

UNIT 7

The Self in Interpersonal Communication



UNIT TOPICS

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Self-Esteem

Attack Your Self-Destructive Beliefs
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Seek Out Nourishing People
Work on Projects That Will Result in Success

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UNIT 7

THE SELF IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

UNIT TOPICS

Who you are and how you see yourself influence the way you communicate with others and the way others communicate with you. Your self-concept, self-awareness, and self-esteem all play a significant role in your interpersonal interactions.

SELF-CONCEPT

You no doubt have an image of who you are; this is your self-concept. It consists of your feelings and thoughts about your strengths and weaknesses, your abilities and limitations. Your self-concept develops from at least three sources: (1) the image of you that others have and that they reveal to you, (2) the comparisons you make between yourself and others, and (3) the way you interpret and evaluate your own thoughts and behaviors.

OTHERS' IMAGES OF YOU

If you wished to see the way your hair looked, you would likely look in a mirror. But what would you do if you wanted to see how friendly or how assertive you are? According to Charles Horton Cooley's (1922) concept of the *looking-glass self*, you would look at the image of yourself that others reveal to you through the way they treat you and react to you.

You would look especially to those who are most significant in your life—to your *significant others*. As a child, you would look to your parents and then to your teachers. As an adult, you might look to your friends, romantic partners, and colleagues at work. If these significant others think highly of you, you will see this positive image of yourself reflected in their behaviors; if they think little of you, you will see a more negative image. These reflections that you see in others help you define your self-concept.

SOCIAL COMPARISONS

Another way you develop your self-concept is by comparing yourself with others. When you want to gain insight into who you are and how effective or competent you are, you probably look to your peers. For example, after an examination you probably want to

know how you performed relative to the other students in your class. If you play on a baseball team, it's important to know your batting average in comparison with the batting average of others on the team. Absolute scores on the exam or knowledge of your batting average may be helpful in telling you something about your performance, but you gain an additional perspective when you see your score in comparison with the scores of your peers.

YOUR OWN INTERPRETATIONS AND EVALUATIONS

Much in the way others form images of you based on what you do, you also react to your own behavior; you interpret and evaluate it. These interpretations and evaluations help to form your self-concept. For example, let us say you believe that lying is wrong. If you lie, you will evaluate this behavior in terms of your internalized beliefs about lying. You will thus react negatively to your own behavior. You may, for example, experience guilt if your behavior contradicts your beliefs. In contrast, let's say you pulled someone out of a burning building at great personal risk. You would probably evaluate this behavior positively; you would feel good about this behavior and, as a result, about yourself.

SELF-AWARENESS

Your self-awareness represents the extent to which you know yourself. Understanding how your self-concept develops is one way to increase your self-awareness: the more you understand about the reasons why you view yourself as you do, the more you will understand who you are. Additional insight is gained by looking at self-awareness through the Johari model of the self.

THE FOUR SELVES

Self-awareness is neatly explained by the model of the four selves (the Johari window). This model, presented in Figure 7.1, is divided into four basic areas, or quadrants, each of which represents a somewhat different self.

Note that a change in one area of the self brings about a change in the other areas. Visualize this model as representing your self. The entire model is of constant size, but each section can vary, from very small to very large. As one section becomes smaller, one or more of the others grow larger. Similarly, as one section grows, one or more of the others must get smaller. For example, if you enlarge your open self, this shrinks your hidden self. Further, this revelation or disclosure may in turn lead to a decrease in the size of your blind self if other people reveal insights that they have gained about you but that you have not known.

The Johari model emphasizes that the several aspects of the self are not separate pieces but are interactive parts of a whole. Each part is dependent on each other part. Like that of interpersonal communication, this model of the self is a transactional one.

