

Review Article

Framed But Not Contained: An Integrative Review of Self-Definition, Social Roles, and Awareness

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Article History	Abstract
Received: September 19, 2026 Accepted: October 10, 2026 Published: October 16, 2026	This paper examines how freely a person can define herself. Using an integrative literature review, it brings together philosophy, sociology, psychology, and linguistics, and compares theoretical accounts of the self with empirical research on family, social roles, self-concept, and communication. The analysis is organized around three concepts. First, frameworks such as family position, education, and social roles shape identity before a person is able to choose, often without conscious awareness. Second, even the self-defined from within, through ideals, hopes for the future, and values, carries social expectations, so people may confuse who they are with who they want to become, or with who others expect them to be. Third, language limits self-definition, because words may not mean the same thing to speaker and listener, yet research on communication shows that people regularly notice and repair misunderstandings. The paper concludes that self-definition is never completely free, but that no framework fully captures a person. The notion of awareness connects these analyses. It allows people to recognize the frames that shape them and develops through communication with others. This answer places the paper closest to William James's account of the social self and Charles Taylor's view of authenticity within inherited horizons of meaning. The paper also suggests that self-portrait writing in schools could encourage students to reflect on what shapes their self-descriptions. Keywords: Self-Definition, Identity, Awareness, Social Roles, Language.

1. Introduction

Human beings are easily influenced by society and the environment around them. Even before they are born, and before they can think or decide for themselves, certain social positions and roles are already decided for them. In many Asian family contexts, for example, the eldest child does not only mean being born first. It means that the eldest child is often associated with a sense of responsibility, maturity, and care for other family members. Within the framework of being the first-born, one may fall deeply under its influence, believing everything she is told to do. In the same way, social positions, roles, and other frameworks form one's identity and tie it to corresponding social expectations. When people introduce themselves, they usually describe themselves through familiar words and, daily habits, or things that are closest to them. Yet these words may not mean the same thing to the listener as they do to the speaker, so their choice of words can reveal how easily communication errors occur. Even the attempt to describe oneself, then, takes place within frames of family, society, and language. This leads to an important question: how freely can a person define herself? To answer this question, this paper reviews research in philosophy, sociology, psychology, and linguistics, and analyzes three concepts: the frameworks that shape identity, the self-defined from within, and language and awareness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Nature of the Self

Philosophers have long disagreed about how the self is defined. One tradition holds that each person has a stable inner core that remains the same over time. René Descartes (1641/2008) described the self as a thinking subject, the one existence he could be certain of even while doubting everything else. David Hume (1739-

1740/2000) challenged this view, arguing that when people look inward they find no unified self, only a changing “bundle” of perceptions. A sense of being the same person is constructed when the mind closely connects related perceptions without noticing their differences (Krueger, 2015). Thomas Reid (1785) defended the older view against such accounts, arguing that a person is something indivisible, and that personal identity implies the continued existence of a single self that does not come in degrees. William James (1890) offered a middle position. He described consciousness as a continuous stream rather than a fixed core, and distinguished the self that knows (the “I”) from the self that is known (the “Me”). The Me includes a social self, since people show different sides of themselves to the different groups whose opinion matters to them (James, 1890). In the twentieth century, the question shifted from what the self is to how it is formed. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that much of what is treated as natural about women is the result of social definition, suggesting that a self can be shaped from outside before a person recognizes it. Taylor (1991) responded to such accounts by defending the ideal of authenticity, while arguing that authenticity can only be pursued within inherited horizons of meaning. More recent work has carried these philosophical questions into psychology, where they can be studied empirically. McAdams and McLean (2013) described narrative identity as an evolving life story that links a reconstructed past to an imagined future. They further showed that it develops gradually, beginning in early conversations between parents and children.

2.2. Self-Definition Across Disciplines

The question of how the self is defined has developed into separate debates in several fields. In sociology, the central debate concerns structure and agency: whether social conditions are internalized as habits that operate without awareness, as Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus suggests (Akrivou and Di San Giorgio, 2014), or whether people can reflect on their circumstances and act on that reflection (Archer, 2003). In psychology, theories of the self-concept describe how people compare who they are with who they hope or ought to be (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987), while developmental research treats identity as an ongoing process rather than a settled result (Branje *et al.*, 2021). In linguistics, debate continues over how far language influences thought (Wolff and Holmes, 2011).

