Psychological Centrality and Self-Concept Change

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INTRODUCTION

Any theory of the self-concept must address itself to the "thorny problem of self-concept change (Rosenberg, 1979: 76)." That is, what are the conditions under which individuals will be willing or unwilling to change the way they think and feel about themselves? Here we explore the possibility that the psychological centrality (Rosenberg, 1979: 73-77) or relative phenomenological importance, of a self-conception is one factor that influences a person's willingness to consider changing that self-conception.

Rosenberg (1979: 75-76) develops the problem of psychological centrality and self-concept change in terms of the apparently contradictory evidence generated by attempts to get people to change the way they think and feel about themselves. On the one hand, he notes, experimental social psychologists such as Videbeck (1960), Maehr, et al. (1962), and Webster and Sobieszek (1974) (and I would add Alexander and colleagues, 1969; 1971; 1977; 1981) seem to have little difficulty getting subjects to change their self-conceptions in response to experimental treatments of one sort or another. On the other hand, Rosenberg points out, clinicians consistently report that self-concept change is one of the most difficult goals to achieve in therapy. Rosenberg (1979: 75) argues that the concept of "psychological centrality" is the key to understanding these contradictory findings surrounding the problem of self-concept change.

Psychological centrality refers to the idea that the identities and attributes that make up the self-concept are not all equally important to us, but vary in the extent to which they are central or peripheral to the way we think about ourselves. This idea has its roots in the writings of the first generation of social psychologists (i.e. James, 1890; Cooley, 1902; and Mead, 1934),

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and has been developed in contemporary work under different names, including "identity salience" (Stryker, 1968; McCall and Simmons, 1978), "role/person merger" (Turner, 1978), "central life interests" (Dubin, 1956), "role commitment" (Heiss, 1981) and "authenticity" (Gecas and Mortimer, 1984).

Using this idea, Rosenberg suggests that experimental social psychologists are able to report changes in self-conceptions as a result of experimental treatments because the self-conceptions which are the focus of these experiments are almost always of little or no importance to the subjects involved. Thus, consistent with Alexander's (see Alexander and Wiley, 1981 for a review) "situated identity" theory, it is not at all surprising to find that in these artfully contrived experimental situations, subjects will latch on to whatever self-attributions have been defined as socially desirable. The willingness of subjects to identify themselves with these situationally specific and socially desirable identities can then be interpreted as evidence to support the position that the self-concept is a relatively malleable entity, subject to manipulation in the social psychology laboratory. In contrast, he argues, clinicians face stiff opposition in their attempts to get their patients to change their views of themselves because the self-conceptions which are the focus of psychotherapy are undoubtedly of central importance to their patients. He interprets this evidence to support the position that the self-concept is a far more durable entity than the experimental evidence implies. For Rosenberg (1979: 76), the concept of psychological centrality nicely resolves these contradictory findings:

> An experimenter can easily convince us that we are
> poor connoisseurs of white burgundy, but can he as
> easily convince us that we are fascists or latent
> homosexuals? . . . Whether it is difficult or
> easy to change a self-concept component thus de-
> pends in large part on how critical it is to the
> individual's system of self-values. The person
> who has staked himself solidly on certain statuses
> or dispositions may resist, with all the resources
> at his disposal, any efforts to change these elements,
> for his very concept of self and feeling of self-
> worth rest on these foundations.

Rosenberg's main point in this discussion is to emphasize the significance of the idea of psychological centrality for understanding the dynamics of the self-concept (see also, Rosenberg and Pearlin, 1978). (footnote #1) Along the way, however, he has raised an important issue. If Rosenberg is correct, and experimental social psychologists studying this problem have, either by design or by default, focused only on relatively trivial components of the self-concept, his interpretation would support the view, held by many, that experimental social psychology is largely irrelevant to helping us understand the most important questions of human social behavior (see Ring, 1967; Katz, 1972; McGuire, 1973; Gergen, 1973; Helmreich, 1975).

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This issue is of particular concern to sociologists, since the self-concept is probably the most important and most studied topic in sociological social psychology (see Rosenberg and Turner, 1981; Rosenberg and Kaplan, 1982). This long-standing interest continues because it is generally thought to be the idea best capable of addressing the fundamental problem of the discipline: the mutual determination of the individual and society (Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1981). If, however, experiments in the social psychology laboratory are destined to be limited to focusing on superficial aspects of the self-concept, then social psychological experimentation is also destined to be limited in its capacity to contribute to our understanding of this fundamental problem.

