

PRELIMINARY DATA ON A RELATION BETWEEN SELF-TALK AND COMPLEXITY OF THE SELF-CONCEPT¹

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Summary.— Recent empirical work in social cognition suggests that in building a self-concept people make inferences about themselves based on overt behavior or private thoughts and feelings. This article addresses the question of how, exactly, people make these inferences about themselves and raises the possibility that they do so through self-talk. It is proposed that the more one talks to oneself to construct a self-image, the more this image will gain coherence and sophistication. A correlational study was conducted to explore the relation between richness of the self-concept (using the W-A-Y) and natural disposition to talk to oneself (using a pilot questionnaire). A moderate but positive correlation of .30 is obtained. The article concludes with clinical implications.

It seems almost unavoidable to evoke action of psychosocial mechanisms whenever the problem of the ontogenesis of the self-concept is raised. In that respect, one is likely to find ample reference to symbolic interactionism and to the idea that one's self-concept is a reflection of one's perceptions about how one appears to others. More precisely, Mead (1912/1964, 1934, 1982) suggested that being confronted with different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving would first allow the individual to perceive that he is endowed with unique qualities and then would motivate him to take others' perspective to gain an objective vision of himself and to acquire self-information. Cooley (1902) proposed that we learn about ourselves by being repeatedly exposed to verbal comments—or appraisals—others emit about us.

Of course, I do not want to disparage the participation of the social environment in the formation of the self-concept [see Shrauger & Schoeneman (1979) for critical assessment of symbolic interactionism]; it would be appropriate, however, to consider its importance by insisting on the *active role* the individual plays in the elaboration of his self-image (Markus, 1977; Schwalbe, 1992). Recent empirical work done in social cognition supports this proposition by suggesting that people make inferences about their own characteristics, statuses, and relationships based on their overt behavior and the situations in which these behaviors occur or by attending to their private thoughts and feelings (Bem, 1972; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Andersen, 1984; Andersen & Ross, 1984; Andersen & Williams, 1985; Andersen, Lazowski,

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& Donisi, 1986 McGuire & McGuire, 1988). In this context, the specific question addressed here is how do people make inferences (or assessments, attributions, judgments) about themselves? What cognitive processes are involved in the active acquisition of self-information?

A plausible—if not self-evident—hypothesis readily comes to mind: when one tries to understand oneself, that is, when one works at building a self-image, *one talks to oneself*. A stronger formulation of this hypothesis could be that the more one talks to oneself to construct a self-image, the more this image will gain coherence and sophistication. A correlational study is presented in which the existence of a relation between the complexity (or richness) of the self-concept and a more or less frequent use of self-talk is examined. The results are preliminary because self-talk was measured with a pilot-inventory and the complexity of the self-concept was scored using a new system. For a detailed discussion of the role played by self-talk in the acquisition of self-information and its organisation into a self-concept, see Morin (1993, submitted), Morin and Everett (1990), and Morin and Joshi (1990).

METHOD

Subjects

Eighty-five Caucasian French-Canadian Roman Catholic undergraduate students from Québec served as subjects. Of these 85 subjects, 45 were men (M age = 24.4 yr.; SD = 3.9) and 40 were women (M age = 24.7 yr.; SD = 4.5).

Measures

Complexity of the self-concept.—The complexity of the self-concept was assessed by asking the subjects to answer the question “Who Are You?”. This method, referred to as the W-A-Y (see Bugental, 1964), was adapted for a French-speaking population by L'Écuyer (1975). A variety of measures designed to evaluate the self-concept exist (see Wylie, 1979), but the W-A-Y was chosen because of its open-format nature (subjects are asked to describe themselves freely): it is the only measure which allows a content evaluation of the richness of self-perceptions. Subjects read the following instructions on the top of an otherwise blank sheet of paper:

We would like you to answer the question “Who are you?”. Try to describe yourself the way you are, as you see yourself, no matter what other persons might think. Write as much as you can even if this is difficult. Take your time. Use both sides of the sheet. If you need more space, use another sheet. Thank you for your collaboration.

Self-descriptions produced in answer to the question were scored by two independent raters using criteria developed for the present study. The richness of self-descriptions was scored as follows:

- (a) each and every precision on self-information was assigned a score of

"1." If a subject was to write "I am a shy person," no score was given since this was considered to be plain self-information. However, if the same subject was to write "*On some occasions*, I am a shy person," a score of "1" was assigned. And, if the same subject was to write "On some occasions, I am a *very* shy person," a score of "2" was assigned. And so on.

(b) Any synthesis, deduction, or conclusion about oneself reached from simple observations was assigned a score of "1.5" (because this was considered to be the indication of a more sophisticated self-conception). If a subject was to write "I am always surrounded by people," no score was assigned since again, this was considered to be plain descriptive self-information. However, if the same subject was to write "I am always surrounded by people, *thus I am sociable*," a score of "1.5" was assigned. A single score was calculated.

