CHAPTER 3
THE SELF-CONCEPT AND COMMUNICATION

“The real Self is not I but We.”
FRITZ KUNKEL, early 20th-century psychoanalyst
Do you know someone similar to the person who describes herself or himself in the “I’m So Fat” blog entry? Perhaps you or someone else believes the labels that others use to characterize personality, appearance, or overall ability. Do you think that others perceive you in the same manner that you perceive yourself? These related ideas concern our self-concept and how it is formed.

No matter how we perceive ourselves or how others perceive us, our self-concept is inextricably entwined with communication. In this chapter, we will learn that understanding how the self-concept affects communication can motivate us to communicate competently. Creating realistic goal statements and constructing a mental inventory of strengths and talents can also increase our motivation to communicate in a competent manner. In addition, we will increase our knowledge by learning about characteristics of the self-concept, defensive and nondefensive communication, and the problems associated with inflated self-esteem. Finally, we will learn how to communicate competently by using face-saving and nondefensive messages.
Introduction to the Self-Concept

If you could describe yourself in one word, which word would you choose? Can you select a single dominant personality trait, belief, and/or role to adequately describe how you perceive yourself? Perhaps you believe that it’s impossible to characterize who you are with one noun or adjective and that many words are needed to describe who you really are. You may see your self-concept as multidimensional and therefore need to use a variety of descriptors to characterize how you perceive yourself. Think about how you might describe yourself to others and how your self-perceptions can influence your communication as you read the next section about the conceptualization of the self-concept and why it’s important to study the self-concept as it relates to communication. Similarly, consider the people in your life who have influenced and continue to influence how you perceive yourself. Focus on their communication about you and ask yourself if your communication may have similarly contributed to how others see themselves.

Characterization of the Self-Concept

Quite simply, self-concept refers to how we perceive ourselves. Communication scholars contend that our self-concept is formed, sustained, and changed by our interactions with others.\(^1\) This means that the self-concept is primarily a social phenomenon that is influenced by our relationships. Consider the people in your life who have shaped the way you perceive yourself: how have their comments affected your self-concept? Of course, just as others affect our self-concept, our communication can significantly influence the self-concept of others. Even a comment not intended to affect a person’s sense of self, such as a mild put-down said as a joke, can have an impact on her or his self-concept. However, it may be impossible to say that the formation of the self is entirely social because research suggests that biologically influenced personality traits are a major component of our self-concept.\(^2\) Five general clusters of traits labeled the “Big Five” can influence our self-concept:

- extroverted vs. introverted
- agreeable vs. antagonistic
- open vs. not open
- neurotic vs. stable
- conscientious vs. undirected

Included within the clusters are specific personality traits for which people may be “hard-wired.” These traits include sociability, spontaneity, selflessness, selfishness, independence, curiosity, vulnerability, and carelessness.\(^3\)

The Formation and Development of the Self-Concept

Our culture(s), significant others, our gender, and our own self-talk influence the formation and development of the self-concept. The theory of symbolic interactionism, developed by sociologist George Herbert Mead in the 1920s, posits that our view of self is shaped by those
Communication, Self-Concept, and Civil Discourse

Some scholars suggest that there may be a connection between uncivil discourse and words used to describe the self. These scholars contend that today’s “vocabulary of the self” reflects the overemphasis on individualism as a societal value and is devoid of responsibility and accountability. Words such as self-expression, self-assertion, self-realization, self-approval, and self-acceptance are favored less than words such as self-denial, self-discipline, self-control, self-reproach, and self-sacrifice. This vocabulary implies that “the old ethic of self-discipline has given way to a new ethic of self-esteem and self-expression. This has endangered the practice of traditional civility.”

Roy F. Baumeister, a leading researcher in the area of self-esteem, recommends a shift in focus from “self-esteem” to “self-control and self-discipline” to truly benefit self and society. This doesn’t mean that we must restrict our everyday behaviors or that we must eliminate self-expression. However, it does mean that we should realize that everything we want to express may not be worthy of expression. It also means that we can choose to express one part of ourselves rather than another. Although it may appear that we give up self-expression when we exercise civility, in truth, restraint can be much an expression of our Selves as is unfettered behavior.

with whom we communicate. Two processes, the Pygmalion effect and social comparison, strongly influence how we perceive ourselves.

The Pygmalion Effect

The Pygmalion effect illustrates the way our significant others (people who are important to us) influence our self-concept. In the classic study “Pygmalion in the Classroom,” psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson describe an experiment in which certain teachers had been informed that they had exceptionally intelligent students. In reality, the students who were identified as exceptional were no different than any other student in their grade. At the end of the school year, the students who were described as extremely bright actually did perform at a high level and even improved their IQ scores. The researchers concluded that these children performed well because of their teachers’ expectations. The teachers communicated their high expectations to their students by providing them with extra verbal and nonverbal reinforcement. Furthermore, the teachers didn’t react negatively when their students answered questions incorrectly. The teachers directly and indirectly communicated to their students that they were high achievers, and the students actually came to believe that they were high achievers. In other words, the expectations of their teachers influenced the students’ self-concepts.

Social Comparison

Our self-concept is also influenced when we engage in social comparison with others. Comparing our athletic ability or relational success to others is an example of social comparison, as is asking classmates about their scores on a test. These examples illustrate that social comparison provides us with knowledge about ourselves in terms of how we measure up to others. Recent research illustrates that social comparison is an important determinant of self-perception in Western cultures. Specifically, we tend to respond negatively when others perform better than we do on a consequential task, even when we receive positive above-average feedback about our performance. We
compensate by comparing ourselves with people who perform with average ability and subsequently evaluate ourselves much higher than we evaluate the average performers. For example, we may be dissatisfied when we receive a “B” on an important test because we know that classmates received an “A.” However, it’s probable that we’ll also compare ourselves with classmates who receive a “C” and decide that we really performed much better on the test than those who received the average scores.

Why It’s Important to Study Self-Concept

Just as communication affects our self-concept, our self-concept affects how we communicate with others. Our self-concept can be placed on a continuum that ranges from “healthy” or “strong” to “unhealthy” or “poor.” Healthy self-concepts can result in a realistic acknowledgment of our strengths and weaknesses, and therefore we may accept praise and defend viewpoints even when opposed by others. Unhealthy self-concepts can result in exaggerated and unrealistic perceptions of our strengths and weaknesses, and therefore we may:

• downplay our strengths
• exaggerate our accomplishments
• fail to value our successes
• expect others to perceive us negatively

Such individuals may be overly self-critical because it may be easier and less painful to criticize oneself than to hear the criticism of others. People who have an unhealthy self-concept may also boast about their accomplishments to mask feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. In all, knowledge about the relationship between the self-concept and interpersonal communication can motivate us to communicate in a competent manner.