2.3. Gap in the Literature

These fields have produced detailed accounts of the self, but they have largely developed separately. Research on social structure and reflection gives relatively little attention to how people are interpreted by others, while research on communication rarely connects its findings to questions of self-definition. This paper brings these fields together to examine how freely a person can define herself.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This paper is an integrative literature review that examines how different disciplines understand self-definition. It does not collect new data or involve human participants. Instead, it examines existing research on one research question: how freely can a person define herself?

An integrative review is well-suited to this question for two reasons. First, its aim is not to cover every study that has been published on this topic, but to bring in perspectives from different fields so that a synthesized understanding of the topic emerges (Snyder, 2019). Second, a literature review can address broader and more abstract questions than one single empirical study, and it can make better use of studies conducted with very different methods (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Self-definition is an abstract question studied across several disciplines, and this review draws on philosophy, sociology, psychology, and linguistics.

3.2. Scope of Sources and Approach

The sources include theoretical works, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus and David Hume’s bundle theory of the self, as well as empirical studies of family roles, household responsibility, and self-presentation.

Sources were carefully selected to speak to one part of the research question. Each selection is purposeful rather than exhaustive. A conceptual paper without new data largely depends on the theories it uses; the choice of each theory and its role in the analysis must be explicated and justified. In this sense, the paper follows a theory synthesis approach, which seeks to integrate concepts across several theories and fields of research (Jaakkola, 2020). The analysis is organized by concept rather than by author. A review organized around concepts allows sources from different fields to be read side by side (Webster and Watson, 2002). The paper has three sections, each built around one concept. Section 4.1 examines how fixed environments, such as family, education, and social position, shape identity before a person can choose. Section 4.2 examines how people define themselves from within, through their ideals, their hopes for the future, and their values. Section

4.3 examines how language and communication limit self-definition, and what awareness of these limits makes possible. In each section, theoretical claims are set beside empirical findings to see where they agree, where they differ, and what neither fully explains. The Discussion then brings the three sections together.

4. Analysis

4.1. Frameworks That Shape Identity

Nowadays, in this busy society it is hard to recognize or think about frames that exist around us. Inside one frame, there are also many different categories that are connected to other frames. When we look deeply, we can see that some frames are difficult to change. For example, we cannot choose how we are born or what kind of social environment we are born into, such as family background, education, family relationships, and financial situations. Among these frames, family and education influence us strongly because they are closely connected to the way we grow up. Education shapes how we think and how we develop our own perspective. The first education we receive usually comes from parents, and later, we enter a new society called school. Identity theory provides another way to understand this process. It argues that people's identities are shaped through interactions with significant others and by the social contexts in which they live (Benson and Johnson, 2009). In this sense, family and school are not only places where people learn knowledge, but also environments where they learn values, behaviors, and ways of understanding themselves. This is why people often say that children reflect their parents. School also shapes us in a different way. At school, we learn how to communicate with others, become more sociable, and see things from wider perspectives. Family can also be seen as a small society, where each family member influences the way others speak, act, and think. The relationships between family members are also important because they can be affected by the environment, financial situations, or other problems, but they usually cannot be changed easily. This shows that human beings cannot define themselves from a completely free position. These frames influence what people think is important or valuable. Therefore, even when people believe that they are defining themselves freely, they are already affected by the world around them. Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how social frameworks can become internalized over time. According to this view, social context shapes people's habits, dispositions, and ways of knowing, often without their conscious awareness (Akrivou and Di San Giorgio, 2014). That means that identity is not only something people choose for themselves. It is also something gradually produced through repeated social expectation.

Social position can mean one's place in family, among friends, at school, or later in the workplace. In each position, certain expectations are placed on a person, and other people may already have an image of who that person should be. Leary and Kowalski's model of impression management is useful here because it shows that people do not present themselves freely in every situation. Instead, their self-presentation is influenced by role constraints, desired identity images, and their current social image (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). For example, in the family, the eldest is often expected to be responsible, mature, and caring towards other family members. Research on family context also shows that responsibility within the household can shape how young people understand adulthood and their position in the family (Benson and Johnson, 2009). Cooney and Mortimer (1999) suggest that household responsibility can function as a sign of adulthood, helping adolescents develop a sense of competence and mastery. In addition, each family's values or traditions can create another kind of pressure, making the person feel that they must follow a certain role. Then, among friends, each person may also be given a certain role, such as the quiet one, the funny one, the responsible one, or the one who always listens. Later, in the workplace, a person's job title can create other expectations. These expectations do not only appear in formal positions. They can also be found in ordinary everyday relationships. For instance, a leader may be expected to act confidently, while a beginner may be expected to listen and follow. These roles may seem natural, but they can become frames that limit how a person behaves. They are shaped by family traditions, culture, society, and language. As people grow up, these frames may change, but they do not disappear completely. Because of these social frames, it becomes difficult to know whether a person can fully separate their own desires from the expectations that have been placed on them.