Two models of the self, presented in Figure 7.2, illustrate how the relative sizes of the four selves depend on the particular interpersonal situation. In Figure 7.2 (left), let's assume you are with a friend to whom you have opened up a great deal. Consequently, your open self is large and your hidden self is small. In Figure 7.2 (right), you might be

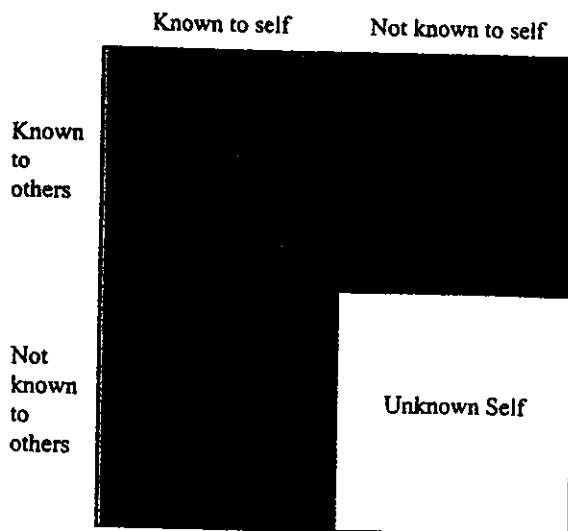


Figure 7.1

The Johari window. The name Johari was derived from the first names of the two people who developed the model, Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. [Source: From *Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics* by Joseph Luft, 1984, p. 60. Reprinted by permission Mayfield Publishing Company, Mountain View, CA.]

with a new employer whom you do not know very well and with whom you are still a bit uncomfortable. Thus, your open self is relatively small and your hidden self is large.

The Open Self The open self represents all the information, behaviors, attitudes, feelings, desires, motivations, and ideas that are known to yourself and to others. The type of information included here might range from your name, skin color, and sex to your age, political and religious affiliations, and batting average. Each person's open self varies in size, depending on the situation and the individuals the person is interacting with. Some people, for example, make you feel comfortable and supported; to them, you open yourself wide, but to others you may prefer to leave most of yourself closed.

Communication depends on the degree to which you open yourself to others and to yourself (Luft 1970). If you do not allow other people to know you (thus keeping your open self small), communication between you and others becomes difficult, if not impossible. You can communicate meaningfully only to the extent that you know others and yourself. To improve communication, work first on enlarging the open self.

The Blind Self The blind self represents all the things about yourself that others know but of which you are ignorant. These may vary from the relatively insignificant habit of saying "You know," rubbing your nose when you get angry, or having a peculiar body odor, to things as significant as defense mechanisms, fight strategies, or repressed experiences.

Some people have a very large blind self and seem totally oblivious of their faults and sometimes (though not as often) of their virtues. Others seem overly anxious to have a small blind self. They seek therapy at every turn and join every self-help group. Some are even convinced that they know everything there is to know about themselves, that they have reduced the blind self to zero. Most of us lie between these extremes.

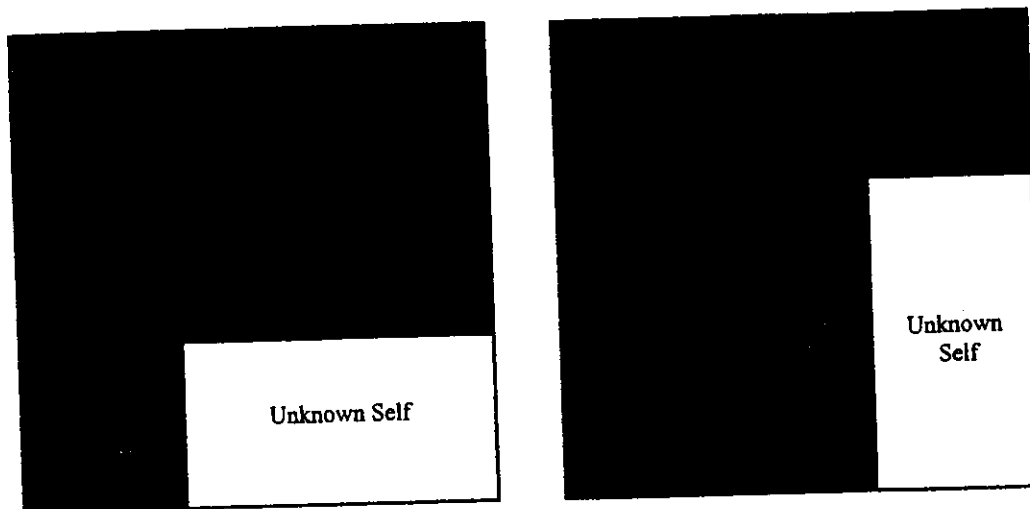


Figure 7.2
Two models of the four selves.