Creating realistic goal statements designed to improve our self-concept can increase our motivation to communicate. It’s important to remember that our self-concept isn’t formed in an instant, and neither can it change in an instant. Therefore, we must set realistic goals for ourselves and not mentally beat ourselves up if we don’t meet them. An example of an unrealistic goal is “I will be a confident...
Responding to Compliments, Opposing Viewpoints, and Acknowledging Accomplishments

Although you may think you reply to compliments, defend opinions, and communicate about your accomplishments in a competent manner, it is important to remember that communication competence is an impression based on others’ perceptions. To gain insight about how your self-concept may affect your communication, ask a minimum of three trusted friends and/or family members for an honest appraisal of how you communicate in terms of praise, opposing viewpoints, and accomplishments. Ask for specific examples regarding the topic of the interactions and what and how you communicated. You may be surprised at what you learn.

Figure 3.1: SETTING REALISTIC GOAL STATEMENTS

I will try to stop procrastinating.

I will look at my pocket calendar every day to check my due dates.

I will work one hour each day on coursework before I allow myself to IM, play video games, or watch television.

I will set the timer for 30 minutes when I return from campus and will “hit the books” after the timer buzzes.

Another reason why it’s important to study our self-concept concerns how we perceive ourselves. We tend to perceive ourselves subjectively and often in a more negative light than is warranted. One method to contend with our subjective self-concept is to create a mental inventory of our talents and strengths. According to psychologist Martin Seligman, talents...
Are there any characteristics associated with your self-concept that you wish to change? Choose one aspect of your self-concept that you would like to alter. Your choices need not be monumental; for example, you may wish to change your perception of yourself as a procrastinator. Write two or three realistic and manageable goal statements regarding the aspect of your self-concept that you desire to change. Examples of “procrastination” goal statements are “I will work on an assignment each day for fifteen minutes until it is complete” and “I will create a ‘computer curfew’ so I can spend most of the night studying.” Discuss your goal statements with your classmates and ask for feedback about their realism and practicality. Remember these goal statements when you find yourself beginning to exhibit the aspect of your self-concept that you want to change. Read your goal statement(s) daily, don’t give up, and soon you may find that you have successfully altered for the better a behavior associated with your self-concept.

TABLE 3.1 Your Personal Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virtue Cluster</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom and Knowledge</td>
<td>Curiosity/Interest in the World; Love of Learning; Judgment/Critical Thinking/Open-Mindedness; Ingenuity/Originality/Practical Intelligence/Street Smarts; Social Intelligence/Personal Intelligence/Emotional Intelligence; Perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Valor and Bravery; Perseverance/Industry/Diligence; Integrity/Genuineness/Honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity and Love</td>
<td>Kindness and Generosity; Loving and Allowing Oneself to Be Loved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship/Duty/Teamwork/Loyalty; Fairness and Equity; Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Self-Control; Prudence/Discretion/Caution; Humility and Modesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence; Gratitude; Hope/Optimism/Future-Mindedness; Spirituality/Sense of Purpose/Faith/Religiousness; Forgiveness and Mercy; Playfulness and Humor; Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Printed with permission by Dr. Martin Seligman.
Assessing Your Talents and Strengths

Take a moment or two to think about your talents. In what areas do you excel or believe that you may be naturally gifted? Are you artistic, athletic, musical, or mechanical? Have you always been good at math? Can you easily take objects apart and put them back together? What other talents do you possess? Take a sheet of paper, fold it in half, and create a list of talents on the left-hand side of the page. Similarly, refer to the “Your Personal Strengths” box for a list of twenty-four strengths. Think about your strengths and list them on the right-hand side of the page. You can also learn which strengths are your highest personal strengths or “signature strengths” by accessing the 240-question VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire at http://www.authentic-happiness.org. You can also log onto MyCommunicationLab and follow the link to this Web site. Review your talents and strengths when you have a low day or when someone’s criticism is especially hurtful. You’ll realize that you’re not so bad after all!

CHARACTERISTICS AND COMPONENTS OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

Our self-concept is affected by the characteristics we believe we possess and has many components. Characteristics and components associated with the self-concept include self-image and self-esteem, the multidimensional nature of the self-concept, the relationship between self-concept and self-disclosure, the subjective character of the self-concept, and the desired self-concept or “face” that we choose to present to others.

Self-Image and Self-Esteem

Take a look at Figure 3.2, “The Self-Concept.” This figure illustrates the idea that aspects of our self-concept can be organized according to our beliefs and evaluations about ourselves and the contexts that influence us. At the beginning of this chapter, self-concept was defined as how we perceive ourselves. Our self-concept is affected by the characteristics we believe we possess (e.g., strengths and weaknesses, personality traits) and how we evaluate these characteristics. Our self-concept, located on the top of the hierarchy, is made up of self-image and self-esteem, which are located directly underneath.

Self-Image  The self-image is a descriptive term; it refers to the characteristics we believe we possess. Our self-image may include the roles we perceive we inhabit, the words we use when we describe ourselves, and how we believe others perceive us. For example, if you describe yourself as a student who does volunteer work and who is looking for a mate, you have communicated several aspects of your self-image (the roles of student, giving citizen, and someone who desires a relationship). Our self-image also involves how others see us. We use other people’s
Comments to check our self-perceptions, and they reinforce or change the perception of what and who we are. For instance, you may perceive yourself as someone who is unselfish and generous. However, this self-perception may change when a coworker mentions the volunteer work he does or the charities to which she donates.

Self-Esteem  Self-esteem, on the other hand, is evaluative; it depends on what we perceive to be worthwhile and/or valuable. In other words, self-esteem goes beyond our self-image to include the value or importance we place on our perceived characteristics. For example, based on quite a few gutter balls, you may perceive that your bowling ability is poor. However, this belief may be an inconsequential component of your self-concept. It may be that your perceived weakness is not that important to you and doesn't negatively affect your overall self-concept. In addition, you may believe that you are a sensitive and kind person (self-image) and that sensitivity and kindness are valuable and worthwhile characteristics to possess (self-esteem). In this instance, your belief about yourself and your positive evaluation of that belief are likely to contribute to a healthy self-concept.

Perceived as Multidimensional

Even though people tend to view the self in terms of a gestalt or whole, theorists suggest that it has many components. The self-concept can be simultaneously perceived as mental and physical and as private and public. Our mental self may be comprised of perceptions of how intelligent we are and what we assume our strengths to be. Our physical self may include perceptions of our body and how physically attractive we think we are. Our private self may include perceptions of self that we do not readily disclose to others; for example,
we perceive ourselves to be overly cynical or unemotional. Our public self may include those aspects of the self that we desire others to perceive, such as that we have a nice personality and enjoy having fun. Other components of self include personality characteristics, social roles, and our moral principles. Although the self-concept is multidimensional, some people believe that there is a stable and resilient “true self” that underlies all of our other “selves.” Although the idea of a true self or “real self” as a single entity is common in individualist cultures, in reality the self is comprised of many characteristics and perceptions.  