Intended or not, Rosenberg's (1979: 75-76) discussion of the relationship between psychological centrality and self-concept change constitutes a challenge to experimentally inclined social psychologists interested in the self-concept. If Rosenberg is correct, had these experiments focusing on self-concept change targeted psychologically central rather than psychologically peripheral self-conceptions-- perhaps closer to the kind of self-conceptions that clinicians deal with-- no changes in the self-concept would have been found because psychologically central self-conceptions are immune to the sort of manipulations generally employed in these experiments. Though this explanation is plausible, to my knowledge, neither Rosenberg nor anyone else has attempted to test it directly. The question is this: is it possible to induce change in psychologically central self-conceptions under experimental conditions? If not, then Rosenberg's hypothesis about the relationship between psychological centrality and self-concept change would be supported and the relevance of experimental social psychology to exploring the self-concept would appear limited. If so, then Rosenberg's hypothesis would be challenged and the relevance of experimental social psychology to exploring the self-concept would appear unlimited. Intrigued by this question, I conducted an experiment designed to answer it. This paper is a report of the findings from that experiment.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CENTRALITY AND SELF-CONCEPT CHANGE

The Self-Concept

If we ask someone of this culture and time to write down a dozen or so statements in answer to the question "Who am I?" (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954) we find that he or she generally has little difficulty in doing so. The responses we get usually consist of a mixture of social identities (e.g. "welder," "mother," "blood donor") and self-attributes (e.g. "kind," "a likable person," "mixed up,"). It is generally accepted among contemporary researchers that an exhaustive inventory of such statements from a person at a particular moment in time would constitute an individual's global self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979: ix; Gecas, 1982).

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Psychological Centrality

It was initially assumed that the spontaneous ordering of the responses in answer to the question "Who am I?" constituted a measurement of the relative importance of these statements to the individual: those responses which occurred first were thought to be more important than those responses that came later (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954: 72). Subsequent research, however, has shown this assumption to be false (McPhail and Tucker, 1972; Tucker, 1966; Staples, 1980). If subjects are instructed, following the initial listing of responses, to "please reorder (or not) these statements in terms of how important each is to defining who you are as a person," the concordance between the rankings of the two lists of self-statements tends to be quite low. However, these latter findings do suggest that, while these self-statements do not appear in order of importance to the person spontaneously, subjects apparently have little difficulty reordering their statements in terms of their importance when specifically asked to do so. Thus, there is good reason to believe that the self-concept is not only composed of discrete identities and attributes, but that these components are experienced as being more or less important to the person. It is this dimension of the self-concept that we refer to as "psychological centrality" (Rosenberg, 1979), or phenomenological importance, and it is this dimension of the self-concept that we would like to discuss in relation to self-concept change.

Self-Concept Change

In order to avoid confusion, it is necessary that we be clear about what we mean by self-concept change. Here, self-concept change refers to change in identity, or role-identity. From a sociological perspective, role-identities are of particular interest because it is through one's roles that we are most directly linked to the groups and institutions that make up society. Therefore, in talking about self-concept change in terms of change in role-identities we are also talking about the process through which individuals align or distance themselves from the various and sometimes competing groups that make up society. Thus, by understanding what motivates people to change their commitment to role-identities we may also shed some light on the problem of how and why groups capture, hold on to, and lose their members (see also Kornhauser, 1962; Coser, 1979).

The problem of psychological centrality and self-concept change concerns the relationship between the subjective importance of an identity and the willingness or unwillingness of an individual to change that identity. The hypothesis preferred by Rosenberg (1979: 75-76) and others (Turner, 1978; Gecas and Mortimer, 1984:11) is that the more psychologically central, or important, the identity, the less likely a person will be to change the identity. The primary justification for this hypothesis appears to rest on an appeal to the self-esteem motive and the presumed relationship between psychological centrality and the need for self-esteem. As Rosenberg (1979: 76) states, "The person who has staked himself solidly on certain statuses or dispositions may resist, with all the resources at his disposal, any efforts to change these elements, for his very concept of

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self and feeling of self-worth rest on these foundations (my emphasis)." Conversely, self-conceptions that are psychologically peripheral should be more amenable to change because the individual's self-esteem is not dependent on these unimportant self-conceptions. As Rosenberg (1979:75-76) notes, in discussing the experiment of Videbeck (1960; se also Maehr et al., 1962; Webster and Sobieszek, 1974; Alexander and Wiley, 1981), subjects who were arbitrarily rated as either good or bad "speech experts" were easily persuaded to change their opinion of themselves as "speech experts" because the identity of "speech expert," invented for the experiment, was probably irrelevant to most of the subjects (see also James, 1890: 309). From this perspective, the results of this experiment might have been much different had the subjects been members of the debate team.

This hypothesis is very compelling. It is well-grounded theoretically and also seems consistent with common-sense assumptions about human behavior. Are there any grounds, therefore, to expect us to be able to induce change in self-conceptions that are psychologically central to people as a result of an experimental treatment?