Although communication and interpersonal relations are generally enhanced as the blind self becomes smaller, do not assume that people should therefore be forced to see themselves as you see them, because this may cause serious trauma. Such a revelation might trigger a breakdown in defenses; it might force people to admit their own jealousy or prejudice when they are not psychologically ready to deal with such information. Such revelations are best dealt with cautiously or under the guidance of trained professionals.

The Hidden Self The **hidden self** contains all that you know of yourself and of others that you keep secret. In any interaction, this area includes everything you do not want to reveal, whether it is relevant or irrelevant to the conversation.

At the extremes, we have the overdisclosers and the underdisclosers. The overdisclosers tell all. They keep nothing hidden about themselves or others. They tell you their marital difficulties, their children's problems, their financial status, and just about everything else. The underdisclosers tell nothing. They talk about you but not about themselves.

The problem with these extremes is that individuals do not distinguish between those who should and those who shouldn't be privy to such information. They also do not distinguish among the various types of information that should or should not be disclosed. The vast majority of people, however, keep certain things hidden and disclose others; they make disclosures to some people and not to others. They are *selective* disclosers.

The Unknown Self The **unknown self** represents truths about yourself that neither you nor others know. The existence of this self is inferred from a number of sources. Sometimes it is revealed through temporary changes brought about by drugs or through special experimental conditions, such as hypnosis or sensory deprivation. Sometimes this area is revealed by certain projective tests or dreams. Mostly, however, it is revealed by the fact that you are constantly learning things about yourself that you didn't know before (things that were previously in the unknown self).

Although you cannot easily manipulate this area, recognize that it does exist and that there are things about yourself and about others that you do not know and may never know.

INCREASING SELF-AWARENESS

You can increase your self-awareness in a number of ways. Here are a few.

Ask Yourself About Yourself One way to ask yourself about yourself is to take an informal "Who am I?" test (Bugental and Zelen 1950). Take a piece of paper, head it "Who Am I?" and write 10, 15, or 20 times "I am. . . ." Then complete each of the sentences. Try not to give only positive or socially acceptable responses; just respond with what comes to mind first. Second, take another piece of paper and divide it into two columns. Head one column "Strengths" and the other column "Weaknesses." Fill in each column as quickly as possible. Third, using these first two "tests" as a base, take a third piece of paper, head it "Self-Improvement Goals," and complete the statement "I want to improve my . . ." as many times as you can in, say, five minutes.



One way to grow in self-awareness is to listen to what others say to and about you. How well do you listen to this? Are there certain issues about yourself that you are more open to than others? Check your perceptions with those who know you well. Ask them if you listen openly and if you are more open to some issues than to others.

Further, remember that you are constantly changing; consequently, these self-perceptions and goals also change rapidly, often in drastic ways. Update them frequently.

Listen to Others You can learn a lot about yourself by seeing yourself as others do. Conveniently, others are constantly giving you the very feedback you need to increase self-awareness. In every interpersonal interaction, people comment on you in some way—on what you do, what you say, how you look. Sometimes these comments are explicit; most often they are “hidden” in the way in which others look at you, in what they talk about, in their interest in what you say. Pay close attention to this kind of information (both verbal and nonverbal) and use it to increase your own self-awareness.

Actively Seek Information About Yourself Actively seek out information to reduce your blind self. You need not be so obvious as to say, “Tell me about myself” or “What do you think of me?” But you can use everyday situations to gain self-information: “Do you think I was assertive enough when asking for the raise?” or “Do you think I’d be thought too forward if I invited myself for dinner?” Do not, of course, seek this information constantly; your friends would surely and quickly find others with whom to interact. But you can make use of some situations—perhaps those in which you are particularly unsure of what to do or how you appear—to reduce your blind self and increase self-awareness.

See Your Different Selves Each of your friends and relatives views you differently; to each you are a somewhat different person. Yet you are really *all* of these. Practice seeing yourself as do the people with whom you interact. For starters, visualize how you are seen by your mother, your father, your teachers, your best friend, the stranger you sat next to on the bus, your employer, your neighbor’s child. Because you are, in fact, a composite of all these views, it is important that you periodically see yourself through the eyes of others. The experience will give you new and valuable perspectives on yourself.

Increase Your Open Self When you increase your open self and reveal yourself to others, you also reveal yourself to yourself. At the very least, you bring into clearer focus what you may have buried within. As you discuss yourself, you may see connections that you had previously missed, and with the aid of feedback from others you may gain still more insight. Also, by increasing the open self, you increase the likelihood that a meaningful and intimate dialogue will develop; through such interactions you best get to know yourself. Do, however, consider the risks involved in such self-disclosures (discussed in Unit 8).