Self-talk.—A pilot questionnaire developed in another study (Morin, Everett, Turcotte, & Tardif, 1993) was used to measure subjects' natural disposition to talk to themselves (about themselves). The inventory is made up of 27 self-verbalizations; subjects are asked to evaluate the frequency with which they say to themselves statements such as "What's giving me this feeling?" or "It's funny. Every time I'm in (some situation) I seem to (do something, react in some way, etc.). I think that I have (some character or personality trait)." Each item was rated on a scale of 0 (I never say this to myself) to 4 (I very often say this to myself). A single score was also calculated. Preliminary results ($n=270$) have shown that the self-talk inventory is characterized by a normal distribution, with a mean of 59.2 and a standard deviation of 15.5. The internal consistency of the scale is high, with a Cronbach coefficient of .89. It also seems to have good discriminant validity: the questionnaire presents a .46 correlation ($p<.01$) with the Self-consciousness Scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), for example, but the magnitude of this .46 correlation indicates that the scales measure different constructs. The Self-consciousness Scale assesses a natural disposition to focus inward whereas the self-talk inventory evaluates subjects' natural tendency to talk to themselves (about themselves). In other words, the latter measures a cognitive process involved in the former.

No replication data are available at this time for either the self-talk inventory or the W-A-Y measure.

Procedure

The self-talk inventory and the W-A-Y were administered during class. Subjects ($n=85$) received no payment or academic credit for participation. Both measures were presented in random order. The subjects were told by the instructor that the purpose of the study was to examine different types of introspection and were invited to complete the questionnaires. Participants were informed that all information would be confidential. They were

also asked to indicate their age and sex on both measures and to take as much time as needed. Most subjects took 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interrater reliability of the W-A-Y scoring system, calculated with a Spearman correlation and based on 30 random pairs of scores, was .91. The mean score on the W-A-Y was 22.2 (*SD*: 11.0); the mean score on the self-talk inventory was 58.8 (*SD*: 14.4).

The Spearman correlation coefficient between scores on the self-talk inventory and on the W-A-Y was .30 ($p < .01$). So there is a weak relation between self-talk and the complexity of self-perceptions. A few limiting factors can readily be identified to explain this result. The self-talk inventory (the only measure of self-talk about oneself available at this time) is an exploratory measure that needs to be tested further for its psychometric qualities. The inventory calls for introspective judgments that are retrospective and generalizing. Thus, there is no way to be sure subjects fully understand that what is being measured is the frequency of use of given *self-statements*, i.e., I say more or less frequently to myself "I feel happy—or sad—today," *and not how they actually feel*. The W-A-Y measure raises an almost insurmountable problem: the subjects' motivation to answer a very difficult and personal question in class. It is clear that an unmotivated subject will give an incomplete and approximate picture of himself; some richness and complexity will not be available.

Another limiting factor might be the administration of measures in a static point in time. Recent data (L'Écuyer, 1990) suggest that the process of formation of the self-concept expands on the entire life-span. Consequently, the following possibilities may diminish the strength of the expected correlation. For one thing, some subjects might already have worked on their self-concept in the past through frequent episodes of self-talk; when such subjects participate in the study, self-talk is infrequent but the self-concept is complex. On the other hand, the opposite situation is equally plausible: some subjects might be in an intense episode of self-talk at the time they participate in the study, but substantial work on their self-concept still needs to be carried out to have its hypothesized effect—hence a rather moderate correlation between both measures. This shows the obvious importance of the temporal aspect of the problem and suggests that future attempts should take this variable into account if possible. A longitudinal study might be more adequate. Also, it is clear that the correlation might actually reflect shared variance with a third variable (possibly verbal intelligence) which was not assessed.

Despite all the preceding, a .30 correlation is nonetheless substantial given the problem under study. It would be naive to expect a strong corre-

lation since other potentially related uncontrolled variables such as personal history, social feedback, and verbal intelligence are likely to play substantial roles together with self-talk in the complex process of building a self-concept. Another potential variable is imagery: autoscopic mental images are likely to represent a cognitive process through which self-observation, i.e., self-awareness, and the formation of a self-concept are mediated (Morin & DeBlois, 1989). But again, in that general perspective, the relative weight of the target variable, self-talk, in correlational terms, seems to be important in comparison with other possible variables.

Conclusion

The results of the exploratory study seem to suggest that the empirical establishment of a link between complexity of the self-concept and self-talk represents a promising research avenue. It also has potential clinical ramifications. The development of a rich and well-articulated self-concept offers interesting psychotherapeutic possibilities. Self-knowledge has been seen by many to be a prerequisite to self-regulation which is responsible for a feeling of autonomy and freedom essential to psychological well-being. Indeed, how can one modify given patterns of thinking or given behaviors in a desirable direction if one is oblivious to these thoughts and behaviors and to the changes to be made? Further, many people may actually seek psychological help because they do not really know who they are, and consequently, what they want to be. In this perspective, applying cognitive-behavioral techniques (see Nurius & Majerus, 1988) would be appropriate to promote emission of self-verbalizations pertinent to self-analysis to enrich the self-concept.

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