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INTERACTIONIST HYPOTHESES OF SELF-CONCEPTION

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### Abstract

Responses given by married couples to a series of personality trait items are analyzed in an effort to test certain static consequences of interactionist theory. The relationship between S's self-conception and the description of S given by S's spouse is examined and compared to the relationship between S's self-conception and his perception of the description given ~~to~~<sup>to</sup> him by his spouse. These relationships are then further examined with the positive or negative quality of the traits and the extensity of interaction of S being taken into explicit account. The results, while being subject to alternative explanations, are consistent with the symbolic interactionist approach.

## INTERACTIONIST HYPOTHESES OF SELF-CONCEPTION

### INTRODUCTION

Recent studies of interactionist hypotheses of self-conception have been of three distinct designs. A first group of studies has examined at one point in time the relationship between a subject's self-conception and the conception that others actually hold of that subject.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> A second group has examined this same relationship over time, taking particular note of changes in self-conception which are presumably due to the "influence" of "significant others". These studies may or may not involve experimental manipulation of the responses of these others to the subject.<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup> The third group of studies has paid particular attention to the subject's perception of the responses of others, and to the relationship of this perception to self-conception. These studies may or may not be conducted over time.<sup>8, 9</sup>

The studies which have been carried out at one point in time are attempts to test certain static consequences of interactionist theory. As such, the results obtained are of course always open to alternative explanations. The present research is of this type, and the data to be reported can be considered as further support for, and extension of, the finding reported by Miyamoto and Dornbusch<sup>10</sup> that while the actual response of others is related to self-conception, the subject's perception of that response is more closely related.

### PROCEDURE

In the present study each subject was asked to (1) "Describe yourself"

(2) "Describe your spouse", and (3) "Describe yourself as you think your spouse would describe you" through the use of a set of sixteen familiar personality trait items. The respondent effected his descriptions by placing a checkmark, after each of the sixteen trait items, in one of the four response categories "Very Much", "Considerably", "A Little", or "Not At All". Each of the three descriptions was effected on a separate page, with each page presenting the same sixteen trait items.<sup>11</sup>

Subjects were drawn from two sources. The first group was composed of married couples who had referred themselves to a local family counselling agency. Each of these couples had expressed the fact that their marital relationship was "unsatisfactory". In contrast to this group, the second group was composed of married couples selected by an assistant minister of a local protestant church. These subjects were selected on the subjective criterion that they exhibited a high degree of marital satisfaction and stability.<sup>12</sup>

The subjects from the local counselling agency were asked to complete the descriptive forms at their first meeting with the agency. Twenty-two couples were obtained from this source. The subjects from the church were contacted by mail after they had expressed a willingness to participate in the research program. Subjects were not asked to submit their names, and all were assured of complete anonymity. Each couple was instructed to effect the various descriptions at the same time, with no discussion between husband and wife as they effected these descriptions. Eighty-six percent

of all mailed forms were returned, giving us thirty-five couples from the church source. No follow-up attempt was made to solicit the descriptions from the remaining fourteen percent of the church volunteers. We thus have a total of fifty-seven couples, or 114 subjects. In both groups, several subjects did not complete all three aspects of the descriptive instrument. This accounts for the slight variations in the total N for the various operations performed below.

In order to examine the effects of an overall "positive" or "negative" quality of a description, each trait item was judged on an a priori basis to have either positive or negative implications with respect to general cultural values. Thus, for example, the trait item "self-centered" is judged to be "negative" while the trait item "optimistic" is judged to be "positive". The responses "Very Much" and "Considerably" are considered equivalent, as are the responses "A Little" and "Not At All". An "A Little" or "Not At All" response to a trait item judged "negative" is thus a positive response, while either of these same responses to a trait item judged "positive" is a negative response.<sup>13</sup> Each response is given equal weight in the scoring. The diverse sources from which the subjects were drawn proved functional in yielding a wide range in the number of negative responses in each of the three descriptions.<sup>14</sup>

All results are reported in terms of an index of agreement. To determine the extent of agreement between any two descriptions, each trait response given by each subject is entered into a four-fold table. Assuming for the moment that interest is in examining the relationship between

self-description and the description of self perceived as given by Other, the following examples will serve to clarify the operations involved. If a self-describing trait is responded to in a positive manner by S and S also states that that same trait will be responded to in a positive manner by Other when Other describes S, then that response is entered into the "positive-positive" cell of the four-fold table. Similarly, if a self-describing trait is responded to in a negative manner by S and S also states that that same trait will be responded to in a negative manner by Other when Other describes S, then that response is entered into the "negative-negative" cell of the table. Each trait pair is analyzed in this way and entered into the appropriate cell of the four-fold table. The total N for such a table is thus 16 (the number of trait items employed by each subject) multiplied by the number of subjects under consideration. Thus, consideration of trait items for 112 subjects results in 1792 trait responses entered into the four-fold table.<sup>15</sup>

