

Self-Talk and Self-Regulation

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Contributor: Famira Racy, Alain Morin

The self is usually understood as being multidimensional in nature, made up of both conscious and unconscious levels, and informed by the observations of others; it includes all conceivable private and public aspects that make up who a person is, such as thoughts, emotions, goals, values, sensations, memories, traits, attitudes, physical attributes, behaviors, and skills. The self represents a highly dynamic system constituted of social, cognitive, emotional, motivational, and neurological dimensions.

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1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly evident that the study of the self should include—if not emphasize—an examination of how its various aspects relate to one another ^[1]. The self is usually understood as being multidimensional in nature, made up of both conscious and unconscious levels, and informed by the observations of others ^[2]; it includes all conceivable private and public aspects that make up who a person is, such as thoughts, emotions, goals, values, sensations, memories, traits, attitudes, physical attributes, behaviors, and skills. The self represents a highly dynamic system constituted of social, cognitive, emotional, motivational, and neurological dimensions (e.g., ^{[3][4][5][6]}).

2. Self-Talk and Self-Regulation from the Vygotskian Perspective

The social nature of cognitive development is intimately woven into the self-regulatory function of self-talk. Self-talk is defined as self-directed speech emitted out loud ^[7]. Researchers studying self-talk tend to agree with the Vygotskian view (e.g., ^[8]) that developing children witness social speech (e.g., parents talking to each other), then mimic and practice social speech by uttering to themselves out loud (private speech, e.g., imaginary friends) and engaging in social speech with others. The development of inner speech (silent self-directed speech) around age seven is thought to happen via mental internalization and the condensation of social and private speech. From this perspective, one can easily take the stance that inner speech is social in nature. For example, one may replay or imagine social conversations or have conversations and dialogue with oneself (e.g., ^[9]).

Self-talk measurement can have strong self-regulatory aspects, which is also in line with the Vygotskian perspective (e.g., ^{[7][10]}). Altering one's behavior, resisting temptation, changing one's mood, making a choice, and filtering irrelevant information are clear examples of self-regulation ^[11]. There is a large body of literature which supports the importance of self-regulatory speech-for-self in children (e.g., ^{[8][12][13]}) and adults (e.g., ^[14]). It is completely natural and healthy to experience self-talk, even in a conversational fashion, in order to control oneself, as Alderson Day and Fernyhough ^[15] showed in their thorough review including self-talk phenomenology and self-regulation. A recent self-talk model ^[16] discusses how “goal-directed self-talk” as well as “educational and strategic self-talk interventions” can be related to variables such as task difficulty, emotions, behavior, performance, metacognition, and concentration, all of which can be seen as self-regulatory in nature.

Even throughout adulthood, people experience self-talk internally or use it out loud to instruct themselves, encourage or criticize themselves, rehearse, and much more. It may be that some forms of self-talk are more helpful for self-regulation than other forms. In terms of questionnaire-based studies, self-talk for self-regulation responses has been shown to have weak-to-moderately strong relationships with various inner speech measures ^[17] as well as with types of inner dialogues (e.g., identity, rumination) ^[18]. In essence, there is a connection between overt and covert self-talk, and they both share self-regulatory functions, although they cannot be equated because the development, phenomenology, and functional range of covert and overt self-talk vary ^[19]. Even though there are other forms of experimental and neurobiological evidence for the usefulness of self-talk in self-regulation, conceptualizations as well as various questionnaire tools are still in the development stages. Furthermore, researchers are exploring a variety of other self-processes that may be involved in the pathways to self-regulation.

3. Self-Concept Clarity, Mindfulness, and Mind Wandering

In addition to the relationship between self-talk and self-regulation, researchers have also found links between self-directed speech and self-concept clarity, mindfulness, and mind wandering (e.g., [20][21]). Self-concept clarity entails the clarity and stability of one's self-concept [22] and having a clear sense of self allows one to form more precise and realistic plans to achieve one's goals (e.g., [23]), and a lack of self-concept clarity may inhibit self-control [24]. Self-talk may be involved in how people conceptualize the self (e.g., [25][26]). Conversely, a group of researchers found modest negative relationships between some phenomenological varieties of inner speech (but not others) and self-concept clarity in a clinical sample, with some differences and some similarities between the clinical and non-clinical groups [20]. When examining this relationship with different measures, university samples (instead of clinical), and a very specific, dialogical variety of inner speech, Oleś and colleagues [18] reported that higher self-concept integration was associated with less frequent internal dialogical activity. It may be that people with a clear sense of self do not need to talk to themselves extensively for self-identity purposes.

Mindfulness is usually defined as a non-judgmental focus on the self in the present moment [27]. Grzybowski [28] found that positive self-talk increased together with trait mindfulness, and later found that self-regulatory self-talk increased together with some aspects of trait mindfulness [29]. The study also showed small but significant negative relationships between a non-judging facet of mindfulness and self-talk for self-management, self-criticism, and social assessment. Perhaps the need to manage and criticize the self and carry out social assessments via self-talk decreases as non-judgement in the present moment increases. There is also evidence from neurological studies, such as one by Riegner and colleagues [30], who found that mindfulness induced weak connectivity between brain areas known to sustain self-referential processing (e.g., the prefrontal cortex), presumably including self-directed speech.

It is also common to distinguish between mindful awareness (being aware of one's internal and external surroundings) and mindful acceptance (non-judgmentally accepting present-moment experiences [31]). Mindful awareness might represent a more active state of self-focus requiring verbal, self-directed probes than mindful acceptance. Conversely, mindful acceptance in the present moment may entail quieting judgmental, self-critical inner speech.

Reports of mindfulness as an enabler of self-regulation, especially in an emotional regulation capacity, have been peaking [32][33][34]. However, this is not always the case for mind wandering, which represents random, off-task thoughts experienced when one is engaged in attention-demanding tasks [35]. While mind wandering can interfere with task focus, it is important to note that it is not always a bad thing—mind wandering might also have something to do with self-communication [36][37], may take the form of verbal conversations with oneself [38], and may even contribute to creativity [39]. Even as such, some seek to eliminate mind wandering [40] and increase self-control [41] using mindfulness.

In essence, putting these pieces together makes it clearer that self-talk probably has a role to play in all of these processes. For example, people may talk to themselves when they are seeking or forming self-concept clarity, when they are gaining awareness of their experience, or when they are distracted from a task. People who use less self-talk or inner speech, are unsure about who they are, or tend to mind wander might also have difficulty with self-regulation. Mindfulness and self-concept clarity are probably helpful for self-regulation and self-talk, whether internal (inner speech) or external (private speech) speech is used.

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