The first hypothesis implies that the first, and perhaps only, response people make to a threat to the self is to hold on to the self-conception that is threatened. That is, there is a motive for self-concept consistency, or stability (Rosenberg, 1979:57-62). Self-consistency, according to Rosenberg (1979: 57) ". . . refers to the motive to act in accordance with the self-concept and to maintain it intact in the face of potentially challenging evidence." This idea may be sound in general; however, when used in this way it elevates the self-consistency motive over the self-esteem motive. That is, if self-consistency, underlies our most central self-conceptions, than the predictable response to a threat to our most central self-conceptions is self-concept stability. This is precisely the prediction we are led to by Rosenberg (1979: 75-76). Thus, where at first it appears that Rosenberg's (1979: 75-76) hypothesis regarding the relationship between psychological centrality and self-concept change rests on the self-esteem motive, closer inspection suggests that a person's unwillingness to change important self-conceptions is motivated not by the need for self-esteem, but by the need for self-consistency. If self-esteem is the motive underlying psychologically central self-conceptions, then is it not reasonable to expect that self-esteem could be maintained or enhanced just as easily by changing self-conceptions as by holding on to them?

In our view, the need for self-consistency, is subordinate to the need for self-esteem. We believe that people have an overriding need to feel good about themselves and that they will struggle to maintain these good feelings whenever they are threatened and will strive to enhance them whenever possible (Rokeach, 1980). Consequently, when faced with a threat to the self, people will be just as willing to change their self-conceptions as they will be to hold onto them-- not because they have a need to change or hold onto self-conceptions, but because they have a need to maintain or enhance self-esteem (Rokeach, 1980; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984: 19-20).

Further, we also believe that, in general, when we reflect upon our selves, certain identities and attributes are seen to be more important than others because it is through these aspects of the self that we hope to demonstrate, to ourselves and others, our competence and morality. That is, the psychological centrality of a self-conception is a function of the extent to which that self-conception gives us, or holds the promise of giving us, the feeling that we are competent and moral people.

If, as is suggested above, the self-esteem motive determines the psychological centrality of a self-conception then the secret to inducing change in psychologically central self-conceptions is to get subjects to question their beliefs about the morality and competence of those self-conceptions. These considerations lead us to propose that individuals will be more, not less, likely to change their central self-conceptions than they will be to change their peripheral self-conceptions, provided that they come to believe that it is necessary to change those self-conceptions in order to maintain or enhance their self-esteem. It is precisely because our important self-conceptions are the primary sources of our self-esteem that we are acutely sensitive to any feedback about those self-conceptions that has implication for self-evaluation. Thus, we are constantly seeking out, through role-taking, social comparisons, and self-attribution (Rosenberg, 1979; Gecas, 1982), information about the self-conceptions that are most important to us. In contrast, because our less important self-conceptions are less important to our self-esteem, we are much less sensitive to any feedback about those peripheral self-conceptions.

Further, where information about our less important self-conceptions is likely to have little or no impact on us, our discoveries about our most central self-conceptions are likely to set in motion a process of self-evaluation leading either to feelings of self-satisfaction or feeling of self-dissatisfaction, depending upon whether or not the feedback we get suggests our performance is consistent or inconsistent, not with our need for consistency, but with our need for self-esteem (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984: 20).

Finally, feelings of self-dissatisfaction arising from the recognition of inconsistencies between our self-conceptions and our need for self-esteem will lead us to change, or attempt to change, whatever it is about ourselves that has threatened our sense of self-worth or self-competence. In contrast, feeling of self-satisfaction arising from the recognition of consistencies between our self-conceptions and our need for self-esteem will lead us to hold onto, or attempt to hold onto, whatever it is about ourselves that has affirmed our sense of self-worth or self-competence (Rokeach, 1980; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984: 17-38).

The ideas developed above lead to competing hypotheses regarding the likelihood of inducing change in psychologically central self-conceptions through an experimental treatment. The first hypothesis, relying largely on the self-consistency motive, suggests that it will be easier to change unimportant self-conceptions than it will be to change important self-conceptions. In contrast, the second hypothesis, relying entirely on the self-

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esteem motive, suggests that it will be easier to change impor-
tant self-conceptions than it will be to change unimportant self-
conceptions, with the provision that the attempt to change these
self-conceptions must implicate the self-esteem upon which they
are based.

POLITICAL IDENTITY AND THE METHOD OF SELF-CONFRONTATION

To determine whether or not it is possible to change psycho-
logically central self-conceptions through an experimental treat-
ment, an experiment was designed that (1) focused on a identity
that we might reasonably expect to vary in its degree of psycho-
logical centrality across subjects and (2) provided subjects with
feedback about the relationships between their identities, on the
one hand, and their related values and attitudes, on the other
hand, in a way that implicated the morality of their identities.

The experiment focused on what we have called the _political
identity_. Here, political identity refers to the liberal--
conservative ideological spectrum as we know it at this time in
the United States. As public opinion polls clearly demonstrate,
many Americans can and do identify themselves along the liberal--
conservative continuum. And, though it is not always clear that
everyone means the same thing by "liberal," or "conservative," it
is reasonably certain that this spectrum allows individuals to
identify with or distance themselves from fairly well defined
political groups and ideologies. Thus, as discussed above, the
political identity is a role-identity to the extent that it
functions to align individuals with or distance them from groups
and institutions. Moreover, the political identity is one that
allows variability in psychological centrality. As the polls
also indicate, many people care about politics, are active in
political organizations, and have well-defined political identi-
ties, while other people have no interest in politics, rarely
vote or participate in political organizations, and have ill-
defined political identities. In other words, people vary a
great deal in the level of commitment to these political groups
and this variability of commitment is reflected at an individual
level in the variability of the psychological centrality of the
political identity across individuals.