### Influenced by Self-Disclosure

**Self-disclosure** refers to the act of willingly sharing information about ourselves to others. Not only is self-disclosure related to the development of interpersonal relationships (discussed in Chapter 10) but self-disclosure is also related to self-perceptions. We may choose to disclose aspects of our self-concept to family members and close friends that we choose not to reveal to others. Their reactions, in turn, can influence how we perceive ourselves. Similarly, conversation partners may inform us about aspects of our self-concept and behavior of which we are unaware. A model that illustrates self-disclosure, self-awareness, and how we relate to others is the Johari Window, developed and named for its creators, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingram.  

The **Johari Window** has four areas or quadrants. The quadrants, labeled the “open, blind, hidden, and unknown” areas, change in size in terms of what, how much, or how little we disclose about the self and what, how much, or how little we know about the self in relation to others.

### The Open Quadrant

The **open quadrant** includes information about ourselves that we and others know. This information can be anything that we reveal to others, such as how old we are or what we do for a living. If asked to draw our Johari Window as it relates to our best friend, we will probably draw a large open quadrant because we probably self-disclose to our best friend. However, if we are asked to draw a Johari Window as it relates to an acquaintance, the open quadrant will be relatively small.

### The Blind Quadrant

The **blind quadrant** includes information about ourselves that we don’t know but others do. For example, has anyone ever pointed out a habit about which you were unaware? Maybe you were told that you crack your knuckles, bite your lip, or fidget with a pen when you are nervous. Similarly, maybe you are unaware that the self you present to others is perceived as somewhat immature because you pepper your conversations with “y’know,” “like,” and “uhm.” This area also includes information and judgments of our personality about which we are unaware. You
are probably familiar with the use of the word *but* in a phrase such as “I hate to tell you this, *but*...” You know that the information following the “*but*” is not going to be complimentary. If this information is about your personality (“sometimes you think you’re funny but you really come off as obnoxious”) or behavior (“I think you’re too tough on your girlfriend or boyfriend”), it belongs in the blind area, because it is information about yourself that you don’t know but others do. The more we become self-aware and learn how others perceive us, the more we can shrink our blind quadrant.

**The Hidden Quadrant**  The *hidden quadrant* includes information about ourselves that we know but that others do not. Can you think of a secret that you haven’t told anyone? This secret need not be deep and dark; maybe there’s some information about yourself that you haven’t shared with others because the need to share hasn’t arisen. For example, you may be allergic to orange juice, you may believe that Beethoven composed the best classical music, or you may have punched a sibling when you were a child. Are these disclosures appropriate in your typical, everyday conversations? Probably not. This type of self-information rests in the hidden quadrant, because it is information about yourself of which you are aware but others are not. Once again, if asked to draw our Johari Window as it relates to our best friend, we will probably draw a small hidden quadrant because the two of us most likely engage in self-disclosure. However, if we are asked to draw a Johari Window as it relates to an acquaintance, the hidden quadrant will be fairly big.

**The Unknown Quadrant**  The *unknown quadrant* refers to the “unknown” information about ourselves that neither we nor others know about. This area will always exist because we can never completely know ourselves. For example, we don’t know how we will react to events and situations a year from now, five years from now, or a decade from now. We also don’t know what information about ourselves is contained in our subconscious. Hypnosis, dream analysis, and Rorschach (inkblot) tests are methods that try to uncover self-information buried in the subconscious. This type of information rests in the unknown quadrant, because it is information about ourselves of which neither we nor others are aware.

The Johari Window illustrates how self-disclosure, self-awareness, and how we relate to others influence our self-concept. The amount and type of our self-disclosure depend on our relationship partners and our life experiences. This knowledge can help us remember that our self-concept is dynamic and that self-disclosure can provide us with insight into how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us.

### Based on Subjective Information

Our self-concept isn’t based on objective sense data. It is possible for our self-concept to be distorted and incorrect. We can perceive ourselves in a more favorable light than is warranted, or we can perceive ourselves in a more negative light than is warranted. For example, can you think of musicians or movie stars who appear self-centered and conceited during interviews? These people may possess an overly favorable view of themselves because they believe the ingratiating praise of their entourages. Additionally, can you think of a time when you perceived yourself more negatively than was justified? Perhaps you received a speeding ticket, got a bad grade on an assignment, or burned a meal. If your self-talk consisted of messages such as “I always mess up!” or “There I go again!” you probably exaggerated the seriousness of the event and the frequency with which you experience these situations. Everyone has down
days, but some people continually view themselves in an unrealistically harsh manner, which can influence how they communicate with and interpret the communication of others.

**Basis of the “Face” We Present to Others**

*Face* not only relates to our perceived self-concept but also involves how we want others to perceive us and our worth. Also labeled “impression management” or “identity management,” face is additionally concerned with behaviors we enact to influence others to perceive us in certain ways. If we desire to present a “casual” face, we can purposefully wear jeans and sneakers and say “hi ya” when meeting people for the first time. On the other hand, if we desire to present a “professional” face, we can purposefully wear a suit and say “pleased to meet you.” Sociologist Erving Goffman suggested that the creation of our identity or face is a collaborative process that involves ourselves and our conversation partners. Goffman contended that everyday life is similar to a performance in which we adopt roles in public by putting on a face. He believed that we use conversation to create identity bids (e.g., “I am a polite person” or “I am an intelligent person”), which may or may not be accepted by others. However, face-to-face conversation isn’t the only way that our identities are formed, sustained, and/or changed. Face is also related to the image of self that is presented on the Internet. Have you ever typed your name into a search engine and reviewed the results? This may be an important way to manage our public face because part of the modern-day hiring process is a Web search on prospective employees. In addition to studying personal Web sites, corporate recruiters are increasingly investigating job applicants on social networking sites such as MySpace, Xanga, and Facebook. The information on networking sites provides employers with information about a job applicant’s judgment and often presents recruiters with red flags. For example, comments posted about alcohol consumption and sex can make potential employees look immature and unprofessional and suggest values at odds with those of a corporation.
Part I  Communication and The Self

SKILL  MOTIVATION  KNOWLEDGE  COMPETENCE  COMMUNICATION

Analyzing Your Web Site

What aspects of the self do you portray to the public on your Web site or social networking site? (If you don’t have a Web or networking site, design one on paper.) Consider the informality or formality of the language you use, the drawings and/or photos that you include, and other characteristics (such as likes and dislikes, accomplishments, and beliefs) that reflect who you are. Ask a classmate to analyze the Web or social networking site based on these ideas, and obtain her or his feedback about the “face” you present to others. Does the face you want to present online match the face perceived by your classmate?