SELF-ESTEEM

How much do you like yourself? How valuable a person do you think you are? How competent do you think you are? The answers to these questions reflect your self-esteem, the value you place on yourself.

Self-esteem is very important because success breeds success. When you feel good about yourself—about who you are and what you are capable of doing—you will perform better. When you think like a success, you are more likely to act like a success. When you

think you're a failure, you're more likely to act like a failure. Increasing self-esteem will, therefore, help you to function more effectively in school, in interpersonal relationships, and in careers. Here are a few suggestions for increasing self-esteem.

ATTACK YOUR SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BELIEFS

Self-destructive beliefs are those that damage your self-esteem and prevent you from building meaningful and productive relationships. They may be about yourself ("I'm not creative"; "I'm boring"), your world ("The world is an unhappy place"; "People are out to get me"), and your relationships ("All the good people are already in relationships"; "If I ever fall in love, I know I'll be hurt"). Identifying these beliefs will help you to examine them critically and to see that they are both illogical and self-defeating.

Another way of looking at self-destructive beliefs is to identify what Pamela Butler (1981) calls "drivers"—unrealistic beliefs that may motivate you to act in ways that are self-defeating. Butler identifies five such drivers: be perfect, hurry up, be strong, please others, and try hard.

The drive to **be perfect** impels you to try to perform at unrealistically high levels in just about everything you do. Whether it is directed toward work, school, athletics, or appearance, this drive tells you that anything short of perfection is unacceptable and that you are to blame for any imperfections—imperfections that by any other standard would be considered quite normal.)

The drive to **hurry up** compels you to do things quickly, to do more than can be reasonably expected in any given amount of time. This drive is at the foundation of what has come to be called "Type A" behavior (Friedman and Rosenman 1974), the personality that is always impatient, always rushing. (As an aside, it might be noted that appearing rushed is one of the ways in which powerlessness is communicated. People with power do not rush; they don't have to. The ones who hurry are the people who are being judged by others, whose job or promotion depends on others).

The drive to **be strong** tells you that weakness and any of the more vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, compassion, or loneliness, are wrong. This driver is seen in the stereotypical man, but it is also becoming more prevalent among women as well who are not permitted to cry, ask for help, or have unfulfilled needs.

The drive to **please others** leads you to seek approval from others. Pleasing yourself is secondary, and self-pleasure is to come from pleasing others. The logic is that if you gain the approval of others, then you are a worthy and deserving person; if others disapprove of you, then you must be worthless and undeserving.

The drive to **try hard** makes you take on more responsibilities than anyone can be expected to handle. This driver leads you to accept tasks that would be impossible for any normal person to manage, yet you take them on without any concern for your own limits (physical or emotional).

Instead of helping you become successful, these drivers almost ensure your failure. Because they foster unrealistically high standards, they make it impossible for you to accomplish the very things you feel are essential for approval by others and by yourself.

Recognizing that you may have internalized such drivers is a first step toward eliminating them. A second step involves recognizing that these drivers are in fact unrealistic and self-defeating. The psychotherapist Albert Ellis (1988; Ellis and Harper 1975) and

other cognitive therapists (for example, Beck 1988) would argue that you can accomplish this by understanding why these drivers are unrealistic and substituting more realistic ones. For example, following Ellis, you might try replacing an unrealistic driver to please others (always and in everything you do) with a more realistic belief that it would be nice if others were pleased with you but it certainly isn't essential. A third step is giving yourself permission to fail, to be less than perfect, to be normal.

Do recognize that it is the *unrealistic* nature of these drivers that creates problems. Certainly, trying hard and being strong are not unhealthy when they are realistic. It is only when they become absolute—when you try to be everything to everyone—that they become impossible to achieve and create problems.

ENGAGE IN SELF-AFFIRMATION

Remind yourself of your successes. There are enough people around who will remind you of your failures. Focus, too, on your good acts, your good deeds. Focus on your positive qualities, your strengths, your virtues. Focus on the good relationships you have with friends and relatives.

