

Self as the Target and the Perceiver: A Componential Approach to Self-Enhancement

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Abstract In this paper, we review the recent literature on the debate over the value of self-enhancement. Past studies fall into two distinct sets, each in the context of a different research tradition. The componential approach to self-enhancement integrates these two divergent perspectives and takes seriously the interplay of self-perception and interpersonal perception. Instead of global indices, the componential approach identifies specific components of person perception. By partitioning the components in self-perception, the componential approach allows for better understanding of the dynamic interactive effects of self-enhancement bias and other components in self-perception on adjustment. We conclude the paper by discussing the emerging attempts to advance a componential approach to examine self-perception in terms of components and outcomes.

Keywords Self-enhancement · Positive self-illusion · Well-being · Mental health · Adjustment · Self-esteem

Introduction

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said in his work *Tao Te Ching* that “He who knows other men is discerning; he who knows himself is intelligent” (Legge 2008[1891], p. 33). Clearly, Lao Tzu understood that knowing the self is different from knowing others. Moreover, Lao Tzu highlighted that the two types of knowledge are intimately connected. Earlier in the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu speaks of the danger of thinking too highly of oneself, warning that “he who vaunts himself does not find his merit acknowledged; he who is self-conceited has no superiority allowed to him” (Legge 2008[1891], p. 24).

Such insights into the value of self-knowledge are not limited to one culture. The importance of self-knowledge was exemplified in the ancient Greek aphorism “Know thyself”—people have a drive to acquire self-knowledge because such knowledge is necessary to function effectively. Similarly, the mythological story of Narcissus, who was cursed to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, and so wasted away while admiring himself, warns against the danger of thinking too highly of oneself. Even in modern Western culture, the pursuit of self-knowledge is still central. People are inspired to “find themselves” and spend a great deal of time and resources trying to understand who they really are.

Traditionally, psychologists considered accurate self-perceptions essential for adaptive functioning and well-being (see Maslow 1950). However, over the last two decades, there is a protracted debate between those who believe that psychologically healthy individuals perceive themselves accurately and those who believe that it is more adaptive to have overly positive, self-enhancing illusions (see Block and Colvin 1994; Kwan et al. 2004; Sedikides et al. 2004; Taylor and Brown 1988).

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The literature on this topic is extensive but the findings have not been consistent. Therefore, the major goal of this article is to review the recent literature on self-enhancement bias and its link to adjustment. We will begin our discussion with a brief review of how the literature has characterized the distinction between the two traditional approaches (social-comparison and self-insight) to self-enhancement bias. We then discuss the recent development of the componential approach to self-enhancement. We focus our discussion on emerging attempts to examine the relations between self-enhancement bias and adjustment using the componential approach. Finally, we discuss future directions for utilizing the componential approach.

The Modern Debate over the Value of Self-Enhancement

Kwan et al. (2004) argued that the debate has gone unresolved because researchers have used different conceptions of self-enhancement that have not been properly distinguished. Two different conceptions of self-enhancement coexist in the literature. One conception originated from Festinger's *social-comparison* theory (1954), and compares perceived self with perceived others: Self-enhancers are those individuals who perceive themselves more positively than they perceive others. The other conception originated from Allport's notion of *self-insight* (1937), and compares self-perception to perceptions by others: Self-enhancers are individuals who perceive themselves more positively than they are perceived by others.

These two approaches have helped shape our understanding of self-enhancement, but each conception is incomplete without the other. Each of these two conceptions compares self-perception to an important criterion (perceptions of others and perceptions by others). However, each of the two previous conceptions confounds self-enhancement with an irrelevant component of interpersonal perception.

To illustrate this point, let's consider the following group of four friends who are auditioning for a university singing group. Contestants audition in front of a panel of judges and a live audience consisting of the other auditioning students, and each is scored based on their performance relative to that of the other singers. The judges score each singer on a scale from 1 to 10, with higher scores reflecting better performances, and these scores determine who makes it into the group. The mean score of all the students auditioning was a 6, though any student who scored a 7 or above made it into the group.

After their performance, these four friends stepped out of the room to wait while the judges decide on a score. While

waiting outside for the results, the four friends spoke to each other about their performance.

