Women's Self-Concept and the Effects of Positive or Negative Labeling Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

When people assign labels to one another, it may actually reflect how they perceive themselves. This study looks at how a woman's self-concept affects her labeling behaviors. It was hypothesized that women with a low self-concept would have the tendency to label others negatively. We predicted that women with an overall low self-concept would be more likely to label others negatively in terms of likeability and life appeal. Analyses suggest that participants with a high self-concept see the more traditional role as limiting their possibilities of self-expression and countering their achieved sense of self; and thus respond negatively.

Labeling theory states that people tend to act in accordance with the labels that others assign to them. When a person is assigned a label they tend to view themselves and act in such a way that promotes them to be labeled in that way. For example, when people label juveniles as delinquent, they tend to act in ways that reinforce the label they are given. In a study done by Liu (2000), delinquent youth were shown to be involved in more delinquent acts when parents labeled them as delinquent. These results suggest that both perceived and actual labeling by parents increase the likelihood of subsequent delinquent youth activities.

Research has established that one negative label can lead to successive negative labels. For example, social deviants who were labeled negatively by others were also labeled as less attractive (Kowner, 1998). The research suggests that initially we tend to categorize others according to the information we have about them. If this information is negative, we will perceive their other characteristics as negative as well. Not only do labels affect us socially, but they also affect us psychologically. People who are labeled negatively by their peers tend to be more depressed, have a lower self-esteem, and have an external locus of control. They may also be more likely to use drugs or alcohol and contribute to deviant acts because of the labels they are given (Downs & Rose, 1991). Overall, understanding factors that affect labeling will be helpful to psychology's understanding of labeling and its outcomes.

Self Concept

One factor that may affect how we perceive and label others is how we perceive and label ourselves. Self-concept is defined as the combination of perceptions and values that an individual believes to be true of their own self (Bukatko & Daehler, 2001, p. 407). Theories on the development of self-concept tend to focus on an individual's view of self in comparison to others. For instance, symbolic interactionism argues that the self-concept is constructed through social interaction with others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1925, 1934 as cited in Campbell & Fehr, 1990). Other theorists have posited the idea of the "looking-glass self" where our self-concept is constructed through our imagination of how others perceive us (Cooley, 1902 as cited in Campbell & Fehr, 1990). Individuals who construct their self-concept this way are constantly evaluating how they perceive others to be evaluating them. Another perspective on self-concept argues that self-concept hinges on self-schemas. Self-schemas are defined as the specific ideas that we form about ourselves and help us organize our views of others (Green & Sedikides, 2001). People form self-schemas in the areas of life that are important to them (Markus, 1977 as cited in Hawkins, von Hippel, & Schooler, 2001). For instance, someone with a positive outlook or an optimistic schema is likely to be satisfied with who they are and rely on positive social interactions for support. Therefore, they may exert a lot of effort towards building new friendships, which reinforce their optimistic behavior. Regardless of the specifics of the individual theories, the development of self-concept is contingent on interactions with others.

Self concept and the impression of others

The tendency to judge another person based on initial internal feelings and perceptions is called impression formation. Self-concept may play a large role in the every day happenings of impression formation and labeling behaviors. Fiske & Von Hendy (1992) found that a person's flexible self-concept influences the process by which they formed impression of others. Researchers found that self-concept impacts the labels we apply to others (Beauregard & Dunning, 2000). In their study, participants were told they had either done poorly or spectacularly at a task. They were then asked to judge the performance of others on the same task. Participants who were given a

poor rating tended to judge both low and high performing targets as socially skilled. Those who were given a spectacular rating not only tended to judge high performing targets as socially skilled but also degraded the skills of the low achieving targets. This finding supports the idea that how one feels about themselves may be reflected in the judgments they have towards others. In particular, we may label another person negatively because we feel negatively about ourselves or we may label others positively because we feel positive about ourselves.