The agreement score reported for each of the tables considered is a simple percent agreement transposed to a scale which ranges from -1 to +1 where 0 corresponds to 50% agreement. This change in scale was performed because a 50% agreement means that there is as much disagreement between the responses in question as there is agreement. Given a four-fold table with the cells labeled as follows, the index of

	+	-
+	a	b
-	c	d
		N

agreement between the entries can be expressed as  $\frac{(a + d) - (b + c)}{N} \cdot 16$

### RESULTS

The first hypothesis to be examined is a restatement of the Miyamoto and Dornbusch finding.

S's self-description will be in positive agreement with Other's actual description of S, but more in agreement with S's perception of Other's description of S.

The data relevant to the hypothesis are presented in Table I. In this table it is clear that for all subjects the index of agreement score between self-description and perceived description is higher than the index of agreement score between self-description and Other's actual description of S. The hypothesis is thus supported, and the Miyamoto and Dornbusch finding reappears in this context. The table also shows that the same results are obtained for males and females taken separately.

Table I  
Index of Agreement Scores

	<u>Self-Description: O's Actual</u>	<u>Self-Description: Perceived</u>
All Subjects.....	.42 (n = 112)*	.56 (n = 112)
All Males.....	.44 (n = 56)	.56 (n = 57)
All Females.....	.40 (n = 56)	.56 (n = 55)

\* In this table and in those to follow, "n" will be used to designate the number of respondents. As noted above, "N" refers to the number of trait responses (16 x "n").

On the basis of the frequently asserted assumption that individuals strive to develop or maintain a "positive" self-concept, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that a perceived positive description would be more readily incorporated into the self-description than would a perceived negative description. That is,

There will be a greater extent of agreement between S's self-description and S's perception of Other's description of S when S perceives Other's description to be positive in overall quality rather than negative in overall quality.

To test this hypothesis, the perceived description reported by each subject was examined. If the number of negative responses on this description was eight or more out of the possible sixteen, that subject was classified as a "negative perceiving subject". All other subjects were classified as "positive perceiving subjects".<sup>17</sup> The data relevant to the hypothesis are presented in Table II. The index of agreement shows that for both males and females the agreement between self-description and perceived description is greater for those subjects who perceive an essentially positive description being given to them by Other.

Table II

Index of Agreement Scores as related to Positive or  
Negative Overall Quality of S's Perception

	<u>Self-Description:Perceived</u>
Positive Perceiving Males.....	.60 (n = 32)
Positive Perceiving Females.....	.60 (n = 30)
Negative Perceiving Males.....	.47 (n = 25)
Negative Perceiving Females.....	.49 (n = 25)



It should be noted that the index of agreement scores presented in Table II do not give any information regarding the nature of the increase in disagreement for those subjects who perceive an essentially negative description. The disagreements can of course be of two types. Given a positive perception on a given trait, the subject could disagree by responding negatively to that trait when describing himself. Or, given a negative perception on a given trait, the subject could disagree by responding positively to that trait when describing himself. These two types of disagreement can be referred to simply as the (+P-S) type and the (-P+S) type respectively. Again on the assumption that individuals strive to develop or maintain a positive self-concept, it would be expected that the increase in disagreement for the negative perceiving subjects would be due to an increase in (-P+S) type disagreement. That is, these subjects would presumably "reject" the negative perception and respond positively when describing themselves. Disagreements of the (+P-S) type should be infrequent for all subjects. Examination of the relevant four-fold tables with all cell entries expressed as percentages confirms this expectation. These data are presented as Table III. It is apparent that for both males and females there is an increase in the percentage of entries in the (-P+S) cell for the negative perceiving subjects. Disagreements of the (+P-S) type are consistently low across all of the tables.

