluating. In terms of athletic ability, many people choose unreasonable reference groups with which to engage in social comparison. If a man wants to get into better shape and starts an exercise routine, he may be discouraged by his difficulty keeping up with the aerobics instructor or running partner and judge himself as inferior, which could negatively affect his self-concept. Using as a reference group people who have only recently started a fitness program but have shown progress could help maintain a more accurate and hopefully positive self-concept.

We also engage in social comparison based on similarity and difference. Since self-concept is context specific, similarity may be desirable in some situations and difference more desirable in others. Factors like age and personality may influence whether or not we want to fit in or stand out. Although we compare ourselves to others throughout our lives, adolescent and teen years usually bring new pressure to be similar to or different from particular reference groups. Think of all the cliques in high school and how people voluntarily and involuntarily broke off into groups based on popularity, interest, culture, or grade level. Some kids in your high school probably wanted to fit in with and be similar to other people in the marching band but be different from the football players. Conversely, athletes were probably more apt to compare themselves, in terms of similar athletic ability, to other athletes rather than kids in show choir. But social comparison can be complicated by perceptual influences. As we learned earlier, we organize information based on similarity and difference, but these patterns don’t always hold true. Even though students involved in athletics and students involved in arts may seem very different, a dancer or singer may also be very athletic, perhaps even more so than a member of the football team. As with other aspects of perception, there are positive and negative consequences of social comparison.

We generally want to know where we fall in terms of ability and performance as compared to others, but what people do with this information and how it affects self-concept varies. Not all people feel they need to be at the top of the list, but some won't stop until they get the high score on the video game or set a new school record in a track-and-field event. Some people strive to be first chair in the clarinet section of the orchestra, while another person may be content to be second chair. The education system promotes social comparison through grades and rewards such as honor rolls and dean's lists. Although education and privacy laws prevent teachers from displaying each student's grade on a test or paper for the whole class to see, teachers do typically report the aggregate grades, meaning the total number of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. This doesn't violate anyone's privacy rights, but it allows students to see where they fell in the distribution.

This type of social comparison can be used as motivation. The student who was one of only three out of twenty-three to get a D on the exam knows that most of her classmates are performing better than she is, which may lead her to think, "If they can do it, I can do it." But social comparison that isn't reasoned can have negative effects and result in negative thoughts like "Look at how bad I did. Man, I'm stupid!" These negative thoughts can lead to negative behaviors, because we try to maintain internal consistency, meaning we act in ways that match up with our self-concept. So, if the student begins to question her academic abilities and then incorporates an assessment of herself as a "bad student" into her self-concept, she may then behave in ways consistent with that, which is only going to worsen her academic performance. Additionally, a student might be comforted to learn that he isn't the only person who got a D and then not feel the need to try to improve, since he has company. You can see in this example that evaluations we place on our self-concept can lead to cycles of thinking and acting. These cycles relate to self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are components of our self-concept.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the judgments and evaluations we make about our self-concept. While self-concept is a broad description of the self, self-esteem is a more specifically an evaluation of the self (Byrne, 1996). If I again prompted you to "Tell me who you are," and then asked you to evaluate (label as good/bad, positive/negative, desirable/undesirable) each of the things you listed about yourself, I would get clues about your self-esteem (Figure 1.2). Like self-concept, self-esteem has general and specific elements. Generally, some people are more likely to evaluate themselves positively while others are more likely to evaluate themselves negatively (Brockner, 1988). More specifically, our self-esteem varies across our life span and across contexts.



Figure 1.2 Self-esteem varies throughout our lives, but some people generally think more positively of themselves and some people think more negatively. [trophy] – [RHINO NEAL](#) – [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

How we judge ourselves affects our communication and our behaviors, but not every negative or positive judgment carries the same weight. The negative evaluation of a trait that isn't very important for our self-concept will likely not result in a loss of self-esteem. For example, I am not very good at drawing. While I appreciate drawing as an art form, I don't consider drawing ability to be a very big part of my self-concept. If someone critiqued my drawing ability, my self-esteem wouldn't take a big hit. I do consider myself a good teacher, however, and I have spent and continue to spend considerable time and effort on improving my knowledge of teaching and my teaching skills. If someone critiqued my teaching knowledge and/or abilities, my self-esteem would definitely be hurt. This doesn't mean that we can't be evaluated on something we find important. Even though teaching is very important to my self-concept, I am regularly evaluated on it. Every semester, I am evaluated by my students, and every year, I am evaluated by my dean, department chair, and colleagues. Most of that feedback is in the form of constructive criticism, which can still be difficult to receive, but when taken in the spirit of self-improvement, it is valuable and may even enhance our self-concept and self-esteem. In fact, in professional contexts, people with higher self-esteem are more likely to work harder based on negative feedback, are less negatively affected by work stress, are able to handle workplace conflict better, and are better able to work independently and solve problems (Brockner, 1988). Self-esteem isn't the only factor that contributes to our self-concept; perceptions about our competence also play a role in developing our sense of self.

Self-Efficacy

Self-Efficacy refers to the judgments people make about their ability to perform a task within a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Judgments about our self-efficacy influence our self-esteem, which influences our self-concept. The following example also illustrates these interconnections (Figure 1.3).

