

1 Restructuring the ecology of the self: a framework for self-concept change

Stability and change in a person's answer to the question 'Who am I?' vary throughout the life cycle. While at some points in life continuity may prevail, at others this question requires radically new answers. The loss of another person, a change in living conditions, or entrance into a new life stage can change the self-concept. The study of the processes of the self-concept undergoing change also provides information about the nature of the self-concept. I will present here the idea of the self-concept existing as part of an ecological system, and describe and study the processes of continuity and change under changing person–environment relationships.

A summary of the ideas and bases of the research programme will be given first. It should help evaluate the relevance of later, more detailed discussions of theories and findings from psychological and sociological social psychology and their implications for an ecological approach to self-concept change.

A person's understanding of self is acquired and developed through social experience. This basic idea has guided almost all theory and empirical research on the self-concept in modern psychology, beginning with William James's (1890) discussions of the self, and elaborated upon by Cooley's (1902) conception of the 'looking-glass self' and G. H. Mead's (1934) major work *Mind, self, and society*. Recently, more empirical tests (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979) and theoretical elaborations (Stryker & Statham, 1985) build on these foundations. From this common basis, psychologically orientated social psychologists are concentrating on the relationship between 'mind' and 'self', i.e. cognitive structure and self-concept, whereas sociological social psychologists are interested in 'self' and 'society', i.e. self-concept and social structure.

The ecology of the self

The present approach will make use of this basic idea and draw together several lines of thinking about the sources and symbols of social experiences and their meaning for the self-concept. The constituents of the self, namely others, environments, and things that provide, mediate, and perpetuate

2 *Restructuring the ecology of the self*

social experience, will be described as the *ecology of the self*. The self both shapes this ecological system and is a reflection of it. Development and change happen within the ecology of the self; therefore, to understand change, the stabilizing and changing forces have to be understood not only as existing within the person but as encompassing the surroundings of that person, too.

The constituents of the ecology of the self are *others*, as the sources of direct social experience, *objects*, as symbols and representations of social experiences, and *environments*, as the setting for social experiences. They are reflected in *self-related cognitions*.

The first function of *others* for the concept of self is the reflection of and reaction to one's actions, both verbal and non-verbal. These ideas are rooted in the writings of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934). For Cooley, the reactions of others to one's own actions provide a mirror for the self. For Mead, the self develops by mirroring society. Both the self and societal rules, expectations, and reactions thus depend upon each other, and one is unthinkable without the other. Exchange with others is therefore the central process by which the self can be maintained as well as changed, as has also been shown by more recent research (for example Archer & Earle, 1983; Backman, 1985; Swann, 1983).

In a more abstract way, the self can be described as the internal organization of external roles of conduct, for instance, in the prescription of roles that can be used to form one's *own* course of action (Becker, 1968). Another function of social interaction is thus to provide the role models that may be incorporated into one's own concept of self. Continued development and change of the self needs exposure to alternative models of conduct or to the novel combination of existing ones. In all instances, the exposure to and interaction with others provides a person with the experiences necessary for development and change.

While social interactions are thought to be central to the dynamics of the self-concept, others do not necessarily have to be physically present to provide social experiences, nor do they have to exist as a concrete person. Social experiences are generalized and symbolized in various forms: in rules and expectations, for instance, but also in physical objects.

Objects may serve several functions for the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). For many social experiences they are the necessary social tools, such as a record player for a dance, and can thus be prerequisites for acquiring a certain component of the self-concept, such as a dancer, a skier, or a music-lover. They can also function as the representation of past social experiences to stabilize and maintain those aspects of self that are related to the past. For instance, a photo album or memorabilia can serve this function. A third function of objects is that they can be symbolic of the self, such as the contents of one's bookshelf or china cabinet.

Stability and change

3

Such symbols of the self serve either to strive toward or maintain a certain status of self (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), or to present a desired image of oneself to others (Schlenker, 1980). Objects are thus able to provide or reflect social experiences and have to be considered as elements in the ecology of the self.

Environments or settings also have to be considered. They provide the place for a person's experiences or actions and can also be symbols of one's identity (Proshansky, 1978). Settings can inherently provide societal rules of conduct (Barker, 1965). Like certain objects, environments also provide prerequisites for self-concept-relevant behaviour, such as a mountain for a skier or a sea for a sailor. But it is not only natural and macro-environments which are relevant for the self-concept. Environments can also be arranged, for instance, when furnishing a flat. The arrangement and creation of environments can be a reflection of the self-concept and thus serve to stabilize it. Another stabilizing function of the environment can be in its use and arrangement to allow for the protection of privacy (Altman, 1976; Kruse, 1980).

