IDENTITY AND
INTERPERSONAL
COMMUNICATION
Objectives:

You should be able to:

1. Define self-concept and describe characteristics of the self.
2. Identify sources of self-knowledge.
3. Define, identity, and distinguish among the four layers of identity.
4. Define identity gaps and describe their consequences.
5. Describe the challenges that confront people as identities change in early adulthood and when children move out of the family home.
6. Strengthen your ability to use interpersonal communication to support your own identity, as well as the identities of others.
SELF-CONCEPT: HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF

• Our personal experiences and interactions with others provide us with substantial information about who we are. When we communicate with other people, we both observe our own behavior and we receive feedback about how others perceive us.

• That sum total of knowledge that you have about yourself is your self-concept. It includes your memories of experiences and accomplishments, your physical traits and distinguishing features, your likes and dislikes, your feelings about yourself, and your experiences communicating with others.
Characteristics of the Self

• The self is subjective. Your self-concept is inherently subjective; in other words, you are who you think you are.

• Another subjective aspect of the self is self-esteem, which is a person’s overall judgment of his or her own worth and value. Researchers measure self-esteem by asking people how much they agree with statements like these (Rosenberg, 1989)

• The self is multifaceted. There are a number of sides to our self-concept that reflect the roles and relationships that we have in different aspects of our lives.
• Facets of the self are more or less visible. Although some facets of the self are easily recognized by others, there are other facets that we try to keep private or that we might not even be aware of.

• The self is dynamic. Although the self-concept is multi-faceted, only the facet that is relevant at a particular moment is active or operational.

• The information that dominates a person’s sense of self at a particular point in time is called the working self-concept.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information about you that is known to you:</th>
<th>Information about yourself that is not known to you:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OPEN SELF</strong></td>
<td><strong>BLIND SELF</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about you that you are aware of and that you share with other people</td>
<td>Information about you that other people are aware of, but you don’t realize about yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIDDEN SELF</strong></td>
<td><strong>UNKNOWN SELF</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information about you that you are aware of, but that you keep secret from other people</td>
<td>Information about you that neither you nor other people are aware of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources of Self-Knowledge

• Your own observations of yourself.

• You can also learn about yourself by observing your specific actions. A self-reflexive act is a behavior that gives you insight into your own state of mind.

• Your social roles. Another source of your self-concept is the different roles you play in your life. Social roles refer to the positions you hold with respect to other people.

• Social comparison. Your self-concept is also the product of social comparison, the process of comparing yourself to others to gain insight into your own traits and abilities.
• Feedback from others. Finally, other people shape our sense of self by the messages and feedback they communicate to us.

• **Generalized Other**: a mental representation of the combined viewpoints of all other people
Although the feedback provided by others can give us insights into ourselves, this process is also subject to the following biases (Kenny, 1994):

- We place a higher value on information from people who are close to us.
- We are more attentive to the perceptions of others when we are experiencing changes in our lives and uncertainty about ourselves.
- We overestimate how much different people agree in their perceptions of us.
- We base our self-concept more on what we believe other people think about us, than how they actually perceive us.
IDENTITY: THE COMMUNICATED SELF

- Identity is the image of yourself that is embodied in communication.
Creating Identity

• One way that we present ourselves to others is self-disclosure, which involves explicitly sharing personal information with another person.

• We also create our identity more indirectly through the topics we discuss and the qualities we display when we communicate with others.

• When you consider how communication behaviors besides self-disclosure reveal your self-concept, you can see that any opportunity to communicate is an opportunity to create your identity.

• Importantly, interpersonal interaction isn’t just a source of information about the self, and nor is it simply a portrayal of the self; rather, it is the venue in which identities are created for self and others.
Layers of Identity

- Communication scholar Michael Hecht suggests that a person’s identity has four layers or frames (Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005).

- The personal layer of identity refers to the perceptions you have about yourself that you communicate to others. This layer encompasses your self-concept, because it includes your perceptions of yourself, and it focuses on the self-knowledge that you display to others through communication.
The enactment layer of identity refers to the qualities we reveal in the verbal and nonverbal style of our communication.

"If I want to impress a woman online, what font should I use? Aristocrat Bold so she'll think I'm rich or Comic Sans so she'll think I'm funny?"
• The **relational layer of identity** includes the various ways in which our personal relationships shape our identities. Our relational partners can either foster or thwart the identities we wish to present.

• The **communal layer of identity**, captures how people’s identities are embedded in their group memberships.

• We can see the four layers of identity at work in the example of **ethnic identity**, which arises from the perception that you share a heritage with a particular racial, cultural, national, or tribal group. A person’s ethnic group is part of the communal layer of identity because it refers to people with whom an individual shares an ethnic identity (Hecht et al., 2005).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layers of identity</th>
<th>Ethnic identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Layer</td>
<td>Ethnicity, or the degree to which membership in the ethnic group is personally important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enactment Layer</td>
<td>The non-verbal and verbal cues, such as appearance, clothing, or dialect, that reflect ethnic group membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Layer</td>
<td>The kinds of relationships valued within the ethnic group, and the ways members of the group relate to each other in terms of status or friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Layer</td>
<td>The ethnic groups that a person belongs to</td>
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Identity Gaps

• The relationships among the layers of identity are captured by the word *interpenetration*, which refers to how the layers of identity are connected to each other.

• When the different layers of identity don’t match, an *identity gap* is present (Jung & Hecht, 2004a).

• Although some disagreement across layers of your identity is inevitable, large identity gaps can have profound consequences.
IDENTITIES IN TRANSITION

• Our self-concept changes with the different circumstances we experience over the course of our life.
Emerging Adulthood

• Our self-concept evolves throughout our lives, but the changes we experience are especially striking in the period from adolescence to adulthood (around ages 18 to 25) known as emerging adulthood.

• As people develop an adult identity, their relational layer is especially likely to change.

• Importantly, emerging adulthood is also a period when sexual identities become solidified. Sexual identity is more than sexual orientation; it refers to how you perceive and express your sexual needs, values, and preferences. Communication experiences are an important part of developing a sexual identity.
The Empty Nest