The purpose of our study was to look at the impact that self-concept has on impression formation and labeling behaviors. If individuals judge themselves through their interactions with others, these perceptions may be affected by how positive or negative they perceive themselves internally. For example, if someone views the world as a scary and dangerous place, a logical conclusion would be that people who occupy the world are scary and dangerous as well. By doing this study, society may better understand where social perceptions and impression formation stems from. Is it from our own insecurities or our need to feel like we belong even if it is at the cost of putting others down to make ourselves feel better? If we can better understand how self-concept effects our perception of others, we may be able to take a proactive approach to things such as stereotyping.

This study examined three different hypotheses in regard to self-concept and the labeling of others. The first hypothesis is that individuals with an overall high self-concept are more likely to use positive labeling behavior and have positive impressions toward others than are people with low self-concept. The second set of hypotheses examines how the portrayal of others may influence the development of perceptions. First, researchers hypothesize that participants with an overall high self-concept will perceive individuals more positively in terms of likeability and life appeal. The final hypothesis will look to see if participants with an overall low self-concept will perceive individuals more negatively in terms of likeability and life appeal. These hypotheses were applied to the three sub-types of self-concept including moral, physical, and personal self-concept.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 144 females enrolled at UW-La Crosse during the fall 2004 and spring 2005 semesters. The age groups of the women were 18-20 years (45%), 21-23 years (49.6%), and 24+ years (5.4%). The majority of women, 90.7%, were of Caucasian descent. Only women were used due to the fact that gender differences were expected. Women were also used to reduce the total number of participants needed to explore the central research question. Those respondents who were in the General Psychology class received course credit for their participation and the others received valuable experience in research.

Procedure

The participants completed a questionnaire that included a self-concept scale and three scenarios to which they responded. Informed consent was obtained before the participants began. Respondents were then debriefed at the conclusion of the study.

Participants were sorted into two categories regarding their self-concept (high or low) based on their responses to the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Roid & Fitts, 1988). High-low groups were also created with the three sub-types of self-concept that were looked at (moral, physical, and personal). In order to strengthen the effect, a tertiary split was used; the top 1/3 was considered "high" and the lower 1/3 was considered "low." Consequently, respondents needed to be over sampled in order to secure a reasonable sample size for the primary analysis.

The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS) is a 100-item scale designed to measure the level of self-concept in participants. The feelings of self-worth are summarized, as well as the degree to which the self-image is realistic and/or deviant. Sample items include questions regarding moral self-concept (I do what is right most of the time), physical self-concept (I have a healthy body), and personal self-concept (I have a lot of self control). Roid and Fitts (1988) reported the reliability of the TSCS to have a range of 0.60 to 0.90. The validity is significant as shown in the correlations between the TSCS and the MMPI or the Minnesota Multi-phasic Personality Inventory (Roid & Fitts, 1988).

The questionnaire measured traditional demographics including socioeconomic status, race, relationship status, age, year in school, and approximate grade point averages. Participants were also asked if they had been through any emotionally stressful events recently that may impact their answers on the study. Respondents read three neutral scenarios about women, which were based on three out of the four traditional sub-stereotypes of women. We tend to categorize women into sex object, career woman, and housewife (Deaux, Winton, & Crowley, 1985). Then they assessed the likeability and life appeal of each woman on a six point Likert-type scale. After that, the participants used bi-polar adjectives, such as lazy or ambitious, to evaluate the woman. Finally, they rated each woman with a liberal, feminist, conservative, and/or traditional label using the Likert scale.

RESULTS

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to indicate the level of approval for each woman. There was not a significant difference between the overall low and high self-concept groups in their ratings of the three women portrayed in the scenarios. The career women and the housewife did not produce any significant results in either self-concept group or between the three subscales. A significant difference was not found between the personal low and high self-concept groups in their ratings of the three women portrayed in the scenarios. The bi-polar adjectives and the labels for each scenario did not produce any significant results either.