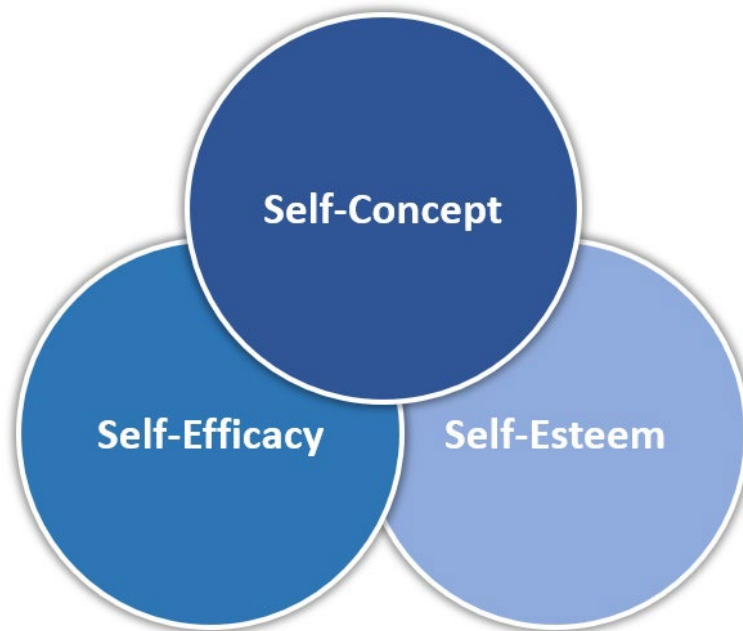


Figure 1.3 Relationship between Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, and Self-Concept. [Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem](#) – [Stevy.Scarbrough](#) – [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Pedro did a good job on his first college speech. During a meeting with his professor, Pedro indicates that he is confident going into the next speech and thinks he will do well. This skill-based assessment is an indication that Pedro has a high level of self-efficacy related to public speaking. If he does well on the speech, the praise from his classmates and professor will reinforce his self-efficacy and lead him to positively evaluate his speaking skills, which will contribute to his self-esteem. By the end of the class, Pedro likely thinks of himself as a good public speaker, which may then become an important part of his self-concept. Throughout these points of connection, it's important to remember that self-perception affects how we communicate, behave, and perceive other things. Pedro's increased feeling of self-efficacy may give him more confidence in his delivery, which will likely result in positive feedback that reinforces his self-perception. He may start to perceive his professor more positively since they share an interest in public speaking, and he may begin to notice other people's speaking skills more during class presentations and public lectures. Over time, he may even start to think about changing his major to communication or pursuing career options that incorporate public speaking, which would further integrate being "a good public speaker" into his self-concept. You can hopefully see that these interconnections can create powerful positive or negative cycles. While some of this process is under our control, much of it is also shaped by the people in our lives.

The verbal and nonverbal feedback we get from people affect our feelings of self-efficacy and our self-esteem. As we saw in Pedro's example, being given positive feedback can increase our self-efficacy, which may make us more likely to engage in a similar task in the future (Hargie, 2011). Obviously, negative feedback can lead to decreased self-efficacy and a declining interest in engaging with the activity again. In general, people adjust their expectations about their abilities based on feedback they get from others. Positive feedback tends to make people raise their expectations for themselves and negative feedback does the opposite, which ultimately affects behaviors and creates the cycle. When feedback from others is different from how we view ourselves, additional cycles may develop that impact self-esteem and self-concept.

Self-discrepancy theory states that people have beliefs about and expectations for their actual and potential selves that do not always match up with what they actually experience (Higgins, 1987). To understand this theory, we have to understand the different "selves" that make up our self-concept, which are the actual, ideal, and ought selves. The actual self consists of the attributes that you or someone else believes you *actually* possess. The ideal self consists of the attributes that you or someone else *would like you* to possess. The ought self consists of the attributes you or someone else believes you *should* possess.

These different selves can conflict with each other in various combinations. Discrepancies between the actual and ideal/ought selves can be motivating in some ways and prompt people to act for self-improvement (Figure 1.4). For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so. Discrepancies between the ideal and ought selves can be especially stressful. For example, many professional women who are also mothers have an ideal view of self that includes professional success and advancement. They may also have an ought self that includes a sense of duty and obligation to be a full-time mother. The actual self may be someone who does OK at both but doesn't quite live up to the expectations of either. These discrepancies do not just create cognitive unease—they also lead to emotional, behavioral, and communicative changes.

When we compare the actual self to the expectations of ourselves and others, we can see particular patterns of emotional and behavioral effects. When our actual self doesn't match up with our own ideals of self, we are not obtaining our own desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration. For example, if your ideal self has no credit card debt and your actual self does, you may be frustrated with your lack of financial discipline and be motivated to stick to your budget and pay off your credit card bills.



Figure 1.4 People who feel that it's their duty to recycle but do not actually do it will likely experience a discrepancy between their actual and ought selves. [Recycle](#) – [Matt Martin](#) – [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

When our actual self doesn't match up with other people's ideals for us, we may not be obtaining significant others' desires and hopes, which can lead to feelings of dejection including shame, embarrassment, and concern for losing the affection or approval of others. For example, if a significant other sees you as an "A" student and you get a 2.8 GPA your first year of college, then you may be embarrassed to share your grades with that person.

When our actual self doesn't match up with what we think other people think we should obtain, we are not living up to the ought self that we think others have constructed for us, which can lead to feelings of agitation, feeling threatened, and fearing potential punishment. For example, if your parents think you should follow in their footsteps and take over the family business, but your actual self wants to go into the military, then you may be unsure of what to do and fear being isolated from the family.

Finally, when our actual self doesn't match up with what we think we should obtain, we are not meeting what we see as our duties or obligations, which can lead to feelings of agitation including guilt, weakness, and a feeling that we have fallen short of our moral standard (Higgins, 1987). For example, if your ought self should volunteer more for the local animal shelter, then your actual self may be more inclined to do so due to the guilt of reading about the increasing number of animals being housed at the facility.

The following is a review of the four potential discrepancies between selves:

- **Actual vs. own ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining our desires and hopes, which leads to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.
- **Actual vs. others' ideals.** We have an overall feeling that we are not obtaining significant others' desires and hopes for us, which leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- **Actual vs. others' ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting what others see as our duties and obligations, which leads to feelings of agitation including fear of potential punishment.
- **Actual vs. own ought.** We have an overall feeling that we are not meeting our duties and obligations, which can lead to a feeling that we have fallen short of our own moral standards.

Influences on Self-Perception

We have already learned that other people influence our self-concept and self-esteem. While interactions we have with individuals and groups are definitely important to consider, we must also note the influence that larger, more systemic forces have on our self-perception. Social and family influences, culture, and the media all play a role in shaping who we think we are and how we feel about ourselves. Although these are powerful socializing forces, there are ways to maintain some control over our self-perception.

Social and Family Influences

Various forces help socialize us into our respective social and cultural groups and play a powerful role in presenting us with options about who we can be. While we may like to think that our self-perception starts with a blank canvas, our perceptions are limited by our experiences and various social and cultural contexts.

Parents and peers shape our self-perceptions in positive and negative ways. Feedback that we get from significant others, which includes close family, can lead to positive views of self (Hargie, 2011). In the past few years, however, there has been a public discussion and debate about how much positive reinforcement people should give to others, especially children. The following questions have been raised: Do we have current and upcoming generations that have been overpraised? Is the praise given warranted? What are the positive and negative effects of praise? What is the end goal of the praise? Let's briefly look at this discussion and its connection to self-perception.



Figure 1.5 Some experts have warned that overpraising children can lead to distorted self-concepts. [participation award](#) – [Rain0975](#) – [CC BY-ND 2.0](#)

Whether praise is warranted or not is very subjective and specific to each person and context, but in general there have been questions raised about the potential negative effects of too much praise. Motivation is the underlying force that drives us to do things. Sometimes we are intrinsically motivated, meaning we want to do something for the love of doing it or the resulting internal satisfaction. Other times we are extrinsically motivated, meaning we do something to receive a reward or avoid punishment. If you put effort into completing a short documentary for a class because you love filmmaking and editing, you have been largely motivated by intrinsic forces. If you complete the documentary because you want an “A” and know that if you fail your parents will not give you money for your spring break trip, then you are motivated by extrinsic factors. Both can, of course, effectively motivate us. Praise is a form of extrinsic reward, and if there is an actual reward associated with the praise, like money or special recognition, some people speculate that intrinsic motivation will suffer. But what’s so good about intrinsic motivation? Intrinsic motivation is more substantial and long-lasting than extrinsic motivation and can lead to the development of a work ethic and sense of pride in one’s abilities. Intrinsic motivation can move people to accomplish great things over long periods of time and be happy despite the effort and sacrifices made. Extrinsic motivation

dies when the reward stops. Additionally, too much praise can lead people to have a misguided sense of their abilities. College professors who are reluctant to fail students who produce failing work may be setting those students up to be shocked when their supervisor critiques their abilities or output once they get into a professional context (Hargie, 2011).

