The Role of Concept of Self and Societal Expectations in Academic and Career Achievement

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Abstract

Concepts of self-esteem and confidence are attributes that affect the power of self or identity of a person such as one's ability to be successful in work. Many theorists have stated that the major variables that impact the self are an individual's core sense of self (who one is) and the environment or social relationships that affect a person (external settings and social context). However, recent theorists point out that the self is also influenced by a changing environment that encourages self-evaluation since each individual must adapt to changes in order to succeed. Attributes of self-concept are interrelated and interdependent, and each individual must maintain a positive concept of self when making career decisions and choices.

Introduction

In educational settings as well as corporate work environments, successful academic or career choices have involved one's self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Developing a positive concept of self includes having a strong sense of self that is adaptive to change and that has the ability to make decisions that contribute to self-confidence. Having a strong sense of self, as well as an honest self-evaluation, gives one the ability to make wise choices that can aid an individual in achieving personal success. Early theorists (Gergen, 1987; Kohut, 1977) have claimed that confidence built on experience and attaining a positive self-concept are linked to high achievement. Theories on self-concept in the workplace have become

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distinguished in the last half of the twentieth century, as depicted by various studies on this topic, and have continued to be popular today.

Societal expectations and the role of women in the workplace have affected many career choices of both men and women. As women became more prominent in the workplace in the 1970s, they were at first considered too caring, too feminine, and more involved in relationships than men; however, these biases or expectations have been changing slowly. During the 1980s, theorists found that relationships played a key role in self-concept and in the perceptions of one's capability for future success in careers. Variables such as social situations and personal achievements also influence one's own personal view of self or capabilities. Recent theorists such as Ormond (2008) proclaim that a "sense of self" involves feelings, judgments, and perceptions of who one is as a person while self-concept involved assessments of one's strengths and weaknesses. Others such as Woolfolk (2004) recognize that when one has to adapt to social relationships in changing environments, it also affects concept of self. What are the variables that can affect the concept of self? The following depicts theories from the twentieth century describing the concept of self and societal expectations in academic and career achievement.

Influences that Impact a Strong Sense of Self

During the early part of the twentieth century, some notions of self were viewed as separate from influences of social relationships and not as impacted by one's environment. Two of the early theories that studied and explored personal views or elements of self are: (a) Kohut's (1977) concept of a stable, consistent, and cohesive "self," and (b) Gergen's (1987) concept of a "self" that changes, depending on the social context. These conceptual perspectives have stated that the notion of a "core sense of self" has been a basic self-concept that can be built upon by various personal experiences and accomplishments throughout one's life span. As one develops through many stages, the personal experiences in both work and social arenas, as well as a supportive environment or external surroundings, affect one's internal view or concept of self, esteem, and confidence.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kohut (1977) expanded the view of self to include "a stable cohesive center of personality" upon which experiences are built and where the capacity to initiate action or attain coherence is derived. Kohut's theory or perspective emphasizes the roles of relationships and empathy in the development of the self and places

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importance on "the relatively enduring aspects of an individual's psychological state in which self-cohesion is firm," or where "the cohesion of the 'self' is not disturbed" (pp. 93-94). In addition to being stable and cohesive, Kohut's model views the "self" as having an important connection to the relational contexts and relationships of individuals throughout their development (Kahn, 1985). Various life experiences affect the concept of self, esteem, or confidence and are important factors in career or academic development. As individuals who perceive a strong sense of self succeed, this will contribute to their identity.

From a sociological perspective, Gergen's theory added that the development of "self" was dependent on the social context in which individuals derived their sense of selves from their perceptions of their social or work roles (Gergen, 1987, 1991). The early theories of Gergen and Kohut described an individual's "sense of self" as originating from subjective experiences. However, Gergen (1991) viewed the "self" as more anchored in a social context where an individual can have many identities, depending on the social context. For example, a person could be more feminine with certain friends and more masculine in other social contexts. Gergen's (1987) perspective proclaimed "knowledge of the self" as being maintained from social interactions where a person can manage a self-image or a given level of self-esteem. He concluded that understanding an individual required "comprehension of the social context" or "understanding community prior to establishing the grounds from which psychological construals are achieved" (Gergen, 1987, p. 60). Gergen advanced the concept of self from a more individualistic viewpoint to a more relational perspective that changes, depending on the environment or social contexts and expectations. Changing work situations or environments require individual social skills for success as well as maintenance of a "strong sense of self."

The development of a "sense of self" plays an important role in the maintenance of high or low self-esteem (Bednar & Peterson, 1995). Becoming an individual with a strong sense of self and confidence is important for success. Understanding the value of one's personal choices, surroundings, and people that influence career success are essential. Gergen's (1991) theory defined "self "in a social context, and he contended that people could be able to modify their self-concepts through changing not only external surroundings but also internal awareness as well. Maintaining a strong sense of self in changing situations is a challenge, and building self-esteem is inherent in the process.