The second hypothesis stipulates that the attempt to change
political identity must in one way or another implicate the
subject's sense of self-worth or self-competence. Rokeach's
(1968; 1973; see Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984 for a review) method
of _self-confrontation_ is ideally suited to this requirement. In
a series of studies done over the past twenty years, Rokeach and
his colleagues have induced predictable long-term changes in
values, attitudes, and behaviors by presenting subjects with
feedback about these beliefs and behaviors in a way that induces
either feelings of self-satisfaction leading to stability or
feelings of self-dissatisfaction leading to change.

In the experiment described below, a self-confrontation
treatment was employed that was designed to provide subjects
feedback about possible consistencies or inconsistencies between
their political values and attitudes and their political
identities in a way that would implicate the morality of their

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political identities.   Consistent with Rokeach's theory, we
should expect some subjects to become dissatisfied with what they
discover about themselves, and therefore we also expect them to
change their political identities in a direction that will main-
tain or enhance their self-esteem.

If the first hypothesis regarding the relationship between
psychological centrality and self-concept change is correct, then
we should find that those subjects who care less about their
political identities should change them more than those subjects
who care a great deal about their political identities.   If the
second hypothesis is correct then we should find the opposite:
subjects who care a great deal about their political identities
should change them more than those who care little about their
political identities.

<div align="center">SUBJECTS, MEASUREMENT, AND PROCEDURES</div>

Subjects
    All of the 120 subjects who participated in the experiment
were students attending Washington State University during the
summer of 1985.   Students in both introductory and advanced
sociology classes were asked to volunteer to participate in a
study of "values and politics."

Measurement
    POLITICAL IDENTITY To measure political identity, subjects
were asked to place an adhesive label with the word "myself"
printed on it on a scale that had "EXTREMELY CONSERVATIVE" at the
top, "MODERATE" in the middle, and "EXTREMELY CONSERVATIVE" at
the bottom.   After the experiment, placement on the scale was
assigned an arbitrary score ranging from "0" to "100" such that a
score of "0" indicates "EXTREMELY LIBERAL," a score of "50"
indicates "MODERATE,' and a score of "100" indicates "EXTREMELY
CONSERVATIVE."   Pretest data on 58 student subjects showed that
scores ranged from 8 to 85, with a mean of 42.98 and a standard
deviation of 17.71.   Four-week test-retest reliability was .79
for a pretest sample of 43 student subjects.

    PSYCHOLOGICAL CENTRALITY   To measure the psychological cen-
trality of the political identity, subjects were asked to indi-
cate whether their political identity was "very important,"
"somewhat important," "not very important," or "completely un-
important" in response to the following statement: "Some people
care a great deal about their political identity-- it is very
important to them.   Other people don't care very much about their
political identity-- it isn't important to them at all.   Below,
check the statement that comes closest to YOUR view."

Procedures
    The experiment utilized a pretest-posttest control group design
(Campbell and Stanley, 1966: 13-25) with the posttest occurring 1
week after the experimental session.   Subjects were randomly
assigned to experimental and control groups.   Two researchers
(the author and an assistant), both males approximately the same
age, conducted the pretest and posttest sessions.   The two re-

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searchers were assigned to control and experimental sessions randomly. All subjects provided self-generated identification numbers that were used to match pretest and posttest question-naires, thereby assuring subject anonymity.

THE EXPERIMENTAL SESSION After providing the pretest data on their political identities and the psychological centrality of their political identities, subjects were asked to complete the Rokeach Value Survey (1982, Form G), which asks subjects to rank order 18 terminal values ". . . in order of their importance to YOU, as guiding principles in YOUR life," One of these values is "EQUALITY: brotherhood, equal opportunity for all,"which has been shown to be strongly related to political ideology (Rokeach, 1973). In addition, subjects also were asked to answer and then compute their scores on 3 scales composed of 5 questions each that measured their attitudes toward equal rights for blacks, women, and gays.

When all subjects had completed the first part of the question-naire, they were instructed to turn to the next page and to focus their attention on Table 1. This table contains data showing the

Table 1. "Table 1" Shown to Experimental Subjects

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	37 WSU LIBERALS	33 WSU MODERATES	20 WSU CONSERVATIVES
Average rank of the value EQUALITY	7	14	15

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composite rank order of the value equality by self-reported political identity as provided by 90 Washington State University students during the spring, 1985 semester. Subjects were then read an interpretation of the table which included the following statement:

Apparently, by ranking EQUALITY 7th, LIBERALS are saying that brotherhood and equal opportunity for all is MORE important to them than are 11 other values. On the other hand, by ranking EQUALITY 15th, CONSERVATIVES àre really saying that only 3 other values are LESS important to them than brotherhood and equal opportunity for all.