There are cultural differences in the amount of praise and positive feedback that teachers and parents give their children. For example, teachers give less positive reinforcement in Japanese and Taiwanese classrooms than do teachers in US classrooms. Chinese and Kenyan parents do not regularly praise their children because they fear it may make them too individualistic, rude, or arrogant (Wierzbicka, 2004). So, the phenomenon of overpraising isn't universal, and the debate over its potential effects is not resolved.

Research has also found that communication patterns develop between parents and children that are common to many verbally and physically abusive relationships. Such patterns have negative effects on a child's self-efficacy and self-esteem (Morgan & Wilson, 2007). As you'll recall from our earlier discussion, attributions are links we make to identify the cause of a behavior. In the case of aggressive or abusive parents, they are not as able to distinguish between mistakes and intentional behaviors, often seeing honest mistakes as intended and reacting negatively to the child. Such parents also communicate generally negative evaluations to their child by saying, for example, "You can't do anything right!" or "You're a bad girl." When children do exhibit positive behaviors, abusive parents are more likely to use external attributions that diminish the achievement of the child by saying, for example, "You only won because the other team was off their game." In general, abusive parents have unpredictable reactions to their children's positive and negative behavior, which creates an uncertain and often scary climate for a child that can lead to lower self-esteem and erratic or aggressive behavior. The cycles of praise and blame are just two examples of how the family as a socializing force can influence our self-perceptions. Culture also influences how we see ourselves.

Culture

How people perceive themselves varies across cultures. For example, many cultures exhibit a phenomenon known as the **self-enhancement bias**, meaning that we tend to emphasize our desirable qualities relative to other people (Loughnan et al., 2011). But the degree to which people engage in self-enhancement varies. A review of many studies in this area found that people in Western countries such as the United States were significantly more likely to self-enhance than people in countries such as Japan. Many scholars explain this variation using a common measure of cultural variation that claims people in individualistic cultures are more likely to engage in competition and openly praise accomplishments than people in collectivistic cultures. The difference in self-enhancement has also been tied to economics, with scholars arguing that people in countries with greater income inequality are more likely to view themselves as superior to others or want to be perceived as superior to others (even if they don't have economic

wealth) in order to conform to the country's values and norms. This holds true because countries with high levels of economic inequality, like the United States, typically value competition and the right to boast about winning or succeeding, while countries with more economic equality, like Japan, have a cultural norm of modesty (Loughnan, 2011).

Race also plays a role in self-perception. For example, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be higher in African American adolescent girls than Caucasian girls (Stockton et al., 2009). In fact, more recent studies have discounted much of the early research on race and self-esteem that purported that African Americans of all ages have lower self-esteem than whites. Self-perception becomes more complex when we consider biracial individuals—more specifically those born to couples comprising an African American and a white parent (Bowles, 1993). In such cases, it is challenging for biracial individuals to embrace both of their heritages, and social comparison becomes more difficult due to diverse and sometimes conflicting reference groups. Since many biracial individuals identify as and are considered African American by society, living and working within a black community can help foster more positive self-perceptions in these biracial individuals. Such a community offers a more nurturing environment and a buffer zone from racist attitudes but simultaneously distances biracial individuals from their white identity. Conversely, immersion into a predominantly white community and separation from a black community can lead biracial individuals to internalize negative views of people of color and perhaps develop a sense of inferiority.

Gender intersects with culture and biracial identity to create different experiences and challenges for biracial men and women. Biracial men have more difficulty accepting their potential occupational limits, especially if they have white fathers, and biracial women have difficulty accepting their black features, such as hair and facial features. All these challenges lead to a sense of being marginalized from both ethnic groups and interfere in the development of positive self-esteem and a stable self-concept (Figure 1.6).



Figure 1.6 Biracial individuals may have challenges with self-perception as they try to integrate both racial identities into their self-concept. [End of Summer Innocence](#) – [Javcon117](#) – [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

There are some general differences in terms of gender and self-perception that relate to self-concept, self-efficacy, and envisioning ideal selves. As with any cultural differences, these are generalizations that have been supported by research, but they do not represent all individuals within a group. Regarding self-concept, men are more likely to describe themselves in terms of their group membership, and women are more likely to include references to relationships in their self-descriptions. For example, a man may note that he is a Tarheel fan, a boat enthusiast, or a member of the Rotary Club, and a woman may note that she is a mother of two or a loyal friend.

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Regarding self-efficacy, men tend to have higher perceptions of self-efficacy than women (Hargie, 2011). In terms of actual and ideal selves, men and women in a variety of countries both described their ideal self as more masculine (Best & Thomas, 2004). As was noted earlier, gender differences are interesting to study but are very often exaggerated beyond the actual variations. Socialization and internalization of societal norms for gender differences accounts for much more of our perceived differences than do innate or natural differences between genders. These gender norms may be explicitly stated—for example, a mother may say to her son, “Boys don’t play with dolls”—or they may be more implicit, with girls being encouraged to pursue historically feminine professions like teaching or nursing without others actually stating the expectation.

Media

The representations we see in the media affect our self-perception. The vast majority of media images include idealized representations of attractiveness. Despite the fact that the images of people we see in glossy magazines and on movie screens are not typically what we see when we look at the people around us in a classroom, at work, or at the grocery store, many of us continue to hold ourselves to an unrealistic standard of beauty and attractiveness. Movies, magazines, and television shows are filled with beautiful people, and less attractive actors, when they are present in the media, are typically portrayed as the butt of jokes, villains, or only as background extras (Patzner, 2008). Aside from overall attractiveness, the media also offers narrow representations of acceptable body weight.

Researchers have found that only 12 percent of prime-time characters are overweight, which is dramatically less than the national statistics for obesity among the actual US

population (Patzner, 2008). Further, an analysis of how weight is discussed on prime-time sitcoms found that heavier female characters were often the targets of negative comments and jokes that audience members responded to with laughter. Conversely, positive comments about women's bodies were related to their thinness. In short, the heavier the character, the more negative the comments, and the thinner the character, the more positive the comments. The same researchers analyzed sitcoms for content regarding male characters' weight and found that although comments regarding their weight were made, they were fewer in number and not as negative, ultimately supporting the notion that overweight male characters are more accepted in media than overweight female characters. Much more attention has been paid in recent years to the potential negative effects of such narrow media representations. The following "Getting Critical" box explores the role of media in the construction of body image.

