

HISTORY OF EXPOSURE TO SELF-FOCUSING STIMULI AS A DEVELOPMENTAL ANTECEDENT OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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Summary.—The present report investigated the question of how individual differences in self-consciousness develop. Rimé and LeBon proposed that high self-consciousness follows a history of frequent exposure to self-focusing stimuli, i.e., mirrors, audiences, audio and video devices, and cameras. To explore this hypothesis private and public self-consciousness and past exposure to self-focusing stimuli were assessed in 438 subjects. Analysis indicated that history of frequent exposure to self-focusing stimuli is significantly but weakly related to high private self-consciousness in men and to high public self-consciousness in women. This supports previous observations suggesting that the routes to the development of self-consciousness seem to differ for the two sexes.

Self-awareness was defined by Duval and Wicklund (1972) as the ability to become the object of one's own attention. A state of self-awareness, in which a person will actively look at and examine any self-aspect that is most salient at the moment, can be created by exposing subjects to self-focusing stimuli. Confronting a mirror, an audience, or a single observer, or seeing pictures or videotape recordings of oneself, or hearing one's voice on a tape recording provoke self-focused attention (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Self-consciousness, on the other hand, refers to the chronic tendency to engage more or less frequently in self-observation (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Individual differences in the time people spend in a state of self-awareness are supposedly stable and independent of environmental influences, e.g., immediate exposure to self-focusing stimuli. Thus, self-consciousness is considered a personality trait. Private self-consciousness represents a tendency to think about covert self-aspects such as moods, motives, mental processes, desires, sensations, and so on. Public self-consciousness is a tendency to think about one's visible characteristics such as physical appearance, social behavior, or the impression one makes on others.

An issue that has been largely neglected is the question of how individual differences in self-consciousness develop (Davis & Franzoi, 1991). Little is known about specific past experiences that are likely to shape self-consciousness (but see Franzoi, Davis, & Markwiese, 1990; Klonsky, Dutton, & Liebel, 1990). A common assumption in personality research is that the emergence of dispositions is provoked by the effects of situations. In that perspective, Rimé and LeBon (1984) suggested that the disposition to self-focus (self-consciousness) is dependent upon past situational factors, so that highly self-conscious individuals would be characterized by an history of frequent exposure to self-focusing stimuli. In other words, being repeatedly exposed to self-focusing stimuli, i.e., being frequently in a state of self-awareness, would create a high disposition to self-focus—a tendency that would persist even in the absence of these stimuli. To test this hypothesis scales assessing private self-consciousness, public self-consciousness, and past exposure to self-focusing stimuli were administered to 438 French-Canadian Caucasian undergraduate college students (126 men and 312 women, *M* age = 20.6 yr.).

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The routes to the development of self-consciousness appear to differ for the two sexes: in Klonsky, *et al.*'s research (1990), specific past experiences had a more significant influence on women's self-consciousness than on men's self-consciousness. Thus, a first prediction was that a more significant association between self-consciousness and history with self-focusing stimuli would be found for the women than for the men. Also, because all self-focusing stimuli, with the exception of small mirrors, have been shown to induce a state of public self-awareness (Carver & Scheier, 1981), a second prediction was that frequent past exposure to these stimuli would primarily be related to high public self-consciousness.

The French version of the Self-consciousness Scale (Rimé & LeBon, 1984) was used to assess individual differences in self-awareness. The private self-consciousness scale contains 10 items. The public self-consciousness scale is made up of 7 items. Subjects are asked to evaluate each item on scales anchored by extremely uncharacteristic of myself (0) and extremely characteristic of myself (4). A (French) scale was developed for the present study to evaluate subjects' past exposure to self-focusing stimuli. This instrument comprises five items, each asking subjects to estimate the frequency of their exposure to a given self-focusing stimulus during childhood and adolescence, using a scale anchored by never (0) and very frequently (4). The items evaluate the extent of exposure to mirrors, audiences, audio and video devices, and cameras. Item 2 for example, reads (in English): "On the following scale, give an estimate of the number of occasions you went in front of an audience (playing music, reciting a text, being in a play, etc.) during childhood and adolescence." A single over-all score combining the ratings for the five items was calculated.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the three measures by sex. Comparisons of *t* tests between groups were calculated, indicating significant sex differences on all measures for private self-consciousness ($t_{436} = -2.53, p < .02$), for public self-consciousness ($t_{436} = -2.66, p < .008$), and for the scale assessing past exposure to self-focusing stimuli ($t_{436} = -5.64, p < .001$). Given these differences, separate correlations were calculated. Analyses suggest that a history of frequent exposure to self-focusing stimuli is significantly but weakly related to high scores on private self-consciousness in men ($r = .21, p < .01$) and to high scores on public self-consciousness in women ($r = .19, p < .001$). Other correlations were not significant. This in-

TABLE 1
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF ALL MEASURES AS A FUNCTION OF SEX

Group	Men (<i>n</i> = 126)	Women (<i>n</i> = 312)
Private Self-consciousness		
<i>M</i>	24.74	26.30
<i>SD</i>	5.97	6.40
Public Self-consciousness		
<i>M</i>	19.43	20.78
<i>SD</i>	4.39	4.97
Pilot Questionnaire		
<i>M</i>	11.32	13.26
<i>SD</i>	3.11	3.33

dicates, as Klonsky, *et al.* (1990) observed and as predicted here, that the routes to the development of self-consciousness seem to differ for the two sexes. The existence of a (modest) correlation between past exposure to self-focusing stimuli and *private* self-consciousness in men is intriguing. Again, self-focusing stimuli have been shown to induce a state of public self-awareness; the only self-focusing stimulus provoking private self-focus is a small mirror (large mirrors

induce public self-focus). It is possible that for an unknown reason extended exposure to self-focusing stimuli in natural settings affects private self-consciousness in men. It could also be suggested that the men in this study confronted more often small mirrors in the course of their development; this idea cannot be evaluated, however, because the item measuring past exposure to mirrors did not specify the size of the stimulus.

Given the large sample, it would be tempting to interpret these correlations as empirical support for the hypothesis that frequent past exposure to self-focusing stimuli plays a limited but significant role in the development of a high tendency to focus on private or public self-aspects. Although the inverse relation looks rather unlikely, the possibility cannot be ruled out that men scoring high on private self-consciousness and women scoring high on public self-consciousness somehow sought self-focusing stimuli in the past.

It is important to note that the present results are preliminary because a pilot measure was used to assess past exposure to self-focusing stimuli. Comparing the self-consciousness of actors who have frequent exposure to self-focusing stimuli and controls would be a methodologically superior way of examining the importance of self-focusing stimuli in the etiology of self-consciousness.

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