4.2. Defining the Self from Within

Writing about oneself is a common activity in school. Students are often asked to write a self-portrait or an autobiography, and this task usually begins with questions about their personality, experiences, dreams, or values. At first, these questions may seem simple; they merely ask students to describe themselves. However, it is not always easy to give an answer that feels completely accurate. Sometimes, the words I choose do not fully express what I mean, or the final response does not feel close enough to who I really am. This difficulty can come from two main problems. First, language does not always contain the exact word or expression I need. Second, I may not understand myself deeply enough to explain myself clearly. In school assignments, students usually have to write in a way that is both detailed and simple. This means that each paragraph needs

enough information, but it also has to remain short and easy to understand. Because of the lack of space or proper communication, choosing the right words becomes significantly important. The words must not only explain my thoughts, but also represent the image of “me” that I want to show. For this reason, self-portrait writing is not only a simple description of a person. It becomes a process of questioning. This process raises a broader question: whether people have thought deeply about who they are and how they define themselves. This idea of a “questioning mindset” is useful here. Lani Watson in her newly published book suggests that questions do not only lead to answers. They also create exploration, curiosity, and a different relationship with oneself. Watson provides an example of a therapeutic question: “What is the one thing now that you want to be able to do in the future?” This kind of question is important because it does not simply ask for a fixed answer. It makes people compare their present self with the self they want to become (Williams, 2026). The questions can help expose assumptions and lead people to discover more about themselves, which requires becoming comfortable with uncertainty (Kidd, 2026). Psychologists describe the opposite tendency as the need for cognitive closure, a desire for a firm answer that can lead people to stop considering alternatives (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). Applied to self-definition, this wish for certainty can lead people to overlook the gap between who they are and who they want to be.

Questions about the future frequently appear in self-portrait writing. “What is your dream?” or “What kind of person do you want to be in the future?” are common questions that many people hear at least once during their school life. At first, these questions may seem simple, but they actually ask people to think about the life they want to live. In this sense, the future becomes an important element of self-definition in that it allows people to imagine possibilities that do not fully exist in the present yet. However, questions about the future should not be understood as asking for one fixed answer. The future is different from the present because it can still change. A person’s thoughts, goals, and values may develop over time, so the future self is not a complete image. It is closer to a direction that a person is moving toward. Research on possible selves supports this view. Markus and Nurius (1986) describe possible selves as the images people hold of who they might become, and show that these images guide motivation in the present. The word “future” gives weight to what a person wants, but it also needs to be used carefully. When people write about their future self, they are not only describing who they are now. They are also imagining who they may become, what kind of life they may choose, and what kind of change they believe is possible. In this way, the future works as a frame that helps people recognize movement and growth. Without the future, people may not be able to imagine what they truly want to move toward.

The words “ideal” and “real” play an important role in self-definition because they show the difference between who a person is and who they want to become. An ideal can be understood as a personal image of perfection, shaped by one’s desires, values, and attachments. In contrast, the real self refers to the self as it exists in the present, although it is also connected to past experiences and future possibilities. Self-discrepancy theory makes a similar distinction between the actual self and the ideal self, and links the gap between them to feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction (Higgins, 1987). The ideal self does not fully belong to the present, but it is not completely separate from it either. It can be understood as the possible future that feels closest to the present self. However, this distinction can become confusing. A person may want to become a certain kind of person so strongly that they begin to believe they are already that person. For example, someone may want to be strong so badly that they start believing they are strong, even though they are not strong yet. In this way, people may unconsciously confuse their real self with their ideal self, believing that the person they want to become is already who they are. Hume’s view of the self helps explain how this happens. The self is not simple and fixed, but a sense of identity that the mind builds by connecting closely related impressions and ideas (Krueger, 2015). When the ideal self feels close enough to the present, the mind may join the two in the same way. This shows how complex and nuanced defining the self can be. One thing is instead evident that the self is not always stable, complete, or easy to explain. Moreover, an ideal is never formed completely within and alone. It is also influenced by society, culture, and the expectation of others, which shape what a person considers desirable or valuable. The ideal self may feel personal, but it can also contain social pressure. Thus, the real self, the ideal self, and the socially influenced self are often mixed together.