In terms of self-concept, media representations offer us guidance on what is acceptable or unacceptable and valued or not valued in our society. Mediated messages, in general, reinforce cultural stereotypes related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class. People from historically marginalized groups must look much harder than those in the dominant groups to find positive representations of their identities in media. As a critical thinker, it is important to question media messages and to examine who is included and who is excluded.

Advertising in particular encourages people to engage in social comparison, regularly communicating to us that we are inferior because we lack a certain product or that we need to change some aspect of our life to keep up with and be similar to others. For example, for many years advertising targeted to women instilled in them a fear of having a dirty house, selling them products that promised to keep their house clean, make their family happy, and impress their friends and neighbors. Now messages tell us to fear becoming old or unattractive, selling products to keep our skin tight and clear, which will in turn make us happy and popular.

Summary

- Our self-concept is the overall idea of who we think we are. It is developed through our interactions with others and through social comparison that allows us to compare our beliefs and behaviors to others.
- Our self-esteem is based on the evaluations and judgments we make about various characteristics of our self-concept. It is developed through an assessment and evaluation of our various skills and abilities, known as self-efficacy, and through a comparison and evaluation of who we are, who we would like to be, and who we should be (self-discrepancy theory).
- Socializing forces like family, culture, and media affect our self-perception because they give us feedback on who we are. This feedback can be evaluated positively or negatively and can lead to positive or negative patterns that influence our self-perception and then our communication.

Discussion Questions

- Compare and contrast self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Provide examples of each.
- Choose one of the socializing forces discussed (family, culture, or media) and identify at least one positive and one negative influence that it/they have had on your self-concept and/or self-esteem.
- Discuss some ways that you might strategically engage in self-presentation to influence the impressions of others in academic, professional, personal, or civic contexts.

Remix/Revisions Featured in this Section

- Editing revisions to tailor the content to the Psychology of Human Relations course.
- Remix of [2.3 Perceiving and Presenting Self](#) (Communication in the Real World – University of Minnesota)
- Changed formatting for photos to provide links to locations of images and CC licenses.
- Added doi links to references to comply with APA 7th edition formatting reference manual.

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1.2 Exploring Identity

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Compare and contrast personal, social, and cultural identities.
- Apply personal, social, and cultural identities to personal experiences.

"Who am I?" This question has been the central plot of many coming-of-age movies, such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Superbad* (2007), *Love, Simon* (2018), *Booksmart* (2019), etc. In these movies, and in our own lives, we have grappled with how to answer this question. According to Erickson's (1968) Psychosocial Theory of Development, adolescents enter a stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, in which they explore and experiment with their identities, seeking to answer the question, "Who am I?" **Identity** exploration is about determining a sense of self and figuring out who also shares similar affiliations or social roles (APA).

Identity is marked by similarity, that is of the people like us, and by difference, of those who are not. How do we know which people are the same as us? What information do we use to categorize others and ourselves? What is often important is a *symbol*, like a badge, a team scarf, a newspaper, the language we speak, or perhaps the clothes we wear. Sometimes it is obvious. A badge can be a clear public statement that we identify with a particular group. Sometimes it is more subtle, but symbols and representations are important in marking the ways in which we share identities with some people and distinguish ourselves as different from others. In the rest of this section, we will examine the various types of identities that we develop and which identities we choose for ourselves and those that are chosen for us.

Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Recall from our earlier discussion of self-concept that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness led them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become (Tatum, B. D., 2000).

Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities (Table 1.1). We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are

formed through processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore, our identities aren't something we achieve or complete.

Table 1.1 Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Personal	Social	Cultural
Reader	Book Club Member	Female
Animal Lover	Honor Society Member	Multiracial
Introverted	Psychology Teacher	Buddhist
Gamer	E-Sports Team Member	Straight

Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009). **Personal identities** include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, I consider myself a puzzle lover, and you may identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our **social identities** are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.



Figure 1.7 Pledging a fraternity or sorority is an example of a social identity. [IMG_2749](#) – [Adaenn](#) – [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and listen to hip-hop music). There are innumerable options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. A current interest in online video games may give way to an interest in graphic design. Social identities do not change as often because they take

more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched.

Cultural identities are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep, G. A., 2002). Since we are often a part of them since birth, cultural identities are the least changeable of the three. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots (Collier, M. J., 1996). For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement. Additionally, common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. We may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. **Ascribed identities** are personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others, while **avowed identities** are those that we claim for ourselves (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and label him or her a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, there has been a movement in recent years to reclaim the label *nerd* and turn it into a positive, and a nerd subculture has been growing in popularity. For example, MC Frontalot, a leader in the nerdcore hip-hop movement, says that being branded a nerd in school was terrible, but now he raps about "nerdy" things like blogs to sold-out crowds (Shipman, 2007). We can see from this example that our ascribed and avowed identities change over the course of our lives, and sometimes they match up and sometimes not.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor's

identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. If someone is biracial or multiracial, they may change their racial identification as they engage in an identity search. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an “Asianlatinoamerican” (Yep, 2002). He notes repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the United States. This example shows how even national identity fluctuates. Obviously one can change nationality by becoming a citizen of another country, although most people do not.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups (Allen, 2011). **Dominant identities** historically had and currently have more resources and influence while **nondominant identities** historically had and currently have less resources and influence. It is important to remember that these distinctions are being made at the societal level, not the individual level. There are obviously exceptions, with people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. However, the overall trend is that difference based on cultural groups has been institutionalized, and exceptions do not change this fact. Because of this uneven distribution of resources and power, members of dominant groups are granted privileges while nondominant groups are at a disadvantage. The main nondominant groups must face various forms of institutionalized discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. As we will discuss later, privilege and disadvantage, like similarity and difference, are not “all or nothing.” No two people are completely different or completely similar, and no one person is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged.

Exploring Specific Cultural Identities

We can get a better understanding of current cultural identities by unpacking how they came to be. By looking at history, we can see how cultural identities that seem to have existed forever actually came to be constructed for various political and social reasons and how they have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this construction. As we have already discussed, our identities are relational and communicative; they are also constructed. Social constructionism is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). In this section, we’ll explore how the cultural identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States. There are other important identities that could be discussed, like religion, age, nationality, and class. Although they are not given their own section, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project

asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one (Figure 1.8). The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (Allen, 2011). Therefore, we will define race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others.



