

Self-Concept, Value, Beliefs And Attitudes

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Introduction

Self-concept, values, beliefs, and attitudes are closely related psychological concepts, but they are not interchangeable. Confusion arises because all four influence how people interpret experience and choose how to act. Self-concept concerns the organized understanding a person has of who they are. Beliefs are propositions that the person accepts as true or probable. Values are relatively enduring judgments about what is desirable, important, or morally worthwhile. Attitudes are evaluations of particular people, objects, issues, or behaviors. These concepts interact continuously, yet none simply sits at the top of a fixed hierarchy. A person may value honesty, believe that a workplace rewards concealment, hold a negative attitude toward a particular policy, and still describe the self as principled. Understanding the distinctions makes it easier to explain consistency, conflict, and change in human behavior. This essay clarifies each concept, traces how it develops, and examines how the four combine to shape identity and decision-making.

Correcting the Conceptual Vocabulary

The original discussion usefully recognized that the concepts are interconnected, but it blurred important distinctions. Self-concept is not an “overall attitude” and should not be treated as identical to self-esteem. It is a system of self-representations: descriptions and beliefs such as “I am a parent,” “I am shy in unfamiliar groups,” or “academic achievement matters to me.” Self-esteem is the evaluative dimension of the self, referring to a person’s general or domain-specific sense of worth. Self-image is a broader everyday term that may include appearance and social identity. Separating these ideas matters because a person can possess a detailed self-concept while evaluating parts of it negatively. Psychological research therefore treats the self as multidimensional, context-sensitive, and influenced by memory, social roles, group membership, and imagined future possibilities rather than as one simple feeling (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Self-Concept as an Organized but Flexible System

Self-concept contains personal attributes, relationships, social identities, competencies, bodily characteristics, and life narratives. Some elements are central and frequently activated, while others become relevant only in particular settings. A person may think of the self primarily as a student in a classroom, as a sibling at home, and as a member of a cultural or religious community during collective events. These descriptions can be consistent, but they may also conflict. Self-schemas help people process information efficiently by directing attention toward experiences that appear relevant

to identity (Markus, 1977). The advantage is coherence: individuals can anticipate how they usually behave. The risk is selective interpretation. Someone who believes “I am poor at mathematics” may remember failures more readily than improvements and avoid opportunities that could challenge the schema. Self-concept is therefore stabilizing without being permanently fixed.

Beliefs: Claims Accepted as True

Beliefs are cognitive representations about how the world, other people, and the self operate. They may concern directly observable matters, such as whether a bus is usually late, or abstract matters involving morality, politics, religion, health, and human nature. Beliefs can arise from personal experience, testimony, education, culture, authority, inference, or repeated exposure. They vary in confidence and in their relationship to evidence. Some are carefully reasoned; others are intuitive, inherited, or emotionally protected. It is inaccurate to say that beliefs are necessarily irrational or never based on facts. Scientific beliefs, for example, may be supported by systematic evidence, while ordinary beliefs may be revised when predictions fail. At the same time, people often preserve beliefs through confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, or selective social networks. Their role is to provide an interpretive framework through which new events become meaningful.

Values: Standards of Importance and Desirability

Values answer a different question from beliefs. A belief concerns what a person thinks is true; a value concerns what the person considers important, desirable, or worthy of protection. Schwartz (1992) describes values as broad motivational goals that guide evaluation across situations. Examples include security, achievement, benevolence, tradition, self-direction, equality, and care for the environment. Values are usually more abstract than attitudes and can support several different behaviors. A person who values family responsibility might work longer hours to provide income, reduce working hours to spend time at home, or seek flexible employment. The value alone does not dictate one action because circumstances, competing values, beliefs about consequences, and available options matter. Values tend to be relatively stable, but they can be reordered through maturation, migration, education, crisis, relationships, or sustained reflection.

Attitudes and the Object of Evaluation

An attitude is a favorable or unfavorable evaluation directed toward an identifiable object, such as a person, group, product, policy, profession, or behavior. Attitudes are often described through cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. The cognitive component includes thoughts and beliefs about the object; the affective component includes feelings; and the behavioral component concerns readiness or intention to respond. These components do not always align. A person may believe exercise is beneficial, feel anxious in gyms, and still intend to become more active. Attitudes

also vary in strength, accessibility, and personal importance. A weak attitude formed from limited information may change quickly, whereas an attitude connected to identity and moral values may resist persuasion. This object-specific character distinguishes attitude from the more general organization of self-concept and values.