What happens when our public image is threatened or proven to be false? Embarrassment and shame may be the result of losing face, which occurs when our desired social identity or self-concept is disconfirmed. Think about a situation in which you felt guilty, embarrassed, or ashamed. Perhaps you perceive yourself to be a trustworthy person and desire this aspect of your self-concept to be perceived by others. If others discover that you have told a secret or cheated on a relational partner, your embarrassment and shame indicate that you have lost face.22

Self-Concept, Identity, and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Do your self-perceptions affect how you use CMC and/or how you portray yourself online? A variety of studies have established a relationship between self-perceptions and CMC use. For example, we use the Internet primarily to obtain information rather than seek entertainment or decrease feelings of loneliness when we possess “self-concept clarity” (i.e., we hold consistent, stable, clear, and confident beliefs about ourselves). On the other hand, we may use CMC to explore different facets of the self and to experiment with different selves if we lack self-concept clarity.23 Research also reveals that compared with persons with high self-esteem, individuals with low self-esteem prefer the use of email rather than face-to-face communication. This preference is a consequence of the anonymous and asynchronous nature of email, which allows us considerable control over our self-presentation. The preference for email communication is particularly noticeable when the risk of rejection is high, such as asking for a date or disclosing personal information. In such cases, persons with low self-esteem may use email not only to control their self-presentation but also to control the pace of interaction and the transmission of cues that indicate nervousness.24

Not only does our self-concept affect how we use CMC but also CMC allows us to manipulate personal identities to a greater extent than face-to-face communication or other person-to-person media. Think about the identities or roles you play in real life; your gender, race, accent, age, and other nonverbal factors allow you to adopt a limited number of roles in face-to-face communication. However, we can adopt an unlimited number of computer-mediated online identities. These identities are communicated via personal markers such as writing style, “.sig” (signature attachment), and the way we conduct ourselves with various members of chat rooms and user groups. In all, language use is extremely important in CMC use because we construct our identities through our language.25 Compared with face-to-face presentation, CMC enables us to self-censor to a greater extent and manage our online identities more strategically, which provides us with a greater opportunity to misrepresent ourselves. However, in terms of an online dating environment, research suggests that CMC discourages deceptive self-presentation because of the possibility of future face-to-face communication. We therefore tend to balance our desire for self-promotion with the need for an accurate self-presentation in online dating environments. The assumption that CMC users frequently, explicitly, and intentionally lie about themselves in such environments has been found to be simplistic and inaccurate.26
Fortunately, we can help maintain face by making use of “face-work.” Facework or “face-saving communication” is designed to prevent loss of face and restore face if lost; it is a fundamental aspect of communication competence. In particular, we can help save our face and the face of others by:

- overlooking a face-threatening act, such as glossing over a mistake or acting as if face hasn’t been threatened, to minimize the extent of embarrassment or annoyance (e.g., “That’s OK, I do that all the time too.”)
- responding with humor—laughter releases nervous tension and demonstrates that an offense isn’t that serious (e.g., “This would make a great scene in a romance/horror/adventure flick!”)
- offering an apology to admit blame and seek atonement (e.g., “It was my fault that this happened. I’m sorry.”)
- communicating an explanation to minimize responsibility or to justify the behavior (e.g., “I didn’t mean it” or “It wasn’t so bad.”)
- engaging in physical remediation (such as adjusting clothing or cleaning a spill)

For example, suppose you or a classmate is greeted with laughter while walking into a classroom. Stuck to a shoe is a long trail of toilet paper. You can save face or help your classmate save face by:

- saying, “Oh, it’s not that big a deal!” or “Like this has never happened to any of you before!” (overlooking or minimizing the face-threatening act)
- saying, “Don’t expect this kind of excitement every day!” (responding with humor)
- saying, “I’m (he’s) sorry for the disruption.” (offering an apology)
- saying, “My (Her) shoes were probably wet, and I (she) must have walked past the restroom and tracked it in.” (offering an explanation)
- putting the toilet paper in the trash (physical remediation)
Englishwoman Anna Leonowens travels to Siam in the mid-1800s to become governess to the children of King Mongkut. Anna befriends many of the king’s wives, servants, and slaves. Tuptim, a woman who is given as a “gift” to the king, escapes from the palace to join her true love. However, she is caught and sentenced to death at her trial. When Tuptim is beaten during the trial, Anna screams that she will speak to the king and then he will put an end to such savagery.

Read the transcript from Anna and the King and answer the following questions alone or in a group: Could Anna have said anything else at the trial that could have prevented the loss of King Mongkut’s face? If so, what? Is it realistic to expect people (especially those from individualist cultures) to think about facework in situations of life or death? Could King Mongkut have spared Tuptim’s life and successfully engaged in face-saving behavior?

**Movie Transcript: ANNA AND THE KING**

Anna: Thank you for seeing me, Your Majesty. I was told by your prime minister that this was none of my business.

Mongkut: It is none of Ma’am’s concern. And King is seeing you now to tell you same himself.

Anna: Forgive me, Your Majesty...

Mongkut: Do not wish for you to talk more on this matter. To King or anyone.

Anna: Well I was only trying...

Mongkut: Tuptim broke law!

Anna: By loving someone? “Sacrifice your life for truth. Persecute no man.” Are these not the teachings of Buddha?

Mongkut: I am King, and I say no!

Anna: You asked me to always tell you what I think.

Mongkut: What you think, and what you do, and how, and when you do them are not the same thing. If you believe I wish to execute this girl ... but now, because you say to court, you can tell King what to do, I cannot intervene as I had planned.

Anna: Intervene! After they’re tortured?

Mongkut: Yes! But you, a woman. And a foreigner, have made it seem King at your command. You have made me appear weak, and impossible for me to step in and not lose face.

Anna: But you are the King...

Mongkut: And to remain such, I cannot undermine nobility. To command loyalty, which I must have to keep country secure.

Anna: You have the power to lead, you’re...

Mongkut: Now is not the time to change the way that things are done!

Anna: Well if not now, then when? How many more people must die so that you might save face?

Mongkut: Go home Ma’am. You help enough for one day.

Excerpt from “ANNA AND THE KING” ©1999 Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox. Written by Steve Meerson and Peter Krikes. All rights reserved.
Face-Saving Communication

Respond to the following situations with face-saving communication:

- In the middle of a weekly business meeting, you knock over a glass of water on the table, threatening others’ papers, including those that belong to the boss. What can you say to save face?
- A friend drops by with a gift for your birthday. Both you and your friend notice a gift tag on the bottom of the present, upon which is written your friend’s name and “Love, Grandma.” What can you say to save your friend’s face?
- You attend a party and engage in casual conversation with an acquaintance. You notice that someone named Terry shouts loudly, bumps into people, and appears intoxicated. Disgusted, you describe Terry to your acquaintance as a “pathetic loser.” Your acquaintance bristles and asserts, “I’m going out with Terry.” What can you say to save face?
- You attend a formal wedding in a solemn house of worship. You’ve been dealing with a queasy stomach, and you can’t help but emit a loud belch during a brief pause in the ceremony. What can you say to save face?