Figure 1.8 There is actually no biological basis for racial classification among humans, as we share 99.9 percent of our DNA. [friends](#) – [Evelyn](#) – [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

Race didn't become a socially and culturally recognized marker until European colonial expansion in the 1500s. As Western Europeans traveled to parts of the world previously unknown to them and encountered people who were different from them, a hierarchy of races began to develop that placed lighter skinned Europeans above darker skinned people. At the time, newly developing fields in natural and biological sciences took interest in examining the new locales, including the plant and animal life, natural resources, and native populations. Over the next three hundred years, science that we would now undoubtedly recognize as flawed, biased, and racist legitimated notions that native populations were less evolved than white Europeans, often calling them savages. In fact, there were scientific debates as to whether some of the native populations should be considered human or animal. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Western “scientists” used these differences as “proof” that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can't deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people as if it were “real.”

Discussing race in the United States is difficult for many reasons. One is due to uncertainty about language use. People may be frustrated by their perception that labels change too often or be afraid of using an “improper” term and being viewed as racially insensitive. It is important, however, that we not let political correctness get in the way of meaningful dialogues and learning opportunities related to difference.

Racial classifications used by the government and our regular communication about race in the United States have changed frequently, which further points to the social construction of race. Currently, the primary racial groups in the United States are African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/a, and Native American, but a brief look at changes in how the US Census Bureau has defined race clearly shows that this hasn't always been the case (Table 1.2). In the 1900s alone, there were twenty-six different ways that race was categorized on census forms (Allen, 2011). The way we communicate about race in our regular interactions has also changed, and many people are still hesitant to discuss race for fear of using “the wrong” vocabulary.

The five primary racial groups noted previously can still be broken down further to specify a particular region, country, or nation. For example, Asian Americans are diverse in terms of country and language of origin and cultural practices. While the category of Asian Americans can be useful when discussing broad trends, it can also generalize among groups, which can lead to stereotypes. You may find that someone identifies as Chinese American or Korean American instead of Asian American. In this case, the label further highlights a person's cultural lineage. We should not assume, however, that someone identifies with his or her cultural lineage, as many people have more in common with their US American peers than a culture that may be one or more generations removed.

History and personal preference also influence how we communicate about race. Culture and communication scholar Brenda Allen notes that when she was born in 1950, her birth certificate included an *N* for Negro. Later she referred to herself as *colored* because that's what people in her community referred to themselves as. During and before this time, the term *black* had negative connotations and would likely have offended someone. There was a movement in the 1960s to reclaim the word *black*, and the slogan “black is beautiful” was commonly used. Brenda Allen acknowledges the newer label of *African American* but notes that she still prefers *black*. The terms *colored* and *Negro* are no longer considered appropriate because they were commonly used during a time when black people were blatantly discriminated against. Even though that history may seem far removed to some, it is not to others. Currently, the terms *African American* and *black* are frequently used, and both are considered acceptable. The phrase *people of color* is acceptable for most and is used to be inclusive of other racial minorities. If you are unsure what to use, you could always observe how a person refers to themselves, or you could ask for their preference. In any case, a competent communicator defers to and respects the preference of the individual.

Table 1.2 Racial Classifications in the US Census

Year(s)	Development
1790	No category for race
1800s	Race was defined by the percentage of African "blood." <i>Mulatto</i> was one black and one white parent, <i>quadroon</i> was one-quarter African blood, and <i>octoroon</i> was one-eighth.
1830-1940	The term <i>color</i> was used instead of <i>race</i> .
1900	Racial categories included white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Census takers were required to check one of these boxes based on visual cues. Individuals did not get to select a racial classification on their own until 1970.
1950	The term <i>color</i> was dropped and replaced by <i>race</i> .
1960, 1970	Both <i>race</i> and <i>color</i> were used on census forms.
1980-2010	<i>Race</i> again became the only term.
2000	Individuals were allowed to choose more than one racial category for the first time in census history.
2010	The census included fifteen racial categories and an option to write in races not listed on the form.
2020*	The census added write in options to the White, Black or African American, and American Indian or Alaska Native racial categories to provide specific origins. There are 15 racial categories listed in total, with the option to select multiple categories.

Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 71-72. * From Marks (2021).

The history of immigration in the United States also ties to the way that race has been constructed. The metaphor of the "melting pot" has been used to describe the immigration history of the United States but doesn't capture the experiences of many immigrant groups (Allen, 2011). Generally, immigrant groups who were white, or light skinned, and spoke English were better able to assimilate, or melt into the melting pot. But immigrant groups that we might think of as white today were not always considered so. Irish immigrants were discriminated against and even portrayed as black in cartoons that appeared in newspapers. In some Southern states, Italian immigrants were forced to go to black schools, and it wasn't until 1952 that Asian immigrants were allowed to become citizens of the United States. All this history is important, because it continues to influence communication among races today.

Gender

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it's a boy or a girl. This question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. A Canadian family became aware of the deep emotions people feel about gender and the great discomfort people feel when they can't determine gender when they announced to the world that they were not going to tell anyone the gender of their baby, aside from the baby's siblings. Their desire for their child, named Storm, to be able to experience early life without the boundaries and categories of gender brought criticism from many (Davis & James, 2011). Conversely, many parents consciously or unconsciously "code" their newborns in gendered ways based on our society's associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys.

While it's obvious to most people that colors aren't gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category. While it is true that there are biological differences between who we label male and female, the meaning our society places on those differences is what actually matters in our day-to-day lives. And the biological differences are interpreted differently around the world, which further shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not. There is a long history of appreciation for people who cross gender lines in Native American and South-Central Asian cultures, to name just two.

You may have noticed I use the word *gender* instead of *sex*. That is because **gender** is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction. There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions. Then we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender expression. Sex is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood, 2005). While the biological characteristics between men and women are obviously different, it is the meaning that we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are evidence that "our way of doing things" is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood, 2005).

Gender has been constructed over the past few centuries in political and deliberate ways that have tended to favor men in terms of power. And various academic fields joined in the quest to "prove" there are "natural" differences between men and women. While the "proof" they presented was credible to many at the time, it seems blatantly sexist and inaccurate today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, scientists who measure skulls, also

known as craniometrists, claimed that men were more intelligent than women because they had larger brains. Leaders in the fast-growing fields of sociology and psychology argued that women were less evolved than men and had more in common with “children and savages” than adult (white) males (Allen, 2011). Doctors and other decision makers like politicians also used women’s menstrual cycles as evidence that they were irrational, or hysterical, and therefore couldn’t be trusted to vote, pursue higher education, or be in a leadership position. These are just a few of the many instances of how knowledge was created by seemingly legitimate scientific disciplines that we can now clearly see served to empower men and disempower women. This system is based on the ideology of patriarchy, which is a system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group (Wood, 2005). One of the ways patriarchy is maintained is by its relative invisibility. While women have been the focus of much research on gender differences, males have been largely unexamined. Men have been treated as the “generic” human being to which others are compared. But that ignores that fact that men have a gender, too. Masculinities studies have challenged that notion by examining how masculinities are performed.