How the Four Concepts Influence One Another

The relationship among the concepts is better represented as a network than as a simple chain. Values can influence which beliefs a person seeks or trusts, and beliefs can suggest which actions will advance a value. Together, beliefs and values often contribute to attitudes. Those attitudes may guide behavior and, through repeated experience, alter self-concept. The influence also moves in the opposite direction. A self-concept such as “I am an environmentalist” can make ecological values more salient, encourage acceptance of information about climate risk, and produce favorable attitudes toward conservation policies. Yet inconsistency is normal. Economic pressure may lead the same person to choose a cheaper but less sustainable product. Behavior reflects not only internal concepts but also opportunity, habit, social norms, and perceived control (Ajzen, 1991). Consequently, one cannot reliably infer a person’s deepest values from a single action.

Socialization and the Formation of Identity

Families, schools, peers, religious communities, media, workplaces, and political institutions all participate in the development of beliefs, values, attitudes, and self-concept. Children learn descriptive information and moral expectations through instruction, observation, reward, and correction. Adolescents compare themselves with peers and explore possible identities, while adults continue to revise self-understanding through work, relationships, parenthood, and social change. Culture shapes which identities are recognized and which values are publicly rewarded. However, socialization is not passive copying. Individuals interpret messages, resist expectations, combine traditions, and react differently to the same environment. A child may adopt a family’s religious identity while questioning some associated beliefs, or may retain a value of community responsibility while rejecting rigid gender roles. Development therefore involves both continuity and agency.

Experience, Emotion, and the Development of Attitudes

Direct experience often creates strong attitudes because it supplies vivid information and emotional consequences. A supportive teacher may foster a positive attitude toward education, while discrimination at work may produce distrust of an institution. Attitudes can also develop without direct experience through stories, media representations, group norms, or persuasive messages. Repetition increases familiarity, but familiarity does not guarantee accuracy. Emotional associations

may be especially influential when people lack time or motivation to evaluate evidence. Peer pressure, stress, hierarchy, and political identity can alter which evaluations are expressed publicly, yet a stated attitude may differ from a privately held one. Researchers must therefore distinguish explicit attitudes, which people can report, from automatic associations that may operate with less conscious awareness. Neither type should be treated as an unchangeable essence.

Consistency, Dissonance, and Psychological Change

People generally prefer some consistency among their identities, beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions. Cognitive dissonance theory proposes that inconsistency can create discomfort that motivates change (Festinger, 1957). A person who values health but smokes may reduce the conflict by quitting, minimizing the risk, redefining the behavior as stress relief, or avoiding information. The outcome depends on commitment, available alternatives, and the importance of the conflicting elements. Change is therefore not produced by evidence alone. People may protect a belief because it supports group membership or self-respect. Constructive persuasion often works better when it preserves dignity, acknowledges uncertainty, and connects new information to an existing value. Transformative experiences can shift values, but gradual change also occurs through repeated relationships, new roles, and reflection on consequences.

An Applied Example: Choosing a Career

A career decision illustrates the four concepts in operation. A student may possess a self-concept as creative and socially responsible. The student may value autonomy, financial security, and service to others. Beliefs about different professions—whether they offer stable employment, meaningful work, or opportunities for creativity—shape attitudes toward particular degrees and jobs. Family expectations, tuition costs, labor-market conditions, and confidence in ability constrain the final choice. If the student enters accounting for security but experiences persistent dissatisfaction, the experience may alter attitudes and prompt a revised belief about what constitutes suitable work. Alternatively, success may expand the self-concept and reveal creativity within the profession. The example demonstrates why behavior cannot be explained by declaring values the sole foundation. Decisions result from interaction among internal meanings and external conditions.

Culture, Power, and the Limits of Individual Explanation

Analyses of self and attitude can become misleading when they ignore social power. People do not construct identity under equal conditions. Racism, class inequality, disability barriers, gender

expectations, and institutional policies influence which roles are available and how others respond to a person. A negative self-evaluation may reflect repeated stigmatization rather than an internal defect. Similarly, attitudes toward institutions may be grounded in actual unequal treatment. Cultural contexts also differ in the degree to which independence, interdependence, family duty, or personal achievement is emphasized. Psychological concepts should therefore be used to understand experience, not to blame individuals for structural obstacles. The self is personal, but it is also relational and situated.

Conclusion

Self-concept, beliefs, values, and attitudes form an interacting system through which people understand themselves and respond to the world. Self-concept organizes identity and role-based self-knowledge; beliefs represent what a person accepts as true; values express enduring priorities; and attitudes evaluate specific objects or actions. None can be reduced to another, and no universal hierarchy explains every decision. Their relationships are reciprocal: values and beliefs inform attitudes, behavior feeds back into identity, and social environments shape all four. They can remain stable enough to support continuity while changing through evidence, relationships, conflict, and new experience. Clear distinctions among the concepts make it possible to analyze behavior without assuming that one action reveals an entire character or that identity is permanently fixed.

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