

# Identifying and Changing Perceptions of Self-Value: A Tool Bag



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In highly collectivist societies like South Korea, Japan, and China, individuality is not emphasized. From birth until death, self-perception is built on the views of others. This could be related to socioeconomic status, academic achievement, family ties, friends, associates, physical appearance, and much more. That's not to say this function does not exist in Western society, it does, but it is much less pronounced. In a country like the United States, where individuality is paramount to identity, you would think the opinions of others would matter less. I don't believe this to be true. Whether Americans consciously embrace or dismiss the idea of collectivism (priority of the group over the individual) is not important. What is important is understanding how individuals in American society suffer from negative perceptions of self due to the anxieties of an unconscious search for group recognition and approval.

I'm sure most have felt, at times, that deciding to pursue a relationship, or perhaps a new activity, or engage with unfamiliar work was dependent on the opinion of others, and not on the conscious evaluation of personal ability:

*"Do you think I can get this job? Do you think I can make the team? Do you think this class would be too hard for me?"*

That's not to say others' opinions can't be valuable when making tough decisions, but when the decision-making *cannot* be done without the opinion of another, then there are issues of self-value and poor perceptions of personal ability. The feeling of deciding on your own and feeling confident about it can be freeing, and even more so a revolution in self-esteem if things go well. But how do we get from point A (poor perceptions of self-value and ability) to point B (high perceptions of self-value and ability)? I will provide a simple two-step roadmap that can aid in moving from A to B, with a few interesting scientific tidbits throughout.

To address your eager question of "*how do we do it then,*" the answer is primarily through exposure. I believe there are many tools to change perceptions of self, but exposure is one of the most important. Exposure to new ideas, to circumstances, to failure and success, and most importantly, exposure to new people and new environments, and exposure to the idea of a new, improved,

and more confident YOU. Let's define useful terms before moving forward for clarity's sake:

1. **Exposure** - the state of being exposed to contact with something.
2. **Perception** - a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something; a mental impression.
3. **Self** - a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others.
4. **Value** - the importance, worth, or usefulness of something.
5. **Environment** - the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded.
6. **Esteem** - respect and admiration.

In the next three sections, we will first explore *how* we view ourselves, and finally how we can use these realizations to change ourselves for the better.

### The Veil and Double Consciousness

You may or may not be familiar with the early 20th-century sociologist, W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois was a prominent American

sociologist who wrote on some of America's most persistent social issues. Two of Du Bois' most important ideas were the concepts of: 1) **The Veil** and 2) **Double Consciousness**. According to Du Bois, The Veil was a description of how people see the world as a result of their experience. For example, a man who grows up in the countryside will view the city differently than a native urbanist. Hence, he is viewing his urban environment through his native rural veil. In Du Bois' own words, Double Consciousness is described as "*always*



*looking at oneself through the eyes of others.*" Essentially, looking at and evaluating yourself and personal worth through the eyes and opinions of others. Both ideas may sound very similar by definition. However, there is an important yet subtle distinction that separates them. In the case of **The Veil**, the individual is interpreting the world through their point of view. In the case of **Double Consciousness**, the individual views the

world through the eyes of others, not by conscious choice, but by conditioning.

By now it's understandable if you're asking, "ok, so how does this relate to me, and does it?" Fair enough. The truth is all individuals, you and me alike, experience The Veil and Double Consciousness to some degree, whether we consciously acknowledge it or not. What is most important though is to identify our Veil and Double Consciousness: to examine and evaluate them, to colorize and associate them, to dissect and consciously live them.



If we're able to do that we have a chance in changing our (assumedly if you're reading this in the first place) disparaged perceptions of self-value. The next time you are applying to a job, working, performing, having dinner with friends, or mulling over a decision, instead of thinking about your pending action or decision from the point of view of the other, let the imaginary person view you

through your lens. Let them take on your personal feelings, not the feelings you think they have about you. Because most often those feelings you may think they have are your projected feelings of self-doubt, condemnation, and skepticism for your own work, worth, and ability. From a mental and emotional level, you've already set yourself up for failure.

"But what about where I come from, where I grew up, the culture I was imbued with since childhood, how can I escape The Veil if it's all I know?" Separating yourself from your Veil is indeed a challenge. Many would call the act of doing so a form of relativism... though entirely removing The Veil may be challenging or nearly impossible. What's most important in this case is that you're able to classify or itemize what your Veil is composed of. For example, if you're from a rural area, does the city stir feelings of anxiety? If you can identify the cause of this anxiety, then you are fully capable of decoding your veil in its entirety. Once you can identify what makes up your veil then you can more easily define what doesn't. The things that exist outside your veil are the things that are most useful in changing your

perceptions. Exposure to the unfamiliar will be the quickest way to dislodge you from both your Veil and Double Consciousness, or at the very least, provide a pseudo-third person experience in self-examination that leads to significant change.

Examination of The Veil and Double Consciousness is an essential first step in changing perceptions of self. As both are the groundwork for understanding the self, the self's real and non-real limitations, and to understand the self and its relative place in an environment that is composed of both objects and people.