Avani: *We were horrible in there. We weren't even singing in unison. I mean, Bharati, you looked like you were trying too hard to carry out the note. And Chadna, if we were to follow your steps, we would be the laughing stock of the entire world. Come on, Deepa you should have warmed up before you went in. You sounded horrible. Let's be real. We are going to end up in the last place. I suck but you gals were much worse.*

In reality, Avani got 10 out of 10 for her singing performance and made the group.

Bharati: *I think you gals did a great job though. Avani, you were amazing. Chadna, you have been working so hard on singing your part and you did it today in front of those judges! Deepa, you are a natural singer! Overall I think I did pretty well, too. Did you notice that the judges kept looking at me? I hope that they notice my talent!*

In reality, Bharati got 6 out of 10 for her singing performance and did not make the group.

Chadna: *I must say all of us performed beautifully! Avani, your voice resonated today. I just loved hearing it. Bharati, you were just right on the beat and that helped us stay in tune; and Deepa, you were just wonderful. I am not bad either; I just sang my heart out. I bet we got 10 out of 10.*

In reality, Chadna got 6 out of 10 for her singing performance and did not make the group.

Deepa: *Chadna, you probably broke the judge's glasses, singing so loudly. I mean... the judges cannot even hear my beautiful voice! And my goodness, Avani, you have to sing way slower than that. Just follow my pace next time. Bharati, you were simply awful. Sigh. I don't think any of you will make it this year. So long my friends, I'm going to be the only one makes the group. I shined gloriously. I am the best performer on earth.*

In reality, Deepa got 8 out of 10 for her singing performance and made the group.

What would the two previous conceptions say about these four girls? Some of the girls would be labeled as self-enhancers according to one conception but self-effacers according to another conception. For example, Avani saw her performance as poor but rated everyone else even lower than her ("I suck but you gals were much worse"). According to the social-comparison conception, she would be a self-enhancer because she sees herself more positively than she sees others. However, with the self-insight

conception, Avani would be a self-effacer because she saw herself less positively than the judges saw her. This is a contradiction: Avani self-enhanced according to the social-comparison conception but she self-effaced according to the self-insight conception.

Each of these two conceptions focuses on *one* important component, *but* ignores the other component. The social-comparison conception does not take into account Avani's actual performance. It does not make sense to label Avani a self-enhancer when she really *is* a better singer than her friends. The problem with the self-insight conception is that it does not take into account how Avani perceives people in general—that is, the general positivity—negativity effect in person perception. In short, the social-comparison approach and the self-insight approach each fail to take into account an important component of self-enhancement (i.e., they confound self-enhancement with other components).

The Componential Approach to Self-Enhancement

Kwan et al. (2004) proposed a componential approach to self-enhancement to include the missing elements from the social-comparison and self-insight approaches. These authors started from the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny 1994), which provides a decompositional analysis of interpersonal perception. SRM decomposes the variance in interpersonal perception into three basic components: the perceiver, the target being perceived, and the unique relationship between the perceiver and the particular target. The SRM analysis specifies three effects, analogous to a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) design. One main effect is the perceiver effect, which may be understood conceptually as whether the perceiver rates others positively or negatively. The second main effect is the target effect, which may be understood conceptually as whether the target is rated by others positively or negatively. The third effect in SRM can be thought of as an interaction between perceiver and target. Kenny (1994) called it the "relationship effect" because it reflects the unique impression that a perceiver has of a particular target, capturing that part of the perception that cannot be explained by the two main effects. In equation form, the way a perceiver P rates a target T on an attribute X is

$$X_{PT} = \text{Perceiver effect} + \text{Target effect} + \text{Relationship effect} \\ + \text{Constant}$$

SRM is focused on interpersonal perception, and self-perceptions are not included when effects are estimated. Kwan et al. (2004) proposed that SRM can be extended to

conceptualize self-perception as a form of interpersonal perception where the self is both the perceiver *and* the target. Following the equation above, self-perception can be partitioned into three components: perceiver effect (P_s), target effect (T_s), and relationship with the self (R_{ss}). Thus, the self-perception on an attribute X is: $X_{ss} = P_s + T_s + R_{ss} + C_s$

Subscript ss indicates that self is both perceiver and target.