The subjects were given a minute to absorb the information presented to them and were then instructed to turn the page of their. questionnaire and direct their attention to the information presented to them in Table 2. This table provided subjects with feedback about their attitudes toward equal rights for blacks, women, and gays. Table 2 presented average scores on each of these scales as provided by the same 90 Washington State University students who provided the data shown in Table 1. The subjects were first told that high scores (25) on these attitude scales indicated opposition to equal rights, while low scores on

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Table 2. "Table 2" Shown to Experimental Subjects

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	37 WSU LIBERALS	33 WSU MODERATES	20 WSU CONSERVATIVES
BLACKS	9.8	11.4	12.5
WOMEN	10.0	10.4	11.8
GAYS	12.9	14.5	15.6

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these attitude scales indicated a favorable attitude toward equal
rights.   The subjects were then read an interpretation of the
table which included the following statement:
   Thus, our findings from Table 2 support those we found in Table
1:   CONSERVATIVES are less in favor of equality than are LIBERALS
and this finding is also reflected in the fact that CONSERVA-
TIVES, on average, also tend to be more racist, more sexist, and
more anti-gay than are LIBERALS.
   After completing several additional questions regarding their
feelings about what they had discovered, the subjects were thank-
ed for their participation, encouraged to attend the posttest
session, and dismissed.

   THE CONTROL SESSION The control session involved providing
subjects with a placebo self-confrontation.   This was done in
order to insure that the control group experienced the same
psychodynamic processes as the treatment group (Greenstein,
1976:258).   After completing the sections on their political
identity and values, subjects were provided with feedback showing
differences in the composite rank order of four instrumental
values (ambitious, broad-minded, helpful, and independent) by
five different academic majors (nursing, social science, communi-
cation, business, and commercial recreation).   These data (not
shown) had been collected from 58 sociology students at
Washington State University during the previous semester.   The
subjects were invited to compare their chosen academic major and
their rankings of these four values with the majors and rankings
of the students shown to them in the table.   When all subjects
had completed the the questionnaire, they were thanked for their
participation, encouraged to return in one week for the posttest
session, and dismissed.

   THE POSTTEST SESSION One week after the pretest, 102 of the
original 120 subjects returned to complete a posttest question-
naire that measured their values and political identities.   After
completing the posttest questionnaires, the subjects were de-
briefed, thanked for their cooperation, and dismissed.

   PRETEST ANALYSIS Fifty-four of the original 62 control sub-
jects and 48 of the original 58 experimental subjects returned

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for the posttest. A comparison of the pretest scores between the 102 subjects who came to both sessions and the 18 subjects who attended only the first session revealed that the latter group tended to be slightly more conservative and to feel that their political identity was somewhat less important than did the former group. These differences, however, were not statistically significant. Consequently, the following analysis focuses exclusively on the 102 subjects for which both pretest and posttest data are available.

While no statistically significant pretest differences were found between treatment groups on any of the variables, experimental subjects ranked equality slightly lower than did control subjects (mean experimental=10.73, mean control=9.53) and were also slightly more conservative than were control subjects (mean experimental= 48.55, mean control=42.59). Consequently, we control for variation in pretest scores between treatment groups by analyzing pretest-posttest change scores (Campbell and Stanley, 1966: 23), defined as pretest political identity score minus posttest political identity score. Thus, since a high score indicates a conservative political identity, a negative change score indicates a shift in a conservative direction from pretest to posttest, a positive score indicates a shift in a liberal direction between pretest and posttest, and a score of 0 indicates no change in political identity from pretest to posttest.

FINDINGS

Before presenting the results of the experiment, it is useful to briefly discuss what we were attempting to accomplish with the experimental treatment. This treatment was designed to take advantage of the fact that many Americans espouse or support the democratic principle of equality and equal opportunity. Or, if they do not espouse or support it themselves, they are at least aware of the idea that to be a good American is to believe, at least to some extent, in equal rights for others. The information presented to experimental subjects, however, implied that some individuals were more in favor of equality than were other individuals. Specifically, the information from Table 1 and Table 2 suggested that liberals were more in favor of equality and equal rights than were moderates or conservatives. Most importantly, by inference, this information also suggested that liberals, by virtue of their relatively greater support for equality, were more moral (i.e. "better Americans") than either moderates or conservatives. In short, immediately after these subjects had identified themselves as liberals, moderates, or conservatives, we provided these subjects with feedback concerning the relative morality of liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

The situation we created in the experimental session was designed to initiate a process of focused self-evaluation among the subjects. In short, we challenged them to confront the moral implications of their political identities. According to Rokeach's (1973; 1980; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984) theory of self-confrontation, some subjects should have felt satisfied and some

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subjects should have felt dissatisfied by what they discovered
about themselves. Among the satisfied subjects we should observe
little or no change in political identity. Indeed, as a conse-
quence of self-satisfaction, these subjects should have been
motivated to strengthen and affirm their political identities
(Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984: 32-36). In contrast, those subjects
who felt dissatisfied with themselves should have been motivated
to change their political identities in order to assuage their
feelings of dissatisfaction and protect their self-esteem. The
question of central concern to us is: who is more likely to have
been affected by this feedback, those subjects who cared a great
deal about being a liberal, moderate, or conservative, or those
subjects who cared very little about being a liberal, moderate,
or conservative?