There have been challenges to the construction of gender in recent decades. Since the 1960s, scholars and activists have challenged established notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. The women’s rights movement in the United States dates back to the 1800s, when the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 (Wood, 2005). Although most women’s rights movements have been led by white, middle-class women, there was overlap between those involved in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the beginnings of the women’s rights movement. Although some of the leaders of the early women’s rights movement had class and education privilege, they were still taking a risk by organizing and protesting. Black women were even more at risk, and Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, faced those risks often and gave a much-noted extemporaneous speech at a women’s rights gathering in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which came to be called “Ain’t I a Woman?” (Wood, 2005) Her speech highlighted the multiple layers of oppression faced by black women.

Feminism as an intellectual and social movement advanced women’s rights and our overall understanding of gender. Feminism has gotten a bad reputation based on how it has been portrayed in the media and by some politicians. When I teach courses about gender, I often ask my students to raise their hand if they consider themselves feminists. I usually only have a few, if any, who do. I’ve found that students I teach are hesitant to identify as a feminist because of connotations of the word. However, when I ask students to raise their hand if they believe women have been treated unfairly and that there should be more equity, most students raise their hand. Gender and communication scholar Julia Wood has found the same trend and explains that a desire to make a more equitable society for everyone is at the root of feminism. She shares comments from a student that capture this disconnect (Wood, 2005):

I would never call myself a feminist, because that word has so many negative connotations. I don't hate men or anything, and I'm not interested in protesting. I don't want to go around with hacked-off hair and no makeup and sit around bashing men. I do think women should have the same kinds of rights, including equal pay for equal work. But I wouldn't call myself a feminist.

It's important to remember that there are many ways to be a feminist and to realize that some of the stereotypes about feminism are rooted in sexism and homophobia, in that feminists are reduced to "men haters" and often presumed to be lesbians. The feminist movement also gave some momentum to the transgender rights movement.

Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression do not match the gender they were assigned by birth. Transgender people may or may not seek medical intervention like surgery or hormone treatments to help match their physiology with their gender identity. The term *transgender* includes other labels such as *transsexual*, *transvestite*, *cross-dresser*, and *intersex*, among others. Terms like *hermaphrodite* and *she-male* are not considered appropriate. As with other groups, it is best to allow someone to self-identify first and then honor their preferred label (Figure 1.9). If you are unsure of which pronouns to use when addressing someone, you can use gender-neutral language or you can use the pronoun that matches with how they are presenting. If someone has long hair, make-up, and a dress on, but you think their biological sex is male due to other cues, it would be polite to address them with female pronouns, since that is the gender identity they are expressing.

Gender as a cultural identity has implications for many aspects of our lives, including real-world contexts like education and work. Schools are primary grounds for socialization, and the educational experience for males and females is different in many ways from preschool through college. Although not always intentional, schools tend to recreate the hierarchies and inequalities that exist in society. Given that we live in a patriarchal society, there are communicative elements present in school that support this (Allen, 2011). For example, teachers are more likely to call on and pay attention to boys in a classroom, giving them more feedback in the form of criticism, praise, and help. This sends an implicit message that boys are more worthy of attention and valuable than girls. Teachers are also more likely to lead girls to focus on feelings and appearance and boys to focus on competition and achievement. The focus on appearance for girls can lead to anxieties about body image. Gender inequalities are also evident in the administrative structure of schools, which puts males in positions of authority more than females. While females make up 75 percent of the educational workforce, only 22 percent of superintendents and 8 percent of high school principals are women. Similar trends exist in colleges and universities, with women only accounting for 26 percent of full professors. These inequalities in schools correspond to larger inequalities in the general workforce. While there are more women in the workforce now than ever before, they still face a glass

ceiling, which is a barrier for promotion to upper management. Many of my students have been surprised at the continuing pay gap that exists between men and women. In 2010, women earned about seventy-seven cents to every dollar earned by men (National Committee on Pay Equity, 2011). To put this into perspective, the National Committee on Pay Equity started an event called Equal Pay Day. In 2011, Equal Pay Day was on April 11. This signifies that for a woman to earn the same amount of money a man earned in a year, she would have to work more than three months extra, until April 11, to make up for the difference (National Committee on Pay Equity, 2011).

Sexuality

While race and gender are two of the first things we notice about others, sexuality is often something we view as personal and private. Although many people hold a view that a person's sexuality should be kept private, this isn't a reality for our society. One only needs to observe popular culture and media for a short time to see that sexuality permeates much of our public discourse.

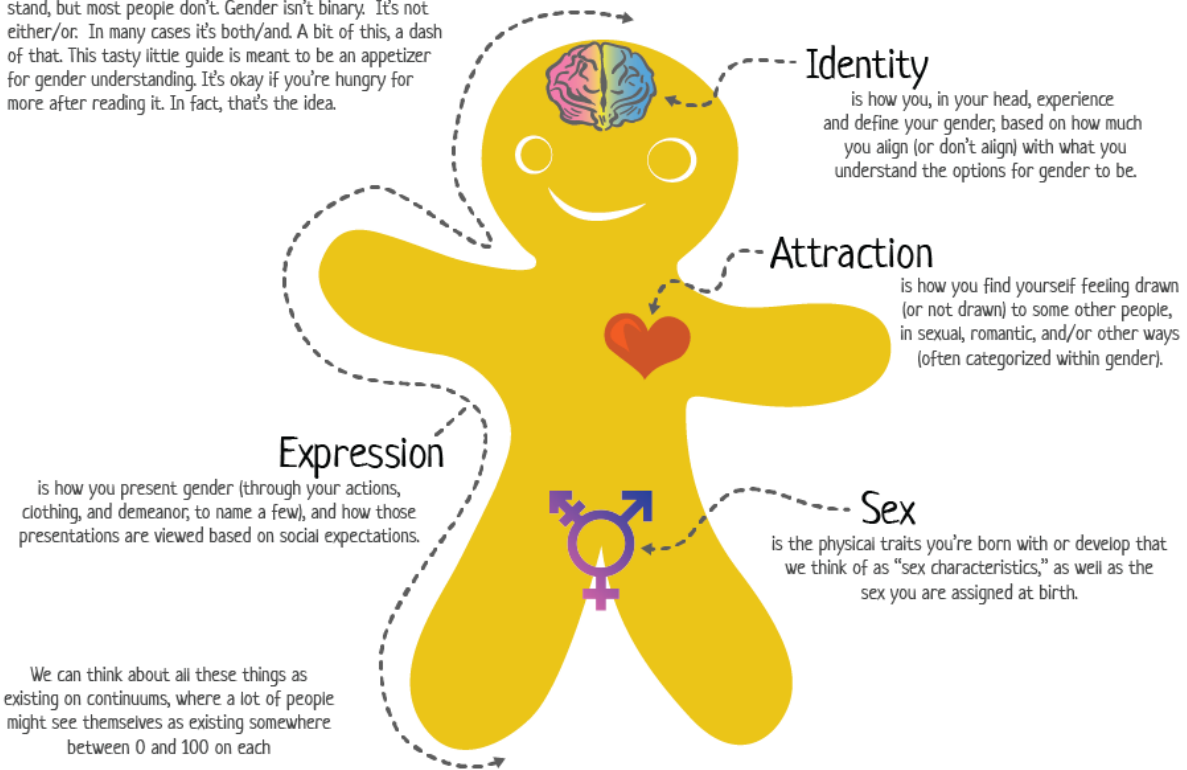
Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation (Figure 1.9), just as race is more than the color of one's skin and gender is more than one's biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn't just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen, 2011). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality connects to public health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation** refers to a person's primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity. The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are *heterosexual* or *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term *sexual preference* has been used previously, *sexual orientation* is more appropriate, since *preference* implies a simple choice. Although someone's preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple. The term *homosexual* can be appropriate in some instances, but it carries with it a clinical and medicalized tone. As you will see in the timeline that follows, the medical community has a recent history of "treating homosexuality" with means that most would view as inhumane today. Many people prefer a term like *gay*, which was chosen and embraced by gay people, rather than *homosexual*, which was imposed by a then discriminatory medical system.