Perceiver Effect (P_s) In self-ratings, a high perceiver effect implies a tendency to evaluate others positively or leniently, whereas a low perceiver effect implies a tendency to evaluate others negatively or harshly. Kwan et al. (2004) found that the perceiver effect has substantive psychological meaning, with high scorers likely to value and maintain close relationships.

Target Effect (T_s) A high target effect implies that the individual is perceived positively by the consensus of the others. When measured across a broad set of socially desirable attributes, the target effect can be understood as a measure of social regard, esteem, or acceptance (Leary 1999). Kwan et al.'s (2004) findings are consistent with this view: individuals regarded highly by their study group members also scored high on personal self-esteem and group assignments.

Relationship-with-the-Self Effect (R_{ss}) Individuals may perceive themselves positively for three reasons: (a) They generally perceive others positively (P_s), (b) they are perceived positively by others (T_s), and (c) they have an overly positive view of themselves (R_{ss}). Only R_{ss} is relevant to self-perception bias. R_{ss} is akin to the relationship effect in SRM and indicates the unique component of self-perception that cannot be explained by perceiver and target effects: It captures the relationship due to the idiosyncratic view that individuals have of their own self.

Kwan et al. (2004) proposed that relationship-with-the-self (R_{ss}) is a refined conception of self-enhancement. They mathematically derived and formalized the two previous conceptions of self-enhancement within this framework. The social-comparison and self-insight conceptions share the relationship with the self effect (R_{ss}). The social-comparison conception includes the individual's target effect (T_s), whereas the self-insight index includes the individual's perceiver effect (P_s), thus making the two conceptions conceptually different. In other words, the social-comparison index confounds self-enhancement with the target effect and the self-insight index confounds self-enhancement with the perceiver effect. Thus, on the social-comparison index, individuals may obtain high values not only because they have an overly positive self-perception

(R_{ss}) but also *because they are seen positively by others (a high target effect)*. That is, some people are indeed smarter, more attractive, or friendlier than others are and they regard themselves as better than others, but the social comparison index would erroneously classify those individuals as self-enhancers (e.g., Avani in the example above). On the self-insight index, individuals may obtain high values not only because they have an overly positive self-perception (R_{ss}) but also *because they see people positively (a high perceiver effect)*. That is, some individuals perceive people (both self and others) more benevolently than others, but the self-insight index would erroneously classify those individuals as self-enhancers (e.g., Bharati).

The componential approach to self-enhancement bias shows that each of the previous perspectives is incomplete without the other. That is, the social-comparison perspective cannot ignore the actual standing of the individual, nor can the self-insight perspective ignore how the individual perceives people other than the self. Both are important components of interpersonal perception and need to be taken into account when claims are made about biases in self-perception and their implications for adjustment.

Recently, Kwan and her colleagues applied the componential approach to identify the conditions that lead to more or less agreement between the two traditional approaches to self-enhancement (Kwan et al. 2008). Their findings show that the degree of overlap between the social-comparison approach and the self-insight approach depends on the trait domain being studied. An example of this is talkativeness, a trait within the domain of extraversion. For talkativeness, there is less of a need to take into account social consensus. It is more important to account for general perception style, or perceiver effect within the componential approach. In this case, the social-comparison approach is not significantly confounded. The situation for friendliness, a trait within the domain of agreeableness, is quite different. Friendliness appears to best be judged by social consensus. If a person does not have the insight to agree with others' opinions of his agreeableness, there is lesser overlap between the social-comparison and the self-insight approach. This finding suggests that some of the variability in the results of previous studies is due to the multitude of trait domains that they examined. Furthermore, the self-insight approach shows greater similarity to the social-comparison approach and the componential approach when judges are familiar with the targets of judgment.

Is Self-Enhancement Bias Good or Bad for Adjustment?

Three kinds of adjustment have been frequently studied in research on self-enhancement: interpersonal, achievement, and intrapsychic. Kwan et al. (2004) illustrated that the two

previous conceptions are theoretically and empirically distinct, and the failure to recognize their differences has made it difficult to resolve the debate. Using the componential approach, Kwan et al. (2004) initially found that self-enhancement was related positively to intrapsychic adjustment, zero to interpersonal adjustment, and negatively to achievement. More recent research using the componential approach found that self-enhancement is related to overt and covert narcissism, hypersensitivity, low resilience, and high defensiveness (Kwan et al., 2008). Together, these findings support the claim that self-enhancement bias is a mixed blessing (see also Bonanno et al. 2005; Paulhus 1998; Robins and Beer 2001).