Table III

Four-Fold Tables Showing Variations in Type of Disagreement

All Entries Expressed as Percentages of Total

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	<u>+ Perceiving Males</u>		<u>- Perceiving Males</u>			
	(n = 32)		(n = 25)			
	<u>Self</u>		<u>Self</u>			
	+	-	+	-		
<u>Perceived</u>	+	64.0	5.2	+	34.0	4.2
	-	14.6	16.0	-	22.5	39.2
		N = 512			N = 400	
	<u>+ Perceiving Females</u>		<u>- Perceiving Females</u>			
	(n = 30)		(n = 25)			
	<u>Self</u>		<u>Self</u>			
	+	-	+	-		
<u>Perceived</u>	+	65.6	7.0	+	31.7	2.2
	-	12.7	14.5	-	23.5	42.5
		N = 480			N = 400	

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Manis<sup>18</sup> has reported data indicating that his subjects' self-concepts

were significantly influenced over time by their friends' opinions of them, particularly when the subjects were evaluated in a relatively favorable light by these friends. The second hypothesis of the present study has examined the agreement between S's self-description and his perception of Other's positive or negative description of him. Manis' findings lead us to believe that the same results should be obtained with respect to the agreement between S's self-description and the description of S actually given by Other. The relevant data are presented in Table IV. It is apparent that for both males and females there is a greater extent of agreement between S's self-description and Other's actual description of S when Other's description is essentially positive. These agreement scores are, however, uniformly lower than the agreement scores between self-description and perceived description. The results are thus consistent with our first hypothesis and are also in agreement with the finding reported by Manis.

Table IV

Index of Agreement Scores as related to Positive or  
Negative Overall Quality of Other's Description

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	<u>Self-Description: O's Actual</u>
Positive Receiving Males.....	.52 (n = 41)
Positive Receiving Females.....	.47 (n = 40)
Negative Receiving Males.....	.32 (n = 16)
Negative Receiving Females.....	.23 (n = 17)

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One final examination of the data can be undertaken. Other's "influence" upon S might vary as a function of S's extensity of interaction. It is possible that the greater the extensity of interaction for S, the less significant are the responses of any one Other. Research by Roeder, Donohue and Biblarz<sup>19</sup> has shown that the extent of agreement between S's self-description and S's work-group rating of S decreases with increasing reference group availability for S. In gathering certain background data on the present subjects, information was obtained as to whether or not wives were employed. This fact of employment or non-employment can serve as an index, though an extremely crude index, of the extensity of interaction of the female subjects. The following hypothesis can thus be evaluated.

There will be a decrease in the extent of agreement between S's self-description and S's perception of Other's description of S with an increase in the extensity of interaction of S.

The data relevant to this hypothesis are presented in Table V. These data indicate that for all females combined, the agreement between self-description and perceived description is greater for the unemployed. This same result is obtained upon examining the positive perceiving group as contrasted with the negative perceiving group. The results are thus consistent with the third hypothesis, and the magnitudes of the agreement scores are once again supportive of our second hypothesis dealing with positive and negative perceived descriptions.

Table V

Index of Agreement Scores as related to Employment Status

	<u>Self-Description: Perceived</u>
All Employed Females.....	.50 (n = 15)
All Unemployed Females.....	.57 (n = 40)
Positive Perceiving Employed Females.....	.57 (n = 7)
Positive Perceiving Unemployed Females.....	.61 (n = 23)
Negative Perceiving Employed Females.....	.44 (n = 8)
Negative Perceiving Unemployed Females...	.51 (n = 17)

These "extensity" results must, however, be viewed with reservation. The agreement scores indicate only slight differences within the groups; the index of extensity is crude; and the number of employed females in the subject population is such that a few additional cases could make a sizeable difference in their agreement scores. Further, if the agreement between self-description and actual description given by Other is examined, there is an apparent reversal of this last set of results. Though we are dealing with very few cases at this point,<sup>20</sup> it is possible that the agreement between self-description and actual description given by Other is greater for the employed rather than for the unemployed. It should be noted here, however, that these agreement

scores between self-description and actual description are once again uniformly lower than the agreement scores between self-description and perceived description.