While none of these aspects has been neglected by psychological theorizing and research on the nature and function of the self-concept, they have usually been considered separately. When they are taken together, however, the picture of an ecological system emerges. The self-concept exists in interdependence with its ecology of others, objects, and environments. As long as the ecology of the self is stable, the self-concept will be stable and strive toward maintenance. Self-concept change, on the other hand, results from an imbalance in the ecology of the self that leads toward restabilization under different ecological conditions, a restructuring of the ecology of the self.

Stability and change

What are some of the conditions for the stability of the ecology of the self, and under which circumstances do these change? In the area of social relationships, the interdependence between the stability of the self and the stability of one aspect of its ecology can be exemplified by extending the concept of commitment to an identity. For instance, Becker (1960) points out that a person's commitment to a social relationship is stabilized through a system of 'side bets': giving up a commitment to a social relationship impacts not only that one relationship but others that are linked to it. For instance, a commitment as 'husband' can be tied to a number of other relationships, such as 'son-in-law' or 'stepfather'. A social commitment thereby stabilizes a system of social relationships which in turn contribute to the person's concept of self.

Centrality of a social relationship to the self-concept can now be defined

4 *Restructuring the ecology of the self*

through the number of other social relationships that are influenced or tied into place by this one commitment. As long as the central social commitment stays in place, a larger network of social role-identities that define the self-concept is stable. The termination of one central social commitment destabilizes the social system, and opens the way for changing the self-concept. Of course, several commitments of this kind can exist with little linkage between their related systems, a fact that James (1890) early recognized. Social relationships are organized into several subsystems, the nodes of which are formed by social commitments.

The above constitutes an analysis on a more sociological level, but the entering or leaving of a social commitment can be shown to have implications for stability and change of the self-concept on a more psychological level of analysis as well. The beginning or end of a central social commitment is usually based on an evaluation of the self-concept, both by oneself and by a significant other. A social commitment is entered into after both partners have implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, evaluated each other's past performance in an attempt to project this past into the future. Therefore, the opportunity to enter a central social commitment constitutes a reinforcement for the self, based on a positive evaluation. On the other hand, the self is being questioned by an evaluation that can lead to the end of a commitment. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with oneself will be the immediate consequence. Thus, satisfaction with self combines the effects of social structural stabilization and destabilization and of the concurrent psychological evaluation.

If social relationships are destabilized and the self-concept is questioned, the whole ecology of the self is affected. On the way to restructuring this ecology, the individual starts a search for new aspects that can be incorporated into the concept of self through exposure to new social contexts, social activities, and ultimately the possibility for new social commitments. Social experiences exposed to in that process are central to all self-concept-related processes.

The process of exposure to new aspects for the self can affect all dimensions of the ecology of the self. If some remain the same, self-concept change can only be limited. The more components of the ecology of the self are involved, the more complete the process of self-concept change can be.

Changes in the ecology of the self can either be self-related and direct, or externally imposed and indirect. A change in a central social commitment is an example of a self-related change in the ecological system of the self as it directly reinforces or questions a person's self-concept. A reinforcement of a person's self-concept will lead to self-concept maintenance and possibly enhancement processes. As these are related to the ecology of the self,

Stability and change

5

the person tries either to preserve the ecological system or to resist changes in the environment that could lead to self-concept destabilization.

Changing environments are examples of externally imposed changes in the ecology of the self. If in the face of externally imposed change the self-concept is neither reinforced nor questioned, self-concept change through situational adjustment will take place. Situational adjustment was the only course of self-concept change described by Becker (1964). The current analysis adds another mode of self-concept change, namely the active restructuring of the ecology of the self. It emphasizes the agentic element in self-concept change.

An active pursuance of change consists of making use of the opportunities a new social and physical environment affords to structure a new ecology of the self and thereby change central aspects of the self-concept. Active pursuance of change can result from a destabilization of the ecological system concurrent to a questioning of the self, or from making selective use of those new elements that can enhance the existing concept of self.

In the face of changes in the social and physical environment another factor contributing to self-related evaluations and processes can be identified. Being a stranger in a new environment or generally being separated as a figure from a new ground focuses attention on oneself. A theory of self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) identifies conditions and consequences of self-focused attention. In a new environment, the self-concept is made salient until the once-new environment becomes familiar. A familiar environment is one where the self-concept and its ecological system are stabilized. While this is not meant to imply that all conditions leading to self-focused attention are those eliciting self-concept change, it can be stated that changes in the ecology of the self-concept lead to self-focused attention and thus facilitate self-concept-related processes such as change or maintenance, whichever is required by the current evaluation of the self-concept.