Furthermore, the componential approach to self-enhancement bias hints that the question of whether self-perception bias is good or bad for adjustment may be too simple a question to ask, because there are multiple components in self-perception. If we are to understand how self-enhancement relates to adjustment, other components in self-perception must be included in the research design.

Recall our earlier example of four singers: They demonstrate several different ways that individuals can engage in self-illusion: Some have overly-positive views of themselves, and the others have overly negative views of themselves. Moreover, some self-enhancers have more socially desirable qualities than others. Possessing other socially desirable qualities such as merit and benevolence compensates for the social costs of self-enhancement (Kwan et al. 2008). People may still like self-enhancers if they are talented and skilled.

In particular, self-enhancers may excel in the competitive environment, where self-enhancers can easily mask their self-centered nature. One of the most accomplished professional boxers of all time, Muhammad Ali, is a perfect example of this kind of adaptive self-enhancement. He publicly self-enhanced long before he was recognized as the world champion. He once said, "I am the greatest. I said that even before I knew I was" (Johnson 2008). "I figured if I said it enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest" (Sayid 2002). The devastating effects of his showmanship and self-promotion on his opponents are well-documented, as he famously intimidated the competition. His self-enhancement would not have been effective without simultaneously possessing a high degree of ability. Ali's successful career is a prime example of the benefit of combining self-enhancement and ability. Perhaps self-enhancement could be viewed as an adaptive strategy to be applied when needed.

Conversely, self-enhancement by a poorly performing competitor would be ineffective, since his or her boasting cannot be supported by actual merit. Take Chadna, for example, who assumed she got one of the highest score but

in reality did not even make the group. Her combination of self-enhancement and low merit did not provide a personal advantage in the competition.

Self-enhancement can be harmful to one's relationship. In collaborative situations, an inflated sense of one's ability may initially help the other group members to feel enthusiastic about the task and work hard. For example, if the four girls in our example chose to form their own singing group, Deepa's confidence in herself may initially make the other girls feel more confident and help them to deal with the stresses of starting their own group. On the other hand, though, grandiosity is likely to alienate an individual from friends and fellow team-members. Deepa's over-confidence and low opinions of others might be damaging to the group's rapport.

Self-enhancement bias hurts group performance in the long run. Overinflated perceptions of one's status in a group lead to dislike by other group members. Since the dislike may lead to detrimental consequences in terms of working relationships, the importance of maintaining belongingness within the group may erode self-enhancement. Indeed, a recent study using the componential approach found little self-enhancement bias of one's status in groups (Anderson et al. 2008). It is essential to accurately perceive one's status in a group in order to cooperate with other members and help overall group performance (Anderson et al. 2008). Furthermore, self enhancement bias is related to lower leadership performance among a group of Finnish military cadets in an officer training program (Lönnqvist et al. 2008).

Thus far, researchers have applied the componential approach to address a long-standing issue of whether self-enhancement bias impacts adjustment positively or negatively. Findings show that the link between self-enhancement and adjustment depends on the way we conceptualize self-enhancement. Furthermore, these studies enable a better understanding of the interaction between self-enhancement bias and other components of self-perception, and the effects of this interaction on adjustment. The social costs of self-enhancement bias are offset by socially desirable qualities, thus explaining why self-perception bias sometimes appears to be positive and sometimes negative for adjustment. The nature of the context plays a pivotal role in whether self-enhancement bias is adaptive or maladaptive. A competitive environment that turns a blind eye to self-centeredness may be the perfect breeding ground for self-enhancers.

Limitations and Future Directions

Like previous research on self-enhancement, our componential approach has focused on surveys and ratings of quantifiable measures. There are, however, different ways

to understand a person. One way to understand a person is by means of narratives. Dan P. McAdams's (2006; 2008) research on redemptive self illustrates how this can be done. The redemptive self is a concept framed as a story. This story contains a person's life history, and how he or she came to be his or her current self. A typical storyline depicts the narrator at an early age acknowledging others' sufferings which he did not have to suffer, and learns that he is special since he is not subjected to the same sufferings others are experiencing. As he moves through life, he faces hardships and obstacles, which are successfully overcome and transformed into valuable lessons. Through this life journey, the redeemer achieves enlightenment, emancipation, recovery, upward social mobility, and/or the actualization of the good inner self (i.e., redemptive self).