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The two conceptual models of Kohut (1977) and Gergen (1987, 1991) have two different perspectives: one of a stable and cohesive "self" initiating action and one of a changing "self" in a particular social or work context; however, they both refer to the attributes of self (self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence) which are key elements for successful careers. The theories concerning concepts of self and relationships affect self-confidence and play an important role in the arena of academic and career development. A strong self fosters confidence when tasks are completed. The view that self-concept consists of a "stable sense of self" (Kohut, 1977) that is adaptable to a changing environment (Gergen, 1987) is key to achieving personal goals, leadership, and success in the work or academic environment. It is even more important in today's competitive and ever dynamic arena since views of self imply a changing self, adapting to a changing environment.

Students are faced with many internal or external barriers when deciding on academic or career choices. A fundamental psychological assumption has been that successful academic and career development depends upon a positive self-concept or self-esteem (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Self-esteem refers to how one regards or judges how one feels about oneself, and self-concept refers to one's cognitive perceptions about academic or career achievements that change in diverse situations (Woolfolk, 2004). Self-confidence refers to feeling capable or having the ability to complete tasks well, and the key attributes pertaining to self-esteem and self-confidence are found to be important for success (Northcutt, 1991). It is unknown whether higher self-esteem and success cause career orientation or whether successful career pursuits cause higher self-esteem (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). It is known that many attributes (both internal and external views of self) impact self-concept or confidence and affect the maintenance of a strong "sense of self" in changing environments.

The Concept of Self in Career and Academic Achievement

Scholars have suggested that many internal barriers such as personal attributes, esteem, and confidence as well as external barriers such as gender bias, cultural bias, and societal expectations prevent individuals from attaining their career goals (Northcutt, 1991; Wallace, 1994). Self-confidence pertains to a perceptive consciousness of one's power and ability to succeed, and self-evaluation is inherent in the ongoing process of who we feel we are (Woolfolk, 2004). Honesty also plays an important role in self-

evaluation, and the ability to be acutely aware of reality or the situation one is in aids this process. Theorists such as Santrock (2008) point out that the concept of self has variations; however, many people use them intermittently and do not distinguish any differences or subtle aspects of self.

The discussion of self and self-concept pertaining to women's career development was prevalent in early business literature (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Nelson, 1996). Career women during the 1980s and 1990s became popular subjects for research studies on developmental and vocational choice governed by self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence. However, Gecas (1982) felt that the evaluation of self-concept was a serious problem for researchers and during this time was an obstacle in gaining valid or cumulative knowledge on this topic. Several career development researchers (Gecas, 1982; Gecas & Mortimer, 1987; Gergen, 1987), writing from a social psychological perspective, examined an integrated perspective of the "self." This view considered social changes that affected an individual's self-concept in one's environment or social context in order to establish a more accurate method of measuring self-concept.

Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) summarized their studies on career women in a chart, listing several factors that had facilitated women's career development. These factors included: (a) individual variables (high ability, high self-esteem, strong academic self-concept), (b) background (working mother, supportive father, role models), (c) education (higher education and continuation in mathematics), and (d) home lifestyle (single or late marriage and no or few children). From their comprehensive review of these factors, two of the major individual variables identified by Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) that had facilitated careers are high self-esteem and strong academic self-concept. How these variables or factors interrelated seemed to be unknown; however, it was noted that perception of background, self-esteem, and educational accomplishments were evident as key to concepts of self.

Betz and Fitzgerald's (1987) work had included studies and surveys on the career or professional choices that young adults made when choosing careers. They found that most young women had chosen academic studies which did not include science and mathematics (known factors contributing to high self-esteem). Also, they found that those in female-dominated careers, such as education or secretarial work, had avoided course work in math, resulting in limited career opportunities. Thus, women who had avoided math and science courses could have had lower self-esteem and may have lacked self-confidence, limiting their career choices. Betz and Fitzgerald also noted that the manner in which these factors had interacted

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and had affected women's career development may have been poorly understood and had suggested further investigation. Currently, more women are enrolled in math and science courses; however, the stigma for women to take these courses and excel still exists.

Later studies by Northcutt (1991) depicted career women (recognized as successful by their peers) with various personal characteristics contributing to success. In addition, Northcutt interviewed a portion of participants in her sample and found that successful career women then had high self-esteem and were high achievers. Thus, she concluded: (a) male career development theories were not applicable to females; (b) successful females in male-dominated careers had additional common characteristics such as independence and aggression in addition to perseverance and hard work; and (c) the perceived characteristics of a successful career woman included achiever, self-confidence, and risk-taker. She also concluded that the personal characteristics of successful women in male-dominated careers were similar to the perceived executive male characteristics in large corporations. While Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) and Northcutt (1991) found in their studies that career men and women were then similar in their self-evaluation of self-esteem or self-confidence, some of the studies prior to the 1980s on self-concept showed that females reported less confidence than males in academic and career-related capabilities (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). It was found in later studies that achieving self-confidence was an important factor for women to continue to be risk-takers and high achievers (Swiss, 1996).