If the impact of self-confrontation varies by level of psycho-
logical centrality then we should expect to find a statistically
significant interaction between treatment and psychological cen-
trality. This hypothesis was tested with a 2 X 4, treatment by
psychological centrality, analysis of variance. The dependent
variable is change in political identity from the pretest to the
posttest, where a positive value indicates a shift in a liberal
direction.

The results of the two-way ANOVA are presented in Table 3. As
we might expect, neither the main effect for treatment nor the
main effect for psychological centrality are statistically

Table 3. Treatment X Psychological Centrality ANOVA

Dependent Variable: Change in Political Identity

	Sum of Squares	DF	F	Sig.
Main Effects				
Treatment	26.613	1	.190	.644
Psychological Centrality	379.095	3	.900	.444
2-Way Interaction				
Treatment X Psychological Centrality	1580.340	3	3.753	.014
Explained	1987.008	7	2.023	.060
Residual	13192.482	94		
Total	15179.490	101		

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significant. In particular, there is no reason to expect an overall shift in political identity in a particular direction because the treatment is expected to affect the subjects in different ways; some subjects may not change at all, some may become more liberal, and some may become more conservative. In contrast, the 2-way interaction between treatment and psychological centrality is statistically significant (F=3.753, DF=3, sig.=.014). Thus, as expected, the effect of the self-confrontation on change in political identity appears to have varied by the level of psychological centrality of the political identity.

Having established a statistically significant interaction between self-confrontation and psychological centrality, we now turn to the question of which subjects-- those with high psychological centrality or those with low psychological centrality for the dependent variable. As indicated, 5 of the 8 cells in the

Table 4. Means For Change in Political Identity for Treatment X Psychological Centrality ANOVA

		Psychological Centrality of Political Identity			
		1	2	3	4
Treatment Group					
Experimental	mean=	11.44	-3.25	-2.81	3.00
	N=	(9)	(20)	(16)	(3)
Control	mean=	-6.25	-1.65	1.82	-2.75
	N=	(8)	(20)	(22)	(4)

1= "very important," 2="somewhat important," 3="not very important," 4="not at all important"
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table show a shift in political identity in a conservative direction from the pretest to the posttest, while the remaining 3 cells show a shift in a liberal direction. Importantly, the subjects showing the largest average change in political identity from the pretest to the posttest are the experimental subjects for whom the political identity was "very important." As expected, these 9 subjects shifted their political identity in a liberal direction, and this shift averaged 11.44 points on the 100 point political identity scale. A Duncan's Multiple Range Test revealed that the mean change for this group was significantly different from the mean change in the "very important" control group, both the experimental and control "somewhat important" groups, and the "not very important" experimental group at the .05 level. No other 2-way comparisons were significant at the .05 level. Using the more conservative Scheffe Multiple Comparison Test, however, none of the 2-way comparisons possible in Table 4 were significant at the .05 level. Thus, while the

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"very important" experimental subjects exhibited the largest
change in political identity of all subjects defined by the 2-way
interaction, the results of the statistical tests employed are
contradictory, suggesting that we be cautious in placing confi-
dence in this finding. With only 17 subjects in the "very impor-
tant" category, a case by case analysis of the data is feasible
and informative. Table 5 arrays each of the 17 cases by treat-
ment group, showing their pretest, posttest, and change scores
for both political identity (high scores are conservative, low
scores are liberal) and the ranking of the value equality on the

Table 5. Case by Case Data For 17 Experimental and Control
Subjects in the "Very Important" Psychological Centrality
Category.

	Political Identity				Equality		
	Pretest	Posttest	Change		Pretest	Posttest	Change
EX#1	64	5	59		2	2	0
EX#2	59	56	3		6	5	1
EX#3	96	96	0		18	18	0
EX#4	60	66	-6		17	10	7
EX#5	80	79	1		18	16	2
EX#6	60	57	3		5	2	3
EX#7	61	61	0		14	14	0
EX#8	65	33	32		4	2	2
EX#9	55	44	11		11	9	2
CO#1	29	39	-10		6	3	3
CO#2	21	16	5		9	10	-1
CO#3	84	78	6		18	18	0
CO#4	10	10	0		2	2	0
CO#5	89	90	-1		18	17	1
CO#6	100	51	-49		12	18	-6
CO#7	50	50	0		2	3	-1
CO#8	29	30	-1		8	7	1

Rokeach Value Survey (low scores mean equality is valued, high
scores mean equality is not valued).
First, to summarize the results in Table 5, 6 of the subjects
in the experimental group became more liberal, 2 of the subjects
exhibited no change in political identity, and 1 subject became
more conservative from the pretest to the posttest. In the
control group, 2 of the subjects became more liberal, two exhib-
ited no change, and 4 became more conservative. With respect to
the ranking of the value equality, none of the subjects in the
experimental group decreased the rank of this value, while 6 of
the subjects increased its ranking and 2 of the subjects exhib-
ited no change. In the control group, 3 subjects decreased the
ranking of equality, two subjects exhibited no change, and 3 of

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the subjects increased the ranking of this value. Thus, as we might expect, the changes in the control group from the pretest to the posttest appear to be mostly random; a few subjects became more liberal, a few became more conservative, and a few stayed the same. In contrast, in the experimental group we find a pervasive shift toward a more liberal position, for both political identity and the importance placed on the value equality.