The basic elements of the theoretical framework underlying the research reported in this book can now be summarized: The self-concept develops and exists in interaction with its social and physical environment to form an ecological system for the self. Certain factors serve to stabilize this ecology, above all social commitments. These are central to the self as they involve and bind together a number of social relationships. Changes in central social commitments either reinforce or question the self-concept.

A questioned self-concept can only lead to self-concept change if the ecological system of the self affords the opportunity. This can be facilitated by external changes in the environment of which the person can make use. Making use of such opportunities allows an *agentic* process of self-concept change to take place. External changes without self-related events lead to change through adjustment.

6 *Restructuring the ecology of the self*

For persons satisfied with their concept of self changes in the ecology of the self that do not support the present self-concept may be resisted. In that case, the only changes which will be considered are those that connect the existing self-concept to new elements (Hayden, 1979). Then, only those new aspects from the environment that support and enhance the present self-concept may be incorporated.

An impediment to agentic self-concept change is the self-imposed restriction which usually accompanies low self-esteem. This poses the question whether a person who is dissatisfied with his or her self-concept will indeed make agentic use of his or her opportunities, or can only be an agent of his or her own fate from a position of strength. As low satisfaction with oneself, low self-esteem may initially inhibit an active search of the environment for new aspects of the self-concept, whereas if one has high self-esteem, one is more able to take advantage of new structures in one's social and physical environment to enhance one's present self-concept.

In general, a person dissatisfied with him- or herself may be slower in making use of new opportunities, and may then embark upon a more general search for new elements of the self-concept before they finally become incorporated. A person who is satisfied with his or her current concept of self may, when in a new environment, more selectively consider those elements of the ecological system that enhance the present self-concept by building on it. In one case, the direction of change is open, and change becomes increasingly agentic. In the other, the direction of change is predetermined. In both cases, self-concept change requires a rearrangement of the ecological system in which the self-concept exists.

Overview

The above presents a concise summary of the theoretical basis and approach that is taken in this book. In what follows, the bases for these assumptions will be reviewed in detail, always from the perspective of what the work reviewed means in the light of an ecological approach to self-concept change. As should have become evident, the roots of the above model can be found in diverse areas of psychological and sociological social psychology, personality psychology, and environmental psychology.

At the same time, empirical research related to such a theoretical approach has to meet certain criteria. These criteria are related to ecological validity, to the necessity to evaluate long-term processes, to the assessment of person–environment relationships in the face of changes, and to the concentration on social process rather than on changes in outcome. Since all these criteria cannot be met by employing one particular method, a multi-method approach has been chosen. A separate chapter will discuss the

Overview

7

rationale of an ecological approach in method as it should complement an ecological approach in theory. Specific methods will be presented that are more likely to fulfil these requirements than other, perhaps more traditional, methods of self-concept research in social psychology.

A number of very diverse studies have been conducted in this research programme. All of them share the common theoretical assumptions as presented here and try to find empirical validation for the ecological approach to self-concept change. However, they do this using different designs and different methods, and studying different aspects of the change process. The multi-method approach also requires a multi-study approach. That way, no one study presented here should be considered by itself, but in the context of the whole research programme.

The methodological considerations and consequences will be discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes an initial study conducted to show the appropriateness of 'relocation' as a paradigm for investigating changes in person–environment relationships, and the relevance of changes in commitment for the form this process takes. The next three chapters look at self-concept change from a social-psychological and a sociological viewpoint. This has consequences for the measures to be employed. An ecological approach has to take the functions of the physical environment for the self-concept seriously, as reviewed in Chapter 8.

In Chapters 9–11, relocation is investigated from the anticipation phase through the initial time spent in a new environment up to about one year after the move. Chapter 12 reviews the role of relocation as a subject of psychological research and as a research paradigm for transitions in the person–environment relationship. The studies discussed in Chapter 13 do this in cross-sectional and quasi-experimental designs; those in Chapter 14 employ longitudinal designs and a variety of methods. Putting together the information provided from the programme of research, the Conclusion assesses the status of the theory and the place of an ecological approach in psychological research.

2 Method considerations for an ecological approach

An ecological approach in theory should be complemented by an ecological approach in method. What does this entail? Various answers could be given. The current research programme attempted to incorporate several ideas into the design of the research. Taken together, these should present one possible, ecological methodological approach appropriate to this research question of stability and change in an ecological context.

Relevant ideas such as the enhancement of ecological validity or the assessment of subjective experience cannot be expected to be fulfilled equally by one single method, nor can they be followed to the same degree in different kinds of studies. A multi-method approach has therefore been chosen, guided by the assumption that while no single method and no single study is able to fulfil all requirements, the combination of different methods in different studies can help approximate such an ideal.

The following principles were taken into consideration in the research project:

- Enhancement of ecological validity.