In summary, our self-concept, which includes both self-image and self-esteem, significantly influences how we communicate with others. This multidimensional concept is influenced by self-disclosure, is subjective, and is the basis of the face we present to others. The self-concept is also affected by our culture; family, friends, and coworkers; gender; and our particular expectations, beliefs, attitudes, and values. In other words, various contexts influence our self-concept.

Contexts and Self-Concept

Recall that perspective taking is an important mental activity that can affect the perception of communication competence. For example, suppose we experience an initial hostile reaction to someone we perceive as a braggart. Putting ourselves in the place of the braggart may reveal that

- what we consider bragging is not perceived similarly in other cultures
- the braggart is repeating messages about the self that he received from family members
- learned gender expectations may have influenced the braggart to communicate in a particular manner
- the braggart actually perceives herself as inadequate and feels insecure

Understanding the influence of the culture, social, gender, and individual contexts on the braggart’s self-concept and communication behavior can help us create the most effective
and appropriate responses to her or his messages. Perspective taking may also prevent us from allowing our initial hostile reaction to result in incompetent communication.

**Culture Context**

Do you identify with the politically and economically dominant culture in your country? Perhaps you perceive one or more of your co-cultures to be more significant than the dominant culture in shaping your identity. Who we are and how we see ourselves are influenced not only by the dominant culture in which we live but also by the co-cultures with which we identify.

**Dominant Culture**

We have learned that no culture is exclusively individualist or collectivist but that cultures tend to be more one than the other. In a culture that is primarily collectivist, identity is based on group membership, such as the family or the work organization. Unlike individualist cultures, children are taught to be dependent on others. Americans find it difficult to fully understand that people may not think of themselves as distinct from others within collectivist cultures. In India, for example, the dominant belief is that all selves share an underlying consciousness. The Japanese self-concept derives from networks of people to whom people are obligated and vice versa. In Japan, the self-concept is created in terms of group membership and interaction.

Unlike collectivist cultures, being independent and self-sufficient is highly valued in individualist cultures. Children are taught to be self-reliant in such cultures, and they are encouraged to express their individualism via their room decorations, dress, hairstyles, and school papers. Individual identity can also be reflected in verbal communication behavior, such as the manner in which we respond to others. For example, you may communicate an unpopular opinion among those who disagree with you or go out of your way to demonstrate that you are your own individual. For Americans, “being true to oneself is first and foremost. Thus, Americans continually search for their individual identities and insist on others’ recognition of their different interests, styles, and preferences.” Moreover, Americans incorrectly assume that people from other cultures embrace individualist values such as individuality, self-reliance, and independence. When asked about their culture, Americans often say that they have no culture, because they think that everyone is an individual who is free from the cultural assumptions that are imposed on them. The belief that each person is a unique biological and psychological being is deeply ingrained and seldom questioned among Americans.

**Co-Cultures**

Co-cultures within a culture, such as our ethnic groups, also influence our self-concept and communication. An ethnic identity is based on common traditions, values, origins, and history. An ethnic identity also includes the knowledge of belonging to a particular group and the shared experiences of its members. For example, the Native American co-culture is more collectivist than the more politically powerful European-American culture. This may result in a Native American employee feeling uncomfortable when singled out and praised by a superior in front of coworkers.

The gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual (GLBT) community is also considered by some to be a co-culture. The process of “coming out” includes exploring one’s sexual identity and sharing that identity with others. Achieving self-acceptance is a crucial step in coming out, and the process is easier when we are less reliant on others for our self-concept and self-esteem. A healthy level of self-esteem has also been found to be important after
the coming out process in that it can mitigate the harmful psychological effects (e.g., depression) of societal oppression.\textsuperscript{35}

### Social Context

Just as the culture context influences the self-concept, so does the context of family, friends, and individuals with whom we work. Many researchers believe that the analysis of the social context is critical to understanding the self-concept.\textsuperscript{36}

**Friends and Family** Family members, especially our parents, contribute to our self-image and self-esteem in a variety of ways. Similarly, significant others also contribute to who we think we are and how we evaluate ourselves. Friends, teachers, coaches, and bosses are examples of significant others who influence us with their communication and the labels and names they choose to call us. For example, positive labeling, such as telling a child that he is “bright” and “creative,” can enhance the self-concept. On the other hand, constantly telling a child that she is “stupid” or “a monster” will most likely damage the self-concept, even if the labels are incorrect and unrealistic.\textsuperscript{37}

**People with Whom We Work** People with whom we work also affect our self-concept in terms of our perceived self-efficacy, the belief in our ability to manage prospective situations.\textsuperscript{38} Our self-efficacy perceptions are highly significant in career persistence and success. Role models and persons who can provide us with on-the-job encouragement help us dispel doubts about our self-efficacy perceptions. Our self-efficacy perceptions are also influential in choosing a career, and “the low proportion of women in technical vocations can be traced back to women’s low perceived self-efficacy regarding technical problem-solving skills.” Therefore, the communication of encouragement from female role models who work in technical fields can significantly influence the self-efficacy perceptions of young women and encourage them to become computer scientists or engineers.\textsuperscript{39}

### Gender Context

From the moment we are born, our sex influences others’ behavior toward us and how we perceive ourselves. Parents often dress male babies in blue clothes and female babies in pink. Little boys are given toy trucks and action figures, while little girls are given toy houses and dolls. Our gender identity becomes a part of our self-concept beginning at age four to seven years, and it is at this point that our self-concept begins to be affected by what we believe about femininity and masculinity.\textsuperscript{40}

Furthermore, the way women and men describe themselves is influenced by gender expectations. Women typically mention characteristics such as generosity, sensitivity, and having care and concern for others when asked to describe themselves. Women also tend to be more concerned about their body image and physical appearance than are men. On the other hand, when men describe themselves, they don’t tend to comment about their physiques. Instead, they typically mention characteristics such as ambition, energy, power, and control.\textsuperscript{41}
Of course, many men have self-concepts that include care and concern for others, just as many women have self-concepts that include power and control. Similarly, a recent study of gender, self-esteem, and group membership illustrates that both women and men possess an equal sense of self-worth based on their relational group memberships. Therefore, it is best to think of gendered self-concepts as a matter of degree rather than as polar opposites.