A close look at the change in political identity scores for the experimental subjects reveals some interesting information. Specifically, two subjects, EX#1 and EX#8, appear to account for most of the aggregate liberal shift in this group. These subjects shifted their political identity 59 and 32 points in a liberal direction respectively. Both subjects indicated that they were mildly conservative at the pretest, and one (EX#1) shifted this identity to quite liberal at the posttest while the other (EX#8) became mildly liberal. The likely source of these dramatic changes is the contradiction between their pretest political identity scores and the importance both of these subjects placed on the value equality. As indicated, at the pretest one subject (EX#1) had ranked equality 2 and the other subject (EX#8) had ranked equality 4. Thus, consistent with self-confrontation theory (Rokeach, 1973), when these two subjects were presented with feedback suggesting a strong contradiction existed between the importance they placed on the value equality and their conservative political identities they apparently experienced a state of self-dissatisfaction focusing on their political identities. And, motivated by the need to reduce their feelings of self-dissatisfaction and to maintain or enhance their self-esteem, these subjects shifted their political identities in a direction that was more consistent with their value for equality and therefore also consistent with their image of themselves as good Americans.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The findings of this experiment indicated that (1) the effect of self-confrontation on change in political identity varied by level of psychological centrality and (2) only those subjects for whom the political identity was "very important" appeared to be affected by self-confrontation; these subjects shifted their political identity in the predicted direction an average of 11.44 points on the 100 point political identity scale. Much smaller changes were found for experimental subjects who indicated that their political identity was anything less than "very important."

The data provided by this experiment appear to provide at least modest support for the view that psychologically central self-conceptions are not immune to experimental treatment. Yet, a number of questions can certainly be raised about the theoretical and methodological integrity of this experiment. It is useful to briefly consider several of the most important questions.

The first issue concerns the validity of our measures of both political identity and psychological centrality. How consistent are these operational measures with self-concept theory as developed above? Wouldn't it have been more consistent with this theory to have measured political identity by asking subjects to

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"please write down 20 statements in answer to the question Who am
I?" And, further, wouldn't it follow that the psychological
centrality of the political identity should have been measured by
asking subjects to "please reorder these 20 statements in terms
of how important they are to defining who you are as a person?"
In truth, this is exactly what was done in a pilot study. Unfor-
tunately, of the 2,550 self-statements that were obtained from
218 student subjects at Washington State University during the
fall of 1984, only 50 (2.0%) could be classified in any way as a
political identity, and an even smaller number than these 50
reflected the conservative--liberal ideological spectrum. It was
estimated that approximately 20,000 self-statements from some
1,000 students would have had to have been screened to generate a
complete pretest-posttest sample of just 100 volunteer subjects.
Thus it could be argued that political identity is clearly not a
very salient identity for most college students. In response, I
would agree that political identity is not a central identity for
most college students. However, this is precisely why these
students were asked to indicate exactly how important the identi-
ty was to them, and why we controlled on the degree of importance
in the analysis. And, as discussed above, only the students who
indicated that their political identity was "very important" to
them changed to any significant extent. We did not expect across
the board changes in the experimental group because 1) not all
subjects would have discovered a discrepancy between their values
and their political identity and 2) even those who discovered
such a discrepancy might not be motivated to change their identi-
ty if that identity was not particularly important to them.

Second, aside from problems of operationalization and measure-
ment, it can still be argued that the first hypothesis is in some
sense still correct, despite the evidence presented here. Not
all, or even most, of the subjects in the "very important" exper-
imental group changed their identities as a result of self-
confrontation. Of course, not all of the subjects should have
changed their political identities since not all of the subjects
discovered contradictions between their identities and their
value for equality. Yet, a few of these subjects (e.g. EX#2,
EX#6) exhibited just as much inconsistency between their ranking
of equality and their political identity as those subjects who
did change. It may be, as the first hypothesis suggests, that
some of these subjects refused to change their psychologically
central self-conceptions, even when provided feedback implicating
their morality, because of the need for self-consistency--the
need to hold on to this political identity because it is an
important part of their self-concept that was threatened. This
may be true, but there is some evidence against this interpreta-
tion. To some extent, the self-consistency effect predicted by
the first hypothesis resembles a type of ego defense reaction or
a reflection of a rigidity in personality. Research by Cochrane
and Kelley (cited in Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984: 49) indicates
that neither dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960) nor authoritarianism
(Adorno et al., 1950) prevent value change induced by self-
confrontation. Further, Rokeach (see Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984:
36-38) has explicitly developed the method of self-confrontation,
rather than confrontation by another, to minimize the possibility

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of ego defense reactions. Thus, it seems unlikely that a need for self-consistency underlies the failure of some subjects to change as a result of self-confrontation. Instead, we would argue that these subjects either misunderstood or did not believe the feedback that was presented to them and, as a consequence, they did not experience self-confrontation.