Gecas and Mortimer (1987) defined identity as an "objective definition of self with continuous self-conceptions that anchored the concept of self to social systems." They viewed self-concept as a multifaceted phenomenon where individuals defined themselves via attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences along with their evaluative (self-esteem) and affective components (Gecas & Mortimer, 1987). Betz & Fitzgerald (1987) agreed that pursuing self-regard or self-esteem was an important goal of every individual in any environment. Through various studies, self-concept, self-esteem, values of self, as well as self-awareness have been declared as important components for success.

The Role of Societal Expectations in Personal Success

The concept of self in relation to the environment and societal expectations plays a key role in academic and career objectives as well as in

individual achievements of personal goals. Gergen's (1991) research emphasized the importance of the social context or social system as connected to one's self-definition not only in identity but also, in terms of action and context. He posited that the same action of an individual may be different in various contexts and that characteristics which attributed to a person could change, depending on the environment. The social context can also affect one's motivation which could be intrinsic depending on internal desire to succeed, or extrinsic, depending on the external environment or situation (Powell, 2006). With regard to career and academic development, understanding the individual in relation to one's environment contributes to solving the puzzle of success.

In their study on psychosocial development, Caffarella and Olson (1993) found that the theme of a "sustaining power of interpersonal relationships" was central in the self-concept of women and also in their identity development or self-perception. Except for the theme of relationships, they stated that individual women have experienced very different developmental expectations. They proposed that these differences could be due to different "senses of selves," to varied experiences with "attachment and separation" conflicts (for example, different caring relationships), or to varied experiences with career goals and accomplishments. They stated that self-concept could be linked to social relationships and identity. Societal expectations could then play a main role in presenting external barriers to career women in the workplace.

Theorists have debated whether the value of self is internal or external, depending on what other people think of them (Gecas & Mortimer, 1987; Gergen, 1991; Kohut, 1977). Studies have shown that successful career women rely on internal self-value or respect rather than on seeking respect from external sources or other people (Northcutt, 1991; Wallace, 1994). However, Brockner's (1988) study showed that individuals with low self-esteem were more influenced by their surroundings. In some cases, self-evaluation referred to the value placed on self-concept in a social context (Gecas & Mortimer, 1987) while at other times, self-esteem was perceived as self-evaluation by experiencing oneself (Betz & Fiztgerald, 1987). In any case, experiences of challenging opportunities were important for career men and women to maintain a high level of self-esteem and to build self-confidence or beliefs that they could complete tasks successfully.

Some authors (Gergen, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Nelson, 1996) had cited gender differences based on male/female personality traits, socialization differences, and expectations as possible obstacles for personal success.

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Gergen (1991) pointed out that in Gilligan's (1982) theory of ethics of caring, women had seen themselves as existing in a web of relationships held together by "bonds of caring." In Gilligan's (1982) descriptions, identity was combined in a context of relationship or in terms of a "social context." According to Wallace's (1994) study, certain perceived gender differences did not appear when comparing executive males and females. Wallace (1994) concluded that there was no consistent evidence that males and females differed in cognitive style, creativity, independence, general self-esteem, empathy, or sociability. However, it was noted that the impact of concept of self, confidence, and societal expectations affected one's self-esteem and thus one's successful endeavors. During the last few decades, research has shed light on the evolving self from a "strong stable or cohesive sense of self," to a self defined mostly by social relationships, and ultimately to a changing self, depending on a dynamic work environment to which one must adapt in order to survive.

Summary

Many theorists have claimed that having a developed sense of self and an understanding of one's talents and skills, while adapting to changing environments, could contribute to having a successful career. It is evident that having a strong sense of self that is consistent, yet adaptable, as well as awareness and confidence, can assist individuals in overcoming barriers and making the right career choice or decision. It is clear that gender socialization in the environment also plays an important role in the development of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence, which affects academic or career achievement.

The attributes of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence are interrelated and how they interact is important in one's educational and career development. As a result of research studies, the concept of self can be defined in terms of both stability of self and adaptability to a changing environment as individuals develop. Also, maintaining a supportive environment and social relationships help individuals develop a realistic perception of self and foster personal development and self-evaluation. The choices one makes and the tasks one accomplishes add to the "self" feeling confident to undertake more challenging assignments that can give direction to successful endeavors. The bridge to success is built by one's core concept of self, or sense of self, and the social relationships one chooses to support it.

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