Individual Context

Our self-concept is influenced by the expectations we have of ourselves based on our self-fulfilling prophecies and our inner critic.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies concern the expectations we have and the predictions we make for ourselves. Self-fulfilling prophecies are evident when we behave in ways that reinforce our self-perceptions and self-expectations, and they can make a predicted outcome of an event likely to occur. For example, perhaps you perceive yourself as unable to sustain a relationship because of a past experience. You may have experienced relational difficulties previously, and your past experiences cause you to predict that you won’t be successful in your social life. Therefore, while on a date, you demonstrate a lack of confidence and communicate beliefs such as “I don’t know why you said you’d go out with me.” The result of your negative self-reinforcing behavior is that your predicted outcome (your date will not be successful) is now more likely to occur than if you hadn’t perceived yourself as socially inept and hadn’t predicted a failed social life. Hopefully, your self-fulfilling prophecies that include positive predictions and result in positive outcomes outnumber the self-fulfilling prophecies that include negative predictions and result in negative outcomes. Consider Figure 3.4, “The Cyclical Nature of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies,” we can see that self-fulfilling prophecies reinforce the self-concept, affect behavior, and can influence how others perceive us.
Inner Critic  Self-fulfilling prophecies are also influenced by what some psychologists call an “inner critic.” Our inner critic produces intrapersonal communication messages such as “I’ve failed at this before and I’ll fail at this again” and “I’ll never reach my goals.” Everyone has an inner critic, and we often believe that this inner voice communicates the truth. Our inner critic tends to focus on what isn’t finished and ignore what we’ve accomplished. The demanding and judging inner critic is cited as a reason for the approximately 90% of college students who admit that they feel inferior to others in one way or another.43

DEFENSIVENESS

Have you ever felt that your self-concept was under attack, and you responded with attempts to protect your self-concept, even at the expense of others? If so, you experienced the communication of defensiveness. When confronted with face challenges, people often become defensive and communicate defensive reactions. Defensiveness refers to a physiological, emotional, and cognitive response that results from the perception that our face is threatened or is under attack. Think back to a recent situation in which a significant other criticized you. It doesn’t matter whether the criticism concerned an issue of major importance (e.g., “You habitually lie to people”) or minor importance (e.g., “You leave the lights on in the computer room when you leave”); if you believed that your self-concept or face was threatened, you probably felt defensive.

Defensive Reactions

What do you typically do to reduce the physical and psychological discomfort when someone communicates a face-threatening act? If you are like most people, you probably respond with a defensive reaction. Defensive reactions (sometimes labeled “defense mechanisms”) defend your self-concept and public face when you are feeling threatened.
Defensive reactions are typically inappropriate and ineffective responses to challenges to our face; they can communicate disrespect and disconfirmation, promote heated arguments, and cause conversation partners to ignore relational problems and potential solutions. The various types of defensive reactions include sarcasm and verbal aggression, excuses, avoidance, and denial.44

**Sarcasm and Verbal Aggression** It’s very tempting to strike back at a critic who communicates a face-threatening act. Striking back at the source of the criticism with sarcasm and verbal aggression is one example of a defensive reaction. For example:

Other: You’re not seriously going to wear that, are you?
You: You should talk. I saw what you wore yesterday and you looked ridiculous!
Other: I’m only trying to help.
You: Thank you sooo much. I’ll be sure to send you my “before and after” photos.

**Excuses** We can attempt to save face when we’re the target of face-threatening communication by suggesting that the communication is of little importance or isn’t within our control.

Other: You promised you’d call yesterday and you didn’t.
You: Yeah, well, it got real busy at work and no one could fill in for me.
Other: Too busy for a phone call or email?
You: Well, you know how the boss snoops around to see what we’re doing. I didn’t want to get in trouble. Besides, you hardly ever check your email.
Other: So I guess it’s better to blow me off and not even try to call, even after you got off work!
You: I got off work late and I was really tired. Besides, I thought you were out and that it was no big deal that I didn’t call.
Other: It is a big deal! You made a promise and you broke it!

**Avoidance** We can avoid dealing with face-threatening acts by ignoring the communication, changing the subject, and/or physically leaving the room where our conversation partner is speaking.

Other: I am really mad at you!
You: (You wear headphones and listen to music as you pretend not to hear.)
Other: Did you hear me? I need to talk to you about something important! Take off those headphones!
You: (You slowly take off the headphones.) I don’t know what the problem is, but why don’t we talk about it later. I want to finish listening to this.
Other: (growing increasingly frustrated) No! This is important; I want to talk about it now!
You: Hey, I just remembered that what’s important is finishing my English paper tonight; it’s due tomorrow. (You begin to walk out of the room.)
Other: Wait a minute! (shouting) I want to talk about this now!
Analyzing Your Defensive Reactions

Explain the following four types of defensive reactions to someone who knows you well and who has criticized you in the past:

- Sarcasm and verbal aggression
- Excuses
- Avoidance
- Denial

Ask your conversation partner for specific examples of defensive reactions you communicate when your face is threatened, and determine whether you have a habitual response that can be classified in one of the aforementioned categories. (Be prepared for some defensiveness on your part.) Discuss how you can protect your self-concept in a more effective and appropriate manner in future communication episodes.

Denial

The denial of face-threatening communication undermines the perceptions of others. One interesting note about defensive reactions is that they are often strongest when the criticism directed toward us is true. Even when we secretly agree with the face-threatening communication, we may deny its validity in an attempt to save our desired social identity.

Other: I know you want a home entertainment center for our apartment, but there's no way we can afford it.
You: Sure there is. If I want something bad enough, I always buy it and things work out in the end.
Other: But the payments for a complete system are at least $500 a month. Even if we wanted to just get a plasma HDTV without all the other equipment, we'd have to rob Peter to pay Paul. And we'd also have to get more insurance because we both know that there've been some burglaries in the complex.
You: Nah! No one would want to rob our junky little apartment. Trust me; you worry too much.

Nondefensive Reaction Skills

Compared with defensive reactions, nondefensive reactions validate a critic’s thoughts and feelings and communicate respect, even if we disagree with the criticism directed toward us. Asking open-ended questions, guessing about specifics, agreeing with the truth, and agreeing to disagree are ways to respond to others in a nondefensive manner.

However, before communicating nondefensive reactions, we must learn to recognize that we are feeling defensive. When we sense the onset of a rapid heartbeat, experience shortness of breath, and feel “hot under the collar,” we should first take a deep breath and pause before speaking by silently counting to three. This will slow us down and prevent an ineffective and inappropriate response such as a defensive reaction. We can then train ourselves to immediately ask an open-ended question.

Asking open-ended questions, guessing about specifics, agreeing with the truth, and agreeing to disagree are ways to respond to others in a nondefensive manner.
Asking Open-Ended Questions  Face-threatening and critical communication is sometimes offered in general terms; therefore, asking open-ended questions can help us understand our conversation partner. For example:

Other: I don’t like your attitude!
You: What have I done?
Other: (laughing) You are such an idiot!
You: Why are you saying this?
Other: You don’t pay enough attention to me!
You: When was the last time I ignored you?

Asking an open-ended question demonstrates that we are trying to understand our conversation partner and enables us to move to additional types of nondefensive responses.