- Use of a naturalistic research paradigm allowing quasi-experimental research.

- Combination of multiple methods.

- Sampling procedures allowing access to varied populations and experiences.

Ecological validity

‘Ecological validity’ is a term that has been used with various meanings of varying degrees of precision. According to Brunswik’s (1949) definition, it refers to the occurrence and distribution of stimulus variables in the natural or customary habitat of an individual. A psychological method is ecologically valid to the extent that its stimulus variables are a representative sample of those in the individual’s habitat. This principle was combined by Brunswik (1952) with the postulate that one should study functional organism–environment relationships. This requires that ‘situational

Use of a naturalistic design

9

circumstances should be made to represent, by sampling or related devices, the general or specific conditions under which the organism studied has to function' (p. 30).

Brunswik's postulate extending the sampling requirements from persons to situations has methodological implications as far as the number of variables included in a research design is concerned. He conceived of representative designs as involving the selection or creation of stimulus conditions representative of the population of stimuli. However, the population of possible stimulus conditions and their configuration is rarely known. More recent methodological developments allow the sampling of experiences in natural situations. The random sampling of moments in individuals' lives *in situ* rather than sampling from situational stimuli to recreate the situation may be one of the best answers to the call for ecological validity. An appropriate method, experience sampling, will be described later in detail.

Use of a naturalistic design: relocation as a research paradigm

Self-concept change is a long-term process involving changes in the person–environment relationship. This basic statement underlies the theoretical approach of this work. It should therefore also be a starting point for the methodological approach that, if taken seriously, requires that change be studied in its *natural context*; and to understand the processes of change, *actual social experiences* have to be studied as they occur. If change has to be studied in a natural context, quasi-experimental use has to be made of naturally occurring changes in the person–environment relationship. A similar approach has, for instance, been taken by Wapner (1981; 1987) in his transitions-of-persons-in-environments paradigm. The rationale guiding this approach has been summarized by Hormuth (1984).

One of the main conditions for studying individual change in the face of change in the person–environment relationship is that the individual has the chance to influence and select from environmental opportunities, even create or recreate aspects of it. In the regular course of life, such opportunities are limited. Within a given social and geographical setting, a person's ecological system and the potential for social experiences within it are relatively fixed and can usually be changed only gradually.

The situation is different when the social and geographical setting changes, as is the case when persons move from one place to another, that is, in a relocation. A relocation usually constitutes a radical change from one social context and physical setting to another one, thereby providing the opportunity for change. In a new environment, the individual is exposed to new contacts and role models, acquires a new behavioural repertoire, and undergoes role transitions. The opportunity to seek out new and different aspects

10 *Method considerations*

of the self-concept is given. On the other hand, the maintenance of previously existing social contacts requires more effort, too, after a relocation: continuity becomes an active process. To provide for continuity, the individual has to actively maintain contact with the previous social environment. If stability is desired in spite of environmental changes (i.e. situational adjustment is resisted), the importance of previously existing social contacts may be increased and actively enhanced (for example through telephone calls, letter writing, or visits). Absolute continuity in the person–environment relationship is impossible. However, continuity in selected aspects can be approximated by the way one's personal environment is created, for instance through furniture or other long-term personal possessions. For all these reasons, relocation is an appropriate paradigm for the naturalistic study of self-concept change because it offers opportunities for change and maintenance.

In addition, relocation frequently occurs in connection with changes in one's place in the social structure, that is, the beginning or termination of a commitment. People move because they get married, because they start a new job, as a result of a separation, because they finish their education, or for a variety of similar reasons. Not all, but many of these changes involve changes in central social commitments.

The study of relocation under natural conditions makes difficult any causal conclusions about resultant changes in interaction patterns, roles, and self-concept. If change occurs, is it due to the intentional activity of the individual or to the necessity for situational adjustment?

The study of naturally occurring changes, as they take place in relocation, precludes the random assignment of individuals to conditions. Use has to be made instead of other natural control conditions, either between persons through comparisons with non-movers, or within persons over time as the degree of novelty of the environment changes. Generally, the study of naturally occurring change requires the implementation of *quasi-experimental* designs (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

Quasi-experimentation is a term referring to experimental designs that are not based on the random assignment of treatment and control groups. Rather, quasi-experimental designs rely on many methods, principally the use of nonequivalent control groups and multiple times of observation, in order to determine whether change occurred and to address the relative contribution of the treatment versus alternative explanations for the observed change.

(Hormuth, Fitzgerald, & Cook, 1985, p.210)

Quasi-experimentation does not just consist of specific research designs but of a variety of principles and techniques. They have in common that they are responses to threats to internal and external validity created by suboptimal research conditions (Cook, 1985; Hormuth, 1985).