Statistically significant results were found between the low moral self-concept ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.34$) and high moral self-concept ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.96$) groups. Participants with a low moral self-concept rated the life appeal of the women portrayed as a sex object (sexually liberated female) more highly, [$F(1,100) = 3.93$, $p = .05$]. The likeability rating of the sex object (sexually liberated female) was not significant for the moral self-concept groups. However, the likeability rating was significant for the physical self-concept groups. A significant difference between the low physical self-concept ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.26$) and the high physical self-concept ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.98$) group was found. Participants with a low physical self-concept rated the likeability of the women portrayed as a sex object (sexually liberated female) more highly, [$F(1,91) = 5.35$, $p = .02$].

DISCUSSION

Results suggest that overall levels of self-concept were not directly linked with the ratings of likeability and life appeal. Our hypothesis that individuals with an overall high self-concept will perceive individuals more positively in terms of likeability and life appeal was not supported. Individuals with a high self-concept rated the sex object (sexually liberated female) as less appealing and more unlikable. The high self-concept group also did not perceive the career woman or the housewife as more positive than the low self-concept group. Analyses suggest that participants with a high self-concept see the more traditional roles as limiting their possibilities of self-expression and countering their achieved sense of self; and thus respond negatively.

Those participants with a low self-concept tended to label the sex object more favorably than the high self-concept group. Participants who have a low moral self-concept may view themselves as inherently different than the more conservative norms set by society concerning the role of women. As such, they may identify with others of a similar disposition and view their behavior more favorably. Results suggest that participants with low physical self-concept may view themselves negatively or less desirable by society's standards of beauty and womanhood. Therefore, they may view the sexually liberated woman more likeably as this analysis represents an extension of their desire. The low self-concept individual might not feel that they can accomplish the things that the career woman or the housewife is doing so they identify with the sex object who has standards that are similar to their own.

Campbell & Fehr (1990) assert that people with a low self-esteem have vague notions of who or what they are. They are less confident in themselves and their relationships and this may cause them to respond more favorably to others who are like them. According to Beauregard & Dunning (2000), people alter their judgments of others to affirm the positive images of themselves and to avoid contradicting those self-images. In this case, individuals with a high self-concept may modify their perceptions of others to keep up their positive self-image. High self-view participants have more positive impressions of themselves (Baumgardner, 1990 as cited in Dunning & Beauregard, 2000). However, low self-view individuals do not have negative self-views, as much as subdued ones that they are less confident about (Baumeister, 1993 as cited in Dunning & Beauregard, 2000). The view of the events that the high self-concept individuals have is clearer than those with a low self-concept and it effects how they perceive others.

LIMITATIONS

The results prove that perceptions of the self play a role in the perceptions of others. Understanding the factors that affect labeling behaviors is helpful to psychology's understanding of labeling and the outcomes it produces. If we can get a better understanding of how self-concept effects our perception of others, we may be able to take a proactive approach to things such as stereotyping. More research should be done to gain knowledge about where the social perceptions and impression formation come from.

Future research would include more cross gender-based analyses, such as having male participants rate the female scenarios and males rate other males, as well as females rating male scenarios. Deaux, Winton, & Crowley (1985) can provide a guide as to how to do this because they examined women and men with both rating each gender. Additionally, more emphasis on development level (i.e. age differences) would create a better

understanding of how self-concept impacts person perception through the life span. Looking at perceptions through the life span among different cultures would be a possibility for the future also.

Another thing that could be looked at in more detail is the other self-concepts that the TSCS measures (i.e. social, academic, and family). Comparing each of these subscales to one another to find significance would be part of the research. Future researchers might also want to run an analysis on the specific bi-polar adjectives to see if any significant results would show up. They may want to find out if there are any significant correlations between the level of self-concept and the demographics, such as GPA, SES, or relationship status. Expanding on the labels or giving the participants the option to come up with their own labels would be another way to go about doing the research.

Current researchers had started with the idea of making more than three scenarios, a positive, a neutral, and a negative one for each of the three women for a total of nine. All of the scenarios could be given to everybody or one bunch of scenarios (i.e. the three neutral) could be given to a random group of people. Alternating with pictures by giving some groups pictures of the women and others just the text and then comparing the two groups to find any differences would be another possible option.

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