#### SUMMARY

The present study has tested one central hypothesis and two related hypotheses which are grounded in interactionist theory. The central hypothesis is a restatement of a finding reported earlier by Miyamoto and Dornbusch. The data relevant to the two related hypotheses which are extensions of the central finding serve to indicate the necessity of taking into account in future research various dimensions implicit in the frequently employed concept of "the significant other". The three hypotheses examined were: (1) S's self-description will be in positive agreement with Other's actual description of S, but more in agreement with S's perception of Other's description of S; (2) there will be a greater extent of agreement between S's self-description and S's perception of Other's description of S when S perceives Other's description to be positive in overall quality rather than negative in overall quality; and (3) there will be a decrease in the extent of agreement between S's self-description and S's perception of Other's description of S with an increase in the extensity of interaction of S. Each of these three hypotheses received empirical support.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Malcolm M. Helper, "Learning Theory and the Self Concept", Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 51, (September, 1955), pp. 184-194.
2. Malcolm M. Helper, "Parental Evaluations of Children and Children's Self-Evaluations", Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 56, (March, 1958), pp. 190-194.
3. Leo G. Reeder, George A. Donohue, and Arturo Biblarz, "Conceptions of Self and Others", American Journal of Sociology, 66, (September, 1960), pp. 153-159.
4. Martin L. Maehr, Josef Mensing, and Samuel Nafziger, "Concept of Self and the Reaction of Others", Sociometry, 25, (December, 1962), pp. 353-357.
5. Melvin Manis, "Social Interaction and the Self Concept", Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 51, (November, 1955), pp. 362-370.
6. William R. Rosengren, "The Self in the Emotionally Disturbed", American Journal of Sociology, 67, (March, 1961), pp. 454-462.
7. Richard Videbeck, "Self-Conception and the Reaction of Others", Sociometry, 22, (December, 1960), pp. 351-359.
8. Carl J. Couch, "Self-Attitudes and Degree of Agreement with Immediate Others", American Journal of Sociology, 63, (March, 1958), pp. 491-496.
9. S. Frank Miyamoto and Sanford M. Dornbusch, "A Test of Interactionist Hypotheses of Self-Conception", American Journal of Sociology, 61, (March, 1956), pp. 399-403.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

10. Op. cit., p. 403.
11. The trait items employed were: Sense of Duty, Sociable, Stubborn, Makes Decisions Readily, Easily Depressed, Gets Angry Easily, Sense of Humor, Dominating, Optimistic, Feelings Easily Hurt, Critical of Others, Easygoing, Self-Centered, Likes to Take Responsibility, Gets Over Anger Quickly, Warm and Affectionate.
12. A note on the history of this research is in order. The author had earlier been interested in developing an instrument to be employed in a field setting to distinguish married couples who were having marital difficulty from those who were not having such difficulty. The instrument formulated for this purpose was an adaptation of Bernard Farber's "Index of Marital Integration" (Bernard Farber, "An Index of Marital Integration", Sociometry, 20, [1957], pp. 117-134). Eleven of the sixteen personality trait items utilized in the adapted instrument were taken from Farber's "index". Beyond this, there was no specific rationale for the particular trait items employed. Certain other changes in approach were also introduced. Farber did not ask for the "perceived description" which is of central importance in the data which follows. Also, Farber's "Somewhat" response category was eliminated in the adapted instrument. This simplified scoring and consequently released the researcher from certain measurement assumptions which were deemed overly restrictive.



FOOTNOTES (continued)

Given the adapted instrument, a pretest was arranged to determine how adequately it distinguished between married couples who had been classified on some independent criterion as "having difficulty" or "not having difficulty". This should explain the sources of the subjects for this research. The hypotheses which constitute the focus of the present study were some of the more important assumptions upon which the instrument was based.

13. The arbitrary judging of the trait items as to their positive or negative implications is of course not necessary if one wishes simply to determine the extent of agreement between the various descriptions. It is necessary, however, if one entertains hypotheses regarding differential extent of agreement as a function of the overall "character" of these descriptions.
14. Considering only S's perception of the description given to him by Other, the range of negative responses for males and females of both sources is as follows: agency males = 6 to 13; agency females = 5 to 15; church males = 1 to 11; and church females = 0 to 13. The average number of negative responses perceived is as follows: agency males = 9.3; agency females = 10.3; church males = 5.6; and church females = 5.4.
15. In those few instances in which a subject failed to respond to all of the trait items, the omitted response was entered into the table in such a way as to work against the hypothesis being tested. Omitted responses were surprisingly infrequent, however.

FOOTNOTES (concluded)

16. It should be noted that the index of agreement cannot be interpreted as a correlation coefficient in the usual sense. Further, the groups employed in this study are not independent random samples from any known universe, nor is it clear what random model should be employed in conjunction with the data. Consequently, in the analysis which follows, tests of significance are not utilized. Under the circumstances, it appears reasonable to evaluate the results on the basis of consistent tendencies which appear.
17. The arbitrary decisions involved in differentiating subjects into "positive perceivers" and "negative perceivers" has resulted in a division of the subject population such that 82% of the agency subjects are classified as "negative perceivers" and 77% of the church subjects are classified as "positive perceivers".
18. "Social Interaction and the Self Concept", Op. cit., p. 366.
19. "Conceptions of Self and Others", Op. cit., p. 159.
20. For example, there are only three "negative receiving - employed" females.