Could we extend the componential approach to study redemptive self over time? Our conception of self-enhancement (as well as the two previous conceptions) did not include "the temporal dimension of human experience" (Albert 1977, pp.485). Indeed, research shows that people compare themselves to themselves over time, such as to their former or future selves (e.g., Wilson and Ross 2001). This temporal-comparison conception of self-enhancement traces its root to Albert (1977) who postulated "a process of comparison that goes on only within a single individual [who] might compare a description of himself now with a description of himself in the past or future" (p. 485). Just like Albert extended Festinger's social-comparison theory by adding a temporal dimension, we can expand our componential approach to incorporate time as a third dimension in addition to perceiver and target. This three-dimensional model and research design would include how multiple perceivers perceive multiple targets (including the self) at multiple times; in this multi-level model, time is a fixed effect (e.g., how Avani perceives Deepa and herself ten years ago, now, and ten years into the future).

This extended version of our model would allow us to conceptualize and investigate within a single framework various forms of self-enhancement identified in the literature, such as the redemptive self or the tendency to see oneself more positively in the present than in the past. This extended model would also facilitate connections and integration with the literature on redemptive self and development/aging (e.g., Fleeson and Heckhausen 1997), allowing issues such as whether older people can redeem themselves and achieve enlightenment, perhaps perceiving others more benevolently (Ps) and showing less enhancement bias for the self (Rss).

Extending the Componential Approach to Self-Esteem

The componential approach can be applied to self-esteem as well (see Kwan et al. 2009). No other construct like self-

esteem has been so inextricably linked to personal competence, psychological adjustment, and social problems. A recent controversy has surrounded the values of self-esteem as a predictor of adjustment. For example, some studies showed that people with high self-esteem tend to show high levels of aggression (e.g., Pappas & O'Carroll, 1998), whereas other studies found that people with low self-esteem tended to show aggression (e.g., Donnellan et al. 2005; Paulhus et al. 2004). Thus, the evidence on the relation between self-esteem and its value is inconclusive.

These conflicting findings might in fact be a product of different forms of self-esteem, some of which may be positively associated with adjustment while others may be negatively associated with adjustment. In effect, the heterogeneity in the constituents of self-esteem obscures its precise value. If we are going to promote self-esteem as a means to bettering our children, we should be sure that we are promoting the correct aspects of it. The success of previous programs of self-esteem intervention has been no more than partial, in part because it is difficult to differentiate the healthy components of self-esteem from the defensive components.

Self-esteem is a form of self-perception, thus including various components. The componential approach to self-esteem explicates the components in self-esteem and examines their unique function. Kwan et al. (2009) identified three sources of self-esteem: benevolence, merit, and bias. Accordingly, people with high self-esteem exhibit at least one of three main features: they are either high in benevolence (always regarding people kindly), high in merit (actually deserving or efficacious), or biased (having an overly positive view of themselves). The three parts of this componential approach to self-esteem can be seen as analogous to the three components of self-perception outlined above: benevolence is another way of looking at the perceiver effect, merit is the target effect, and bias is the self-relationship effect.

An interesting direction for future research is to apply the componential approach to formalize the components in different types of self-esteem. A key question in the literature is whether implicit self-esteem and explicit self-esteem are qualitatively different from each other. We know a little about the exact nature of both types of self-esteem, but they typically show a weak relation with each other. A better understanding of the components of global self-esteem might help resolve the puzzle about the disassociation between the two types of self-esteem. Implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem might contain different components, making it difficult to compare them using a common framework and methodology. The componential approach might offer a psychological account for the similarities and differences between these two types of self-esteem within the same conceptual framework.

Kwan et al. (2009) also attempted to examine whether these sources hold true for other cultures. They found that individuals in China, a culture that is drastically different from America, derive their self-esteem from the same three sources. Future research should replicate these findings in other cultures and examine whether the sources of self-esteem are universal and if so, what is the nature of the universality.