The Genderbread Person

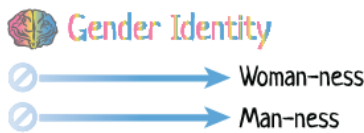
by its pronounced **METROsexual.com**

Gender is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but most people don't. Gender isn't binary. It's not either/or. In many cases it's both/and. A bit of this, a dash of that. This tasty little guide is meant to be an appetizer for gender understanding. It's okay if you're hungry for more after reading it. In fact, that's the idea.



We can think about all these things as existing on continuums, where a lot of people might see themselves as existing somewhere between 0 and 100 on each

⊖ means a lack of what's on the right side



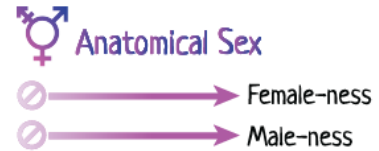
personality traits, jobs, hobbies, likes, dislikes, roles, expectations

common GENDER IDENTITY things



style, grooming, clothing, mannerisms, affect, appearance, hair, make-up

common GENDER EXPRESSION things

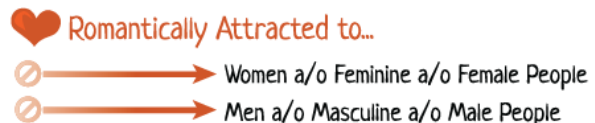


body hair, chest, hips, shoulders, hormones, penis, vulva, chromosomes, voice pitch

common ANATOMICAL SEX things

Identity ≠ Expression ≠ Sex
Gender ≠ Sexual Orientation

Sex Assigned At Birth
 Female Intersex Male
 Typically based solely on external genitalia present at birth (ignoring internal anatomy, biology, and change throughout life). Sex Assigned At Birth (SAAB) is key for distinguishing between the terms "cisgender" (when SAAB aligns with gender identity) and "transgender" (when it doesn't).



Genderbread Person Version 4 created and uncopyrighted 2017 by Sam Killerman For a bigger bite, read more at www.genderbread.org

Figure 1.9 The Genderbread Person is a model to help differentiate various terms related to gender and sexuality. [The Genderbread Person – Sam Killerman – Uncopyright](#)

The gay and lesbian rights movement became widely recognizable in the United States in the 1950s and continues on today, as evidenced by prominent issues regarding sexual orientation in national news and politics. National and international groups like the Human Rights Campaign advocate for rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) communities. While these communities are often grouped together within one acronym (GLBTQ), they are different. Gays and lesbians constitute the most visible of the groups and receive the most attention and funding. Bisexuals are rarely visible or included in popular cultural discourses or in social and political movements. Transgender issues have received much more attention in recent years, but transgender identity connects to gender more than it does to sexuality. Last, *queer* is a term used to describe a group that is diverse in terms of identities but usually takes a more activist and at times radical stance that critiques sexual categories. While *queer* was long considered a derogatory label, and still is by some, the queer activist movement that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s reclaimed the word and embraced it as a positive. As you can see, there is a diversity of identities among sexual minorities, just as there is variation within races and genders.

As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history. Sexual orientation didn't come into being as an identity category until the late 1800s. Before that, sexuality was viewed in more physical or spiritual senses that were largely separate from a person's identity. Table 1.3 "Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication" (below) traces some of the developments relevant to sexuality, identity, and communication that show how this cultural identity has been constructed over the past 3,000 years.

Table 1.3 Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication

Year(s)	Development
1400 BCE–565 BCE	During the Greek and Roman era, there was no conception of sexual orientation as an identity. However, sexual relationships between men were accepted for some members of society. Also at this time, Greek poet Sappho wrote about love between women.
533	Byzantine Emperor Justinian makes adultery and same-sex sexual acts punishable by death.
1533	Civil law in England indicates the death penalty can be given for same-sex sexual acts between men.
1810	Napoleonic Code in France removes all penalties for any sexual activity between consenting adults.
1861	England removes death penalty for same-sex sexual acts.

Year(s)	Development
1892	The term <i>heterosexuality</i> is coined to refer a form of “sexual perversion” in which people engage in sexual acts for reasons other than reproduction.
1897	Dr. Magnus Hirschfield founds the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Berlin. It is the first gay rights organization.
1900–1930	Doctors “treat” homosexuality with castration, electro-shock therapy, and incarceration in mental hospitals.
1924	The first gay rights organization in the United States, the Chicago Society for Human Rights, is founded.
1933–44	Tens of thousands of gay men are sent to concentration camps under Nazi rule. The prisoners are forced to wear pink triangles on their uniforms. The pink triangle was later reclaimed as a symbol of gay rights.
1934	The terms <i>heterosexuality</i> and <i>homosexuality</i> appear in Webster’s dictionary with generally the same meaning the terms hold today.
1948	American sexologist Alfred Kinsey’s research reveals that more people than thought have engaged in same-sex sexual activity. His research highlights the existence of bisexuality.
1969	On June 27, patrons at the Stonewall Inn in New York City fight back as police raid the bar (a common practice used by police at the time to harass gay people). “The Stonewall Riot,” as it came to be called, was led by gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons of the bar, many of whom were working class and/or people of color.
1974	The American Psychiatric Association removes its reference to homosexuality as a mental illness.
1999	The Vermont Supreme Court rules that the state must provide legal rights to same-sex couples. In 2000, Vermont becomes the first state to offer same-sex couples civil unions.
2003	The US Supreme Court rules that Texas’s sodomy law is unconstitutional, which effectively decriminalizes consensual same-sex relations.
2011	The US military policy “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” is repealed, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly.