There is, however, at least one other alternative interpretation of these findings that would support the first hypothesis. It could be argued that the self-confrontation presented some subjects with a contradiction between two self-conceptions: a self-conception based on high support for the value equality (i.e. "I am someone who believes in equal rights for all") and the political identity. And, those subjects who ranked equality quite high but also called themselves conservatives (e.g. EX#1 and EX#8) shifted their political identities to be consistent with their highly important, equality-based, self-conception. If it were the case, however, that self-consistency, and not self-esteem, motivated these changes, then why did we not find some conservative subjects lowering their ranking of equality? Such a shift would have achieved self-consistency just as a change in political identity achieved it. But this is not what we found; not one of the experimental subjects in the "most important" group lowered the importance they placed on the value equality from the pretest to the posttest. Thus, it would seem that the changes we observed among the "very important" subjects were motivated not by a need for self-consistency, but by a need for self-esteem.

A third issue concerns the generalizability of our findings beyond the college population. Here we can rely to some extent on the findings generated by Rokeach and others (see Ball-Rokeach, 1984: 29-36 for a review) from more than 25 self-confrontation experiments. The accumulated evidence suggests that self-confrontation works with all kinds of people in and out of the social psychology laboratory. Though these previous studies have not targeted the political identity per se, there is no reason to believe that targeting political identities rather than values, attitudes, or behaviors would invalidate these results. Nevertheless, the answer to this question must be determined empirically.

Finally, how do we reconcile the findings from this study with those reported by other experimental attempts to alter the self-concept, particularly the empirical base supporting Alexander's (Alexander and Wiley, 1981) "situated identity" theory? As noted above, from this point of view, even the subjects who cared very little about their political identities should have become more liberal as a result of self-confrontation because the liberal identity was defined as socially desirable in the experimental situation. Referring back to Table 4, we do find that the 3 subjects in the experimental group who cared least about their political identity did become more liberal an average of 3 points from the pretest to the posttest. But this shift is relatively small and the number of subjects so few that we are really stretching the evidence to take these findings as support of Alexander's theory. It seems more likely that these subjects, and perhaps others in the "somewhat important" and the "not very

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important" groups, were unaffected by self-confrontation because they didn't even have enough interest in politics or their political identities to take the time to really understand the meaning of the information that was presented to them. Had they, some of them might have adopted a liberal identity because it was defined as socially desirable and because they had little or nothing to lose by doing so.

Taken as a whole, the above considerations advise some caution in the interpretation of the results of this experiment. What seems certain is that there are good theoretical reasons, and now some empirical evidence, to support the view that attempts to change self-concept will be affected by the degree of psychological centrality of the self-conception in question. In short, we can expect to find an interaction between treatment and psychological centrality. But few would disagree with this. What is far less certain, however, and is subject to some disagreement, is the exact functional form of this interaction. At the very least, the findings reported here indicate that some people who tell us that a particular role-identity is very important to them can be motivated to change that self-conception as a result of an experimental treatment. That we have been able to induce change in such psychologically central self-conceptions in a social psychological experiment is contrary to at least one hypothesis regarding the nature of the relationship between psychological centrality and self-concept change (Rosenberg, 1979: 75-76). While further research is clearly needed, (footnote #2), the results of this experiment indicate that Rokeach's method of self-confrontation may provide a useful device for further exploring the "thorny problem of self-concept change" (Rosenberg, 1979: 76) both in (Rokeach, 1973) and out (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984) of the social psychology laboratory.

FOOTNOTES

1. As a reviewer pointed out, other factors could account for the contradiction between experimental and clinical findings. For example, clinicians may report difficulties inducing self-concept change because clients are receiving contradictory feedback from significant others outside of the clinical setting while the experimental context usually provides a consistent message about a relevant identity. I have little trouble with this point. In my view, however, the issue is not so much whether the context is experimental or clinical, but whether the self-conceptions in question are important or trivial. My position is that important self-conceptions are not immune from experimental (or clinical) change as long as the treatment (or therapy) implicates a person's feelings of competence or morality with respect to that self-conception.

2. A natural follow-up to this study would be to replicate the experiment with a sample of political activists e.g. "Young Republicans." If the results were similar, such a finding would counter the criticism that, despite controlling for the importance of political identity as we did here, political identity was not a salient identity for our subjects. It

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might also prove very useful to triangulate the experimental approach used here, perhaps by doing posttest interviews with the subjects to get some idea of how the subjects experienced the process of self-confrontation, and whether their experiences conform to our expectations. My thanks to a reviewer for these suggestions.

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