Guessing About Specifics  Even after asking an open-ended question, we may still be unsure of the meaning of a face-threatening act or criticism. Our next step may be to guess about specifics. Guessing about specifics enables our conversation partner to communicate an in-depth response and examine her or his assumptions. For example:

Other: I don’t think you care about me.
You: Why not? (Open-ended question)
Other: You don’t treat me right.
You: How do I act when I don’t treat you right? (Open-ended question)
Other: You act like you don’t care.
You: Is it because we’ve been staying in on Friday and Saturday nights? (Guessing about specifics)
You: Is it because I didn’t hang out with you at Chuck’s party? (Guessing about specifics)
Other: Yeah, well, I guess so.

Agreeing with the Truth How many times have you criticized someone and expected a nondefensive response of agreement? Most of us typically prepare and mentally rehearse our responses to a partner’s expected defensive reactions. Agreeing with the truth is a nondefensive response that is rarely expected. This response also has potential for deflecting a conversation that can get out of hand if it includes defense mechanisms. For example:

Other: You're just being difficult.
You: You’re right; I am.
Other: This is the third time you’re late!
You: I’m sorry. I’ll really try to be on time from now on.
Other: What you said was so rude.
You: Yeah, I know. I need to be more careful.

Notice that these responses do not include self-put-downs. We can agree with the truth if we believe that the comments directed to us are accurate or likely. However, sometimes criticism and face-threatening communication are overgeneralizations (e.g., they include the words always or never) or negatively relate to our overall self-concept. If this is the case, we can agree with the portion of the comments we believe to be true and disagree with the rest.
Agreeing to Disagree  When we remain calm and rational during a face-threatening act, we often find there is some truth to what our partner tells us. However, even if we can’t find any truth in our partner’s comments, we can validate his or her right to have an opinion. For example:

Other:  If you keep partying the way you do, you’re going to flunk.
You:    You may be right, but I think I can handle it.
Other:  Why do you listen to that stuff? It’s awful.
You:    I respect your opinion, but I like alternative music.

Of course, it goes without saying that we must be aware of our nonverbal communication, especially our tone of voice, when we communicate any type of nondefensive response. Sounding angry or sarcastic communicates defensiveness and prevents us from interacting in a competent manner. In general, communicating a nondefensive response in a voice that quivers with emotion is better than striking back in anger or responding with other defensive reactions that neither validate nor attempt to respectfully keep a conversation going.

Remember to be realistic about the guidelines and skills designed to improve self-concept and communication. As mentioned in the previous chapter, guidelines can fall short, and skills don’t always work. For example, you can’t assume that the competent communication you direct toward a more powerful person will be returned in kind. Consider the nondefensive response of agreeing to disagree. Telling your college professor “I respect that you gave my project a ‘D,’ but I believe I deserve a better grade” is not likely to result in your desired outcome. Similarly, after receiving criticism at work about arriving late, a response such as “You’re correct when you say that I’ve been late a lot, but I disagree that it’s causing problems” will probably result in defensiveness, anger, and the possibility of having to find a new job. The best course of action when communicating with someone more powerful than you may be to remain silent or use other communication tactics designed to save face and reduce defensiveness.

Nondefensive Reactions

Respond to the following situations with nondefensive reactions:

- You and a friend go on a vacation together, and you act as the “principal photographer.” Upon viewing the printed photographs, your friend tells you that the photos are blurry, you didn’t take enough “people shots,” and you’re an overall lousy photographer. How can you respond nondefensively?

- You are in the beginning stages of a romantic relationship. You and your new significant other tease each other, and the taunts and barbs become increasingly intense. All of a sudden, your significant other declares, “You are definitely not like my ex!” How can you respond nondefensively?

- You work very hard on an assignment for one of your classes. You are disappointed when you learn you received a “C” for the work, and you become angry as you walk to your professor’s office to talk about the grade. However, you realize that it’s best to communicate nondefensively with your professor. How can you respond nondefensively?

- Your boss calls you into her or his office and says that a coworker has complained about your actions on the job. How can you respond nondefensively?
The Dark Side of Self-Concept and Communication: Inflated Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was once assumed to influence students’ grades, sexual behavior, substance abuse, and relationships with peers. In 2000, the American Psychological Society (APS) created a task force headed by Roy F. Baumeister to examine scientific studies that included objective measures of self-esteem. After reviewing more than two hundred studies, the APS task force concluded that low self-esteem predisposes young people to engage in neither sexual behavior nor drug or alcohol abuse. Additionally, although there is a correlation between self-esteem and grades, the task force revealed that achieving high grades leads to higher self-esteem (not the other way around). The APS task force found only two consistent findings concerning the benefits of high self-esteem: people with high self-esteem are significantly happier and more satisfied with their lives than people with low to moderate levels of self-esteem, and people with high self-esteem are persistent and resilient.47 Surprisingly, the APS task force discovered a dark side to self-esteem that affects academic performance and interpersonal relations.

Academic Performance

In regard to academic performance, the APS task force found that artificially inflating students’ self-esteem can actually decrease grades. One study reviewed by the task force revealed that attempts to bolster self-esteem among struggling college students can backfire. When at-risk students received messages that instructed them to boost their self-esteem (e.g., students were told to think, “I can be proud of myself,” “I can do this,” and “I am satisfied with myself”), the result was an average failing grade. On the other hand, when at-risk students received messages designed to instill a sense of responsibility for their grades (e.g., students were told to think, “I need to work harder,” “I can learn this material if I apply myself,” and “I can control what happens to me in this class”), the result was an average passing grade.48 Similarly, people with inflated self-esteem often become defensive in the face of embarrassment, criticism, and having their authority questioned. In the academic setting, receiving passing grades that don’t actually reflect academic performance in K–12 classes can cause college students to become offended, demoralized, or angry when they don’t achieve the grades they believe they deserve.49

Interpersonal Relations

In addition to affecting academic performance, inflated self-esteem affects interpersonal relations. Some educators believe that children in school programs designed to “enhance positive self-perceptions” actually have learned self-importance and self-gratification. Another unfortunate result of such programs is that children fail to learn respect for others.50 People with inflated self-esteem also tend to become defensive and seek reassurance...
We have learned that competent communication includes an ethical dimension of well-based standards of right and wrong. Asking “Have I practiced any virtues today (e.g., integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, and responsibility)” “Have I done more good than harm?” “Have I treated people with dignity and respect?” “Have I been fair and just today?” and “Have I made my community stronger because of my actions?” can provide us with a systematic approach to dealing with everyday ethical behavior. Read the following situation and consider whether requiring students to write “I’m a loser” sentences is an ethical way to influence self-concept and behavior.

