



## Construction of the Self

**Publication Title:** The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective

**Publication Author:** Susan Harter

**Publisher, year of publication:** The Guilford Press, 1999.

This is a fairly dense text, written by the Professor of Psychology and Head of the Developmental Psychology Program at the University of Denver in Colorado, USA. The book sets out to explore the important developmental goal of the cognitive and social construction of a sense of self that increasingly becomes less dependant on external evaluations, and that represents a core set of inner attributes perceived to reflect one's true self. Harter is strongly committed to a developmental approach to understanding human beings and this was the first aspect of the book that attracted me. She also presents good potted histories of the concepts she discusses, helping to put current thinking in the context of ideas from the past.

The first task of the book is to provide a conceptualisation of the Self – what does the term mean? As complex as this task may appear, Harter provides a clear and very useful characterisation of the Self concept including the distinction between the I-Self with components such as self-awareness and self-agency, and being the subject, knower, or active observer of our lives; and the Me-Self with components such as the material me; the social me; the spiritual me, and being the object; that which is known; the observed; and the representation of me that I can think about.

There are excellent reviews of the normative development of self-representations throughout childhood and adolescence, which can stand alone as an educational piece. There are also chapters on the self-conscious emotions, self-evaluative judgements, Real and Ideal self-concepts; self-worth, and authenticity, all of which are clearly written with a wide range of contributing research and ideas. There is a very good chapter on the effects of child abuse on I-Self and Me-Self processes. I particularly like the chapter on Autonomy and Connectedness – the acknowledgement that the Self is embedded in relationships with others, and that genuine independence develops in parallel with, and dependant on, genuine relatedness, and vice versa. Although Harter is a leading academic, she is also able to bring together theory and research with everyday practice, especially in her final chapter “Interventions to promote adaptive self-evaluations”. In this chapter, she suggests cognitive and social strategies to teach individuals how to evaluate themselves accurately, and then go about the business of skill development where it is necessary, and more effective internalisation of the positive evaluations of others. Throughout this chapter, she refers to the need for orienting models derived from empirical research to guide the interventions and provides solid examples of these.

Although Harter does not make this explicit, one of the things I like about the book is the emphasis on the development of mental representations, which provides an integrating framework for formulation and psychotherapy – integrating attachment theory, cognitive theory, object relations theory, motivational theories amongst others.

This is not a sit-down-and-read-through kind of book. It is a very powerful reference work that can be read in parts according to what your current interests are and there are many, many references in the book that will provide extensions of the topics covered. The book is roundly lauded by such luminaries in Developmental Psychology as Nancy Eisenberg and Dante Cicchetti and is described as “sophisticated and yet accessible”. I concur, and strongly recommend the book for all clinical psychologists.

Reviewer: Fran Vertue

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