#### Implicit and Explicit Bias of Self

Although research on bias has accelerated in recent years, whether medical, educational, or disciplinary, most research has been conducted on individual bias and group bias, and not bias directed towards the self. Implicit and explicit bias have been an important measure of determining medical outcomes, the probability of securing capital, the likelihood of purchasing a home, as well as many other areas. Large-scale implicit and explicit bias evaluation

is usually done through testing. These tests may be useful when asking individuals about others, but do they work when tasked with evaluating an individual's perceptions of their own self-value and ability?



While implicit and explicit bias has not to my knowledge been used to gauge perceptions of self in any official capacity, I think it can be used to help individuals better understand why they have issues with low self-esteem, self-value, and low perceptions of ability.

In this case, bias is the unfair favor of one thing over another. It is executed either implicitly (*the unconscious bias*) or explicitly (*the conscious bias*). The dilemma is, explicit bias is relatively easy to consciously identify; implicit bias is harder to identify—while **both** can be hard to change—especially when it comes to changing bias against yourself. Examples of explicit and implicit bias are as follows. First, let's look at an example

of explicit bias: opinions held about the act of smoking and people who smoke. Only with time and an incredible amount of scientific evidence and complementary anecdotal evidence did perceptions change. If you ask someone today whether smoking is, A) unhealthy, or B) expensive, the likelihood is that most would answer YES in response to both. But with every explicit bias, there also exists implicit bias. Consider two equally qualified candidates who are competing for a job, both with near-identical ability. Both are interviewed and evaluated on the principle of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity.



Although the company claims an unbiased evaluation process, one man was offered a job and the other was not. Why? Because one man had, although well-manicured, yellow-tinted nails—a common tell for regular smokers. Although the interviewer had a duty to be unbiased, changing societal perceptions of smoking, and smokers, was the

ultimate decision-maker, whether the interviewer was conscious of their bias in decision making or not.

In terms of explicit and implicit bias and the self, we make these types of decisions all the time whether aware of it or not. Which colleges we apply to, who we romantically pursue, what jobs we apply for, where we live, who our friends are, and many other markers involve some level of self-bias, both implicit and explicit. For example, consider 30 potential colleges—10 excellent, 20 great, and 10 OK. Hopeful students are asked to pick 10 to apply for admission. The results on average? Students overwhelmingly picked the schools that were rated as great and ok; and chose schools below their level of academic ability even in the face of more positive evaluations by family, school counselors, and friends—just one example of explicit bias of personal ability. In terms of implicit bias, consider the bar scene, or any place that could result in romantic engagement. How do you choose your romantic engagement? By looks? By physical appearance? Surely the first impression counts most in this circumstance, no? Well, yes and no.

Appearance does matter, but not in the way one may think. According to a study done by the University of Miami, the biggest determinant in prospective partner selection is your physical appearance or the appearance of the opposite parent. You may not consciously realize it, but the likelihood is that you will choose a partner who looks like you or an opposite-sex parent is incredibly high.

Can we change implicit and explicit bias? The answer is yes, but it's not easy. We need constant and continuous exposure that is contrary, but most importantly, positive. In this case, consider therapy. Forming associations with success and good experience is important in formulating a new idea of self. The next time you find yourself at the grocery, ask, *why* this drink, or *why* this snack? You may think...well because I like it? That's fine but think about it more deeply. What attracts you to this item specifically? Mentally note the color, the shape, the flavor, and try to identify whether those traits have any significance in other areas of your life. If this is done regularly with something simple, we can build the tools that can help us better examine ourselves.

With these tools, we can understand why we may be biased against our abilities, skeptical of our value, and ultimately, why we may be lacking esteem.



### **Tying it Together**

We've identified the Veil, Double Consciousness, Explicit and Implicit Bias, as well as defined a host of terms [exposure, perception, self-value, environment, esteem], and reiterated many times the importance of exposure in changing perceptions of self. How do we go about utilizing all these components to make something truly useful? Here is a four-point outline that can help you change your perceptions of self and elevate your value/worth.

1. Thoroughly identify your veil (or lens) through which you perceive the world. Where did you grow up, how did you grow up, what do you do, who are your parents, who are your friends, what do you

currently think about the world?

Make a date/plan to expose yourself to something outside your usual environment. This is a single step towards reinvention of your veil.

2. When you interact with a friend, associate, boss, or acquaintance, recognize how you think they view you. Instead of holding the self-projection of their perceptions, consciously realign your thoughts to hold positive self-perceptions. This is a single step towards the reimagining of your Double Consciousness.
3. The next time you find yourself verbally doubting a personal project, idea, or relationship, stop, catch the thought, criticism, or opinion, and ask yourself why you

think it. Think of evidence that supports your bias. The likelihood is, your self-doubt and criticism are not warranted and go against the evidence, unjustly bringing down your self-value. This is a personal call-out of your explicit self-bias.

4. Finally, when you arrive as we all will at the crossroads of life, it's here where time is of value and *not* making a hasty decision is a virtue. The next time you encounter a Yes or No question about yourself, suspend your implicit decision-making by not answering. Instead, think for a moment, and ask, which decision builds my self-esteem/self-value, and builds constant, positive, and enduring perceptions of self?

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