The way you talk to yourself about yourself influences what you think of yourself. If you talk positively about yourself, you will come to feel more positive about yourself. If you tell yourself that you are a success, that others like you, that you will succeed on the next test, and that you will be welcomed when asking for a date, you will soon come to feel positive about yourself. Table 7.1 presents a useful list of self-affirming phrases. Reading over the list is sure to stimulate your own self-affirmations.

SEEK OUT NOURISHING PEOPLE

The psychologist Carl Rogers drew a distinction between noxious and nourishing people. Noxious people criticize and find fault with just about everything. Nourishing people, on the other hand, are positive. They are optimists. Most important, they reward you, they stroke you, they make you feel good about yourself. Seek out these people.

WORK ON PROJECTS THAT WILL RESULT IN SUCCESS

Some people want to fail, or so it seems. Often, they select projects that will result in failure. Perhaps the projects are too large or too difficult. In any event, they are impossible. Instead, select projects that will result in success. Each success helps build self-esteem. Each success makes the next success a little easier.

When a project does fail, recognize that this does not mean that you are a failure (see Experiential Vehicle 12.1). Everyone fails somewhere along the line. Failure is something that happens; it is not something inside you. Further, your failing once does not mean that you will fail the next time. So put failure in perspective. Do not make it an excuse for not trying again.

I am beautiful, capable, and lovable.	I love my brothers and sisters unconditionally.
I am a lovable and worthy person.	I can shine my light gently every moment of every day.
I appreciate and love myself!	I bring others out.
The love I give to others I also can offer to myself.	I love myself when I want to feel loved.
I can live a nurturing, exciting, and creative life.	I can forgive myself.
I am creating the experience of love in my life.	I can learn how to care for my body in a loving and gentle manner.
My love comes from me.	I am learning to flow joyfully in the present moment.
I am capable and willing to handle my fears as they come up one at a time.	I can accept imperfection.
I always do my best.	My love flows freely to one and all.
I am acceptable and I am open to new forms of being acknowledged.	I am a worthwhile person and there is a place for me.
I can accept the past and welcome the future.	I am lovable because I'm here.
I deserve to feel good.	I can feel good doing the things I'm skilled at.
I am learning to see the beauty of my life.	I am learning to support myself with love.
I am all I need to be.	I release the past and now choose a life of love and fulfillment.
I am creative, loving, and nurturing.	I don't have to be sick to get nurtured.
I find my life satisfying and rewarding.	I am worthy of a loving relationship.
I can learn to accept and love everyone unconditionally—including myself.	My world is safe and friendly.
I can ask for what I want with love in my heart.	I can be gentle with myself.
I am the source of my security and self-esteem.	I can feel supported even when I don't meet my models of perfection.
I always have abundance.	My guilt doesn't help anyone.
I am a powerful, creative being who now chooses to love, nurture, and heal himself or herself.	I am learning to get in touch with my feelings.
Where I am now is perfect for my growth.	I can accept praise and attention at any time.
I can let others love me the way I am.	I have the right to live as I want.
There is nothing I have to do to feel loved.	What somebody else does and says means nothing about me.
I am open to new forms of loving relationships.	
I am open to new forms of being acknowledged.	
I deserve to be healthy.	

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UNIT SUMMARY

Self-Concept	Self-Awareness	Self-Esteem
<p>Self-concept is the image you have of who you are.</p> <p>Sources of self-concept:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • others' images of you • social comparisons • your own interpretations and evaluations 	<p>Self-awareness is your knowledge of yourself; the extent to which you know who you are.</p> <p>The four selves:</p> <p><i>Open self</i>: information known to self and others</p> <p><i>Blind self</i>: information known only to others</p> <p><i>Hidden self</i>: information known only to self</p> <p><i>Unknown self</i>: information known to neither self nor others</p> <p>Increasing self-awareness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask yourself about yourself. • Listen to others. • Actively seek information about yourself. • See your different selves. • Increase your open self. 	<p>Self-esteem is the value you place on yourself; your perceived self-worth.</p> <p>Increasing self-esteem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack your self-destructive beliefs. • Engage in self-affirmation. • Seek out nourishing people. • Work on projects that will result in success.

STUDY QUESTIONS

AFTER COMPLETING THIS UNIT, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

1. Define *self-concept* and explain how it develops
2. Explain the Johari window and define the *open*, *blind*, *hidden*, and *unknown selves*
3. Explain how self-awareness can be increased
4. Define *self-esteem* and explain how it might be raised