Think back to your days in middle school. How would you feel if a teacher made you write “I am a loser because . . .” as a result of not completing your homework? Far from a hypothetical situation, Spanish teacher Julie Barrentine had students write “loser sentences” over and over on a piece of paper if they failed to complete their assignments. The idea to use the word loser in the sentences, which came from Barrentine’s students, was intended to be a humorous way to motivate them to finish their homework. However, parents complained to school officials once they found out about the loser sentences. In addition to stopping the practice, officials sent letters of apology to all of Barrentine’s 137 students. The loser sentences story was exposed in the media, and many people indicated that they thought the teacher crossed the line between “discipline” and “humiliation.” Some parents suggested that Barrentine be disciplined so she would be perceived as a “loser.” However, others responded that they were happy to see a teacher who held students accountable for completing their assignments. Emails to the Dallas Morning News about the incident included the following:

- “None of the parents or principals addressed the real issue—the students not turning in their work.”
- “The teacher was wrong in applying the term ‘loser’ to any student. While it is fine when one kid says it to another; it takes on an entirely different meaning when coming from a teacher.”

One parent in particular suggested that the loser sentences could have a damaging effect on students’ self-concept. “People in authority don’t realize that little things like this make a big difference in someone’s self-esteem. Negativity is destroying our young children,” she wrote.

Do you believe the “I’m a loser” sentences reflect well-based standards of right and wrong? Do you believe that writing loser sentences effectively influences self-concept and behavior? Is it acceptable for students to call each other “loser” but not acceptable for teachers to apply this term to their pupils?

A Case Study in Ethics: “I’m a Loser . . .”

Overall, self-esteem is now considered to be a multilayered concept, and respondents in self-esteem studies may include individuals who are narcissistic or who pretend to have higher levels of self-esteem than reality suggests. Researchers believe that further studies should focus on the various meanings and components related to self-esteem. Experts also suggest that high self-esteem should develop from achievement (instead of assuming that achievement should result from high self-esteem). Educators are now encouraging “earned self-esteem” that results from meeting standards at home and in schools. Similarly, we can “refine” our self-esteem by focusing on setting goals that mutually benefit self and other. For example, instead of focusing on making a good impression when communicating, we may want to focus on learning new information or better understanding our conversation partners’ ideas. Focusing on goals that benefit ourselves and others can stabilize our sense of self-worth and may help us avoid the dark side of the self-concept.
We can enhance our motivation to communicate in a competent manner by

- Understanding that it’s important to study self-concept because our self-concept influences how we accept praise, defend viewpoints, and communicate our accomplishments. Our self-concept also affects how others perceive us.

- Creating realistic goal statements designed to improve our self-concept.

- Making a mental inventory of our talents and strengths and reviewing them when we have a down day or when someone’s criticism is especially hurtful.

We can improve the chances that we will be perceived as a competent communicator by knowing that

- Although the self-concept is influenced by inherited traits, our self-concept is essentially formed, sustained, and changed by our communication with others. The Pygmalion effect and social comparison strongly influence the formation and development of the self-concept.

- The self-concept is based on characteristics we believe we possess (self-image) and characteristics we believe to be worthwhile or valuable (self-esteem). The self-concept is also multidimensional, is influenced by what we disclose to others and what others disclose to us (as illustrated by the Johari Window), and is subjective. Our desired self-concept is the “face” that we choose to present to others.

- Our self-concept is influenced by culture, social, gender, and individual contexts. Cultures that are primarily individualist suggest that people have unique identities. Similarly, our family, friends, and people with whom we work significantly affect our self-perceptions. Socialization (especially what people learn about masculinity and femininity) also affects how we perceive ourselves. Finally, the self-fulfilling prophecy and our inner critic influence our self-concept.

- Defensiveness refers to protecting our face when we feel it is threatened or under attack. Defensive responses, including sarcasm and verbal aggression, excuses, avoidance, and denial, are inappropriate and ineffective ways to defend our self-concept when it is threatened.

- Inflated levels of self-esteem can negatively affect academic performance and interpersonal relations. People with inflated self-esteem often become defensive in the face of embarrassment, criticism, and having their authority questioned. Focusing on goals that benefit us and others can help to stabilize our sense of self-worth and avoid the dark side of the self-concept.

We can perform the following skills to improve our communication as it relates to our self-concept:

- Using facework to help save our face and others’, such as glossing over a mistake or acting as if one’s face hasn’t been threatened, responding with humor; communicating an apology, offering an explanation to minimize responsibility or to justify behavior; and physical remediation.

- Communicating nondefensive reactions such as asking open-ended questions, guessing about specifics, agreeing with the truth, and agreeing to disagree when our face is threatened.
RESPONDING TO OPENING BLOG

BLOG RESPONSE: “I’M SO FAT”

Pretend you are actually leaving a comment on I’m So Fat’s blog site. Consider why I’m So Fat has developed her or his self-concept and what advice you might offer to improve it. Compare your response with the comments written by your classmates.

NAMES TO KNOW

Roy F. Baumeister, p. 91—psychologist at Florida State University who has published extensively in the areas of emotion, interpersonal processes, and identity. Baumeister recommends that researchers should de-emphasize the study of self-esteem and concentrate on self-control and self-discipline to benefit self and society.

George Herbert Mead, p. 68 (1863–1931)—philosopher and psychologist whose major contribution to the field of social psychology was his analysis of how the human self arises in the process of symbolic interaction or communication.

Martin Seligman, p. 72—psychologist and best-selling author who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman is known as a founder of positive psychology, a research area that encompasses positive emotions, positive character traits, and positive institutions.

Erving Goffman, p. 77 (1922–1982)—sociologist who was a pioneer theorist in the area of face-to-face interaction and who developed the dramatistic perspective to study interpersonal communication. Goffman’s classic 1959 book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, continues to influence modern students of symbolic interaction.

KEY TERMS

blind quadrant, 75  self-concept, 68
defensive reactions, 85  self-disclosure, 75
defensiveness, 85  self-efficacy, 83
face, 77  self-esteem, 74
facework, 79  self-fulfilling prophecies, 84
hidden quadrant, 76  self-image, 73
inner critic, 85  significant others, 69
Johari Window, 75  social comparison, 69
open quadrant, 75  symbolic interactionism, 68
Pygmalion effect, 69  unknown quadrant, 76
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is a self-concept? How does the way we perceive ourselves influence how we communicate with others?
2. How do significant others, social comparison, and the Pygmalion effect relate to the self-concept?
3. How do self-image and self-esteem relate to the self-concept?
4. Describe how the self-concept is multidimensional.
5. Describe and explain the four quadrants associated with the Johari Window.
6. Why is the self-concept considered to be subjective?
7. What is “face,” and how can we competently manage face-threatening situations?
8. How does the cultural context influence our self-concept?
9. In what ways do family, friends, and coworkers affect our self-concept?
10. In what way is the self-concept affected by gender?
11. How do self-fulfilling prophecies affect the self-concept?
12. What is defensiveness? How does defensiveness manifest itself in communication?
13. What are some nondefensive ways we can respond to others?
14. What are some of the negative consequences of having inflated self-esteem?