In addition to race and ethnicity, religion is important in the development of self-views. In the *Curse of the Self*, Leary (2004) addresses how the mitigated self hinders the enriching quest for spirituality and magnanimity. Across a number of moral doctrines, the self-centeredness of self-enhancement is a “curse” to spiritual insight, modesty and religious behavior. The inner monologue of the self generates an egocentric reality that impedes on seeing the ultimate reality (in a divine manner). Clinging to the current identity of the self also complicates the acquisition of a spiritual transformation that some religious traditions teach as salvation, redemption, or enlightenment. Traces of religious visionaries throughout history in Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism have noted the ego driven self interrupts this spiritual realization, and transformation. Indeed, Leary (2004) makes a case for Western religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam to have also confronted the problems with the self. All these and many more indigenous religions and moral beliefs essentially teach that one needs to be selfless to reach the divine.

The Eastern religions' solution in becoming enriched without an egoic self is by quieting the self. One example of this Eastern conception of the enriched self is Siddhartha Gautama (a.k.a., “Buddha”), whose doctrine of *anatman*, or no self, concentrated on current feelings and perceptions, rather than viewing the self as having a fixed existence. In this manner, human suffering no longer exists when there is no fixed self to protect and preserve. Present followers of Buddha practice Zen to eradicate self-focused thoughts and give complete attention to current actions, living life in the moment. This can be done by the practice of mindfulness, which focuses on the present and disengages from the “inner monologue” that enhances anxiety or creates internal judgments. Rather the idea of mindfulness is to attend to the current sensations, perceptions, and actions (sometimes through meditation, sensory overload, or mysticism) to keep the self quiet. This results in a deeply grounded sense of self that is experientially aware. Self enhancement, on the other hand, is contingent on validation by others or influenced by comparisons to others. Theory and research suggests that quieting the self decreases the intra and interpersonal costs of self enhancement. The “quieting” of the self really is a disengagement from self-concern—the worries, plans, evaluations, and feelings.

This Buddhist philosophy has previously been examined in research on self-perception. Neff (2003) drew upon Buddhist philosophy to examine self-compassion and characterized it as a stable source of positive attitude toward the self. Self-compassion encompasses being in touch with and open to one's own emotions, being accepting and nonjudgmental with regard to one's failings, and believing that one is part of a common human experience.

One source that we have identified is a positive attributional style that may be independent of objective reasons, which we term *benevolence* in our componential approach to self-esteem. Its non-evaluative nature buffers the self from negative judgments. Benevolence is closely related to the concept of compassion in Eastern Philosophy and may be generalized, not merely restricted to the self (Dalai and His Holiness 2002). In essence, benevolence involves positive attitudes toward the self, others, and humanity.

According to the Buddhist teachings of the Dalai and His Holiness (2002), compassion arises from the realization that “our very existence and well-being are a result of the cooperation and contributions of countless others” (p. 9). A compassionate attitude helps people to deal with frustration and failure by recognizing oneself as part of a larger existence. Perhaps a key to mental health in a competitive world is to strike a balance between self-improvement and self-compassion.

Conclusions

Most previous studies of self-enhancement fall into two distinct sets, each conceptualizing self-enhancement bias in the context of a different research tradition. The componential approach to self-enhancement integrates these two distinct perspectives in research on self-enhancement bias. Since the publication of Kwan et al. (2004), researchers are increasingly aware of the distinction between the two previous conceptions of self-enhancement (Zuckerman and O'Loughlin 2006; Menon and Thompson 2007). A number of subsequent researchers have adopted the componential approach in self-perception research (e.g., Anderson et al. 2006; Borkenau and Mauer 2006; Anderson et al. 2008; Lönnqvist et al. 2008). More importantly, researchers have joined the call for more attention to the value of conceptualizing self-perception in terms of components (Cacioppo et al. 2007; De Los Reyes and Kazdin 2006; Gramzow et al. 2008; Kenny, et al. 2006; Sedikides and Gregg 2008). The theory of self-perception is inextricably linked to its measurement. The componential approach provides a conceptual framework for defining the key theoretical terms and components, as well as a roadmap for future research on self-perception and its relation to adjustment.

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