Year(s)	Development
2015	The US Supreme Court legalized marriage equality nationally in the case Obergefell v. Hodges.

Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 117–25; and University of Denver Queer and Ally Commission, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer History,” *Queer Ally Training Manual*, 2008.

Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity, because we follow a medical model of disability that places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (Allen, 2011). An impairment is defined as “any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a body structure or function, whether physiological or psychological” (Allen, 2011). This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability in that people’s life activities are limited and the relational aspect of disability in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such. Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic. If there is a mental or physical impairment, it should be diagnosed by a credentialed expert. If there isn’t an impairment, then the label of *disabled* can have negative impacts, as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language, for example, were—and perhaps still are—sometimes put into special education classes.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. Ableism is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. Ability privilege refers to the unearned advantages that are provided for people who fit the cognitive and physical norms (Allen, 2011). I once attended a workshop about ability privilege led by a man who was visually impaired. He talked about how, unlike other cultural identities that are typically stable over a lifetime, ability fluctuates for most people. We have all experienced times when we are more or less able.

Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Getting sick for a prolonged period of time also lessens our abilities, but we may fully recover from

any of these examples and regain our ability privilege. Whether you've experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

Statistically, people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States, with an estimated 20 percent of people five years or older living with some form of disability (Allen, 2011). Medical advances have allowed some people with disabilities to live longer and more active lives than before, which has led to an increase in the number of people with disabilities. This number could continue to increase, as we have thousands of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with physical disabilities or psychological impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder (Figure 1.10).



Figure 1.10 As recently disabled veterans integrate back into civilian life, they will be offered assistance and accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. [110518-M-EC403-102](#) - [Wounded Warrior Regiment](#) - [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

As disability has been constructed in US history, it has intersected with other cultural identities. For example, people opposed to “political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations from the male norm.” They framed women as emotional, irrational, and unstable, which was used to put them into the “scientific” category of “feeblemindedness,” which led them to be institutionalized (Carlson, 2001). Arguments supporting racial inequality and tighter immigration restrictions also drew on notions of disability, framing certain racial groups as prone to mental retardation, mental illness, or uncontrollable emotions and actions. See Table 1.4 for a timeline of developments related to ability, identity, and communication. These thoughts led to a dark time in US history, as the eugenics movement sought to limit reproduction of people deemed as deficient.

During the early part of the 1900s, the eugenics movement was the epitome of the move to rehabilitate or reject people with disabilities (Allen, 2005). This was a brand of social engineering that was indicative of a strong public support in the rationality of science to cure society’s problems (Allen, 2011). A sterilization law written in 1914 “proposed to

authorize sterilization of the socially inadequate,” which included the “feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, and dependent” (Lombardo, 2011). During the eugenics movement in the United States, more than sixty thousand people in thirty-three states were involuntarily sterilized (Allen, 2011). Although the eugenics movement as it was envisioned and enacted then is unthinkable today, some who have studied the eugenics movement of the early 1900s have issued warnings that a newly packaged version of eugenics could be upon us. As human genome mapping and DNA manipulation become more accessible, advanced genetic testing could enable parents to eliminate undesirable aspects or enhance desirable characteristics of their children before they are born, creating “designer children” (Spice, 2005).

Table 1.4 Developments Related to Ability, Identity, and Communication

Year(s)	Development
400 BCE	The Greeks make connections between biology, physiology, and actions. For example, they make a connection between epilepsy and a disorder of the mind but still consider the source to be supernatural or divine.
30–480	People with disabilities are viewed with pity by early Christians and thought to be so conditioned because of an impurity that could possibly be addressed through prayer.
500–1500	As beliefs in the supernatural increase during the Middle Ages, people with disabilities are seen as manifestations of evil and are ridiculed and persecuted.
1650–1789	During the Enlightenment, the first large-scale movements toward the medical model are made, as science and medicine advance and society turns to a view of human rationality.
1900s	The eugenics movement in the United States begins. Laws are passed to sterilize the “socially inadequate,” and during this time, more than sixty thousand people were forcibly sterilized in thirty-three states.
1930s	People with disabilities become the first targets of experimentation and mass execution by the Nazis.
1970s	The independent living movement becomes a prominent part of the disability rights movement.
1990	The Americans with Disabilities Act is passed through Congress and signed into law.

Source: Maggie Shreve, “The Movement for Independent Living: A Brief History,” *Independent Living Research Utilization*, accessed October 14, 2011, http://ilru.org/html/publications/infopaks/IL_paradigm.doc.

Much has changed for people with disabilities in the United States in the past fifty years. The independent living movement (ILM) was a part of the disability rights movement that took shape along with other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The ILM calls for more individual and collective action toward social change by people with disabilities. Some of the goals of the ILM include reframing disability as a social and political rather than just a medical issue, a shift toward changing society rather than just rehabilitating people with disabilities, a view of accommodations as civil rights rather than charity, and more involvement by people with disabilities in the formulation and execution of policies relating to them (Longmore, 2003). As society better adapts to people with disabilities, there will be more instances of inter-ability communication taking place.

Interability communication is communication between people with differing ability levels; for example, a hearing person communicating with someone who is hearing impaired or a person who doesn't use a wheelchair communicating with someone who uses a wheelchair. Since many people are unsure of how to communicate with a person with disabilities, following are the "Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities" to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities:

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign-language interpreter.
2. When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
3. When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
6. Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
7. Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing

so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.

8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Summary

- Each of us has personal, social, and cultural identities.
 - Personal identities are components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connect to our individual interests and life experiences.
 - Social identities are components of self that are derived from our involvement in social groups to which we are interpersonally invested.
 - Cultural identities are components of self based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for our thoughts and behaviors.
- The social constructionist view of culture and identity states that the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relation to social, cultural, and political contexts.
- Race, gender, sexuality, and ability are socially constructed cultural identities that developed over time in relation to historical, social, and political contexts.

Discussion Questions

- Describe a situation in which someone ascribed an identity to you that didn't match with your avowed identities. Why do you think the person ascribed the identity to you? Were there any stereotypes involved?
- How do you see sexuality connect to identity in the media? Why do you think the media portrays sexuality and identity the way it does?
- Think of an instance in which you had an interaction with someone with a disability. Would knowing the "Ten Commandments for Communicating with People with Disabilities" have influenced how you communicated in this instance? Why or why not?

Remix/Revisions Featured in this Section

- Small editing revisions to tailor the content to the Psychology of Human Relations course.
- Remix combining [8.1 Foundations of Culture and Identity](#) and [8.2 Exploring Specific Cultural Identities](#) (Communication in the Real World – University of Minnesota).
- Changed formatting for photos to provide links to locations of images and CC licenses.
- Added doi links to references to comply with APA 7th edition formatting reference manual.

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