The existence of “ideal self” suggests that personal values already exist within an individual. No two people in the world can be exactly the same. Since each individual has different life experiences, appearances, personalities, and characteristics, their personal values, beliefs, and thoughts cannot be exactly the same as those of others. In this light, values reveal what belongs specifically to an individual. Values are the beliefs and thoughts that a person considers important, while ideals are images of the self that are built upon those values. For example, if a person believes that freedom is the most important value, their ideal self may be an independent person. The ideal self, then, is not created randomly, but shaped by what a person values and by

the kind of life they consider meaningful. However, values are difficult to explain because the meanings can change depending on how each person defines a word. Words such as “freedom”, “peace” or “success” are often used as if their meanings were obvious, but these words can carry different values depending on culture, experience, and personal perspective. When a person describes herself through such words, others may not understand them in the same way she does. Defining oneself through values therefore depends not only on the individual, but also on language and on how others interpret it.

4.3. Language, Communication, and Awareness

Awareness is important because many social frames, expectations, and misunderstandings influence people without being clearly noticed. Some actions may seem natural simply because they have been repeated for a long time, while some problems may remain invisible because people do not recognize them as unfair or limiting. Therefore, awareness means becoming able to question what once seemed ordinary. It allows individuals to recognize that the difficulties they experience are not always personal failures, but may be connected to culture, tradition, relationships, language, and social expectations.

One important part of awareness is the ability to recognize and sort out problems that exist around people. Even small problems that seem unrelated to an individual may still influence the way people think, speak, and understand others. Problems can appear even in simple conversations. For example, a conversation may not go as expected, opinions may conflict, or people may fail to understand each other clearly. In these situations, people often assume that misunderstandings happen only because of differences in personality. However, personality is not the only reason. People also have different experiences, cultural backgrounds, values, and definitions of words. Because of this, the meanings they attach to certain ideas may not be the same. Ross and Ward (1996) argue that people often underestimate how differently others may understand the same situation. Self-introduction is one example of this problem. A self-introduction often becomes the first impression that one person gives to another. Even when a person chooses words, hobbies, or characteristics that seem to represent them well, listeners create their own image of that person through their own perspective. This shows that communication is not only about expressing oneself, but also about how one is interpreted by others.

Another important part of awareness is learning to look at the world from multiple perspectives. Many conflicts begin when people assume that their own way of thinking is universal. Differences in family traditions, cultural values, and social expectations can shape how people understand ideas such as respect, responsibility, love, and fairness. Love, for example, may seem like a simple and universal concept, but it requires respect, consideration, and understanding. Language is central to this problem. Many people believe that language is transparent and that it can express meaning exactly as it is. In reality, language is a limited tool. People reshape their thoughts to fit into the frame of language before communicating them, so language can help people express themselves, but it can also create misunderstandings. Speaking clearly, then, does not mean expressing every thought perfectly. Rather, it means making an effort to reduce misunderstanding by choosing words carefully, explaining ideas more specifically, and recognizing that others may interpret the same words differently. Research on conversations across twelve languages shows that when people fail to understand a message, they commonly signal the problem and allow the other person to clarify or repair what was said. These repair strategies reveal the fundamentally cooperative nature of human communication, because people usually work together to resolve misunderstandings rather than simply allowing them to continue (Dingemanse *et al.*, 2015). This suggests that misunderstanding is not simply a failure of communication, but something that people can actively recognize and correct.

5. Discussion

5.1. Answering the Research Question

This paper has asked how freely a person can define herself. The sources examined suggest that self-definition is never completely free, because family, social position, and language shape a person before she is able to choose. Yet these frameworks never fully contain her, and awareness is what keeps that gap visible. Each section of the analysis found this pattern in a different place. Section 4.1 showed that family roles and social positions shape identity before a person is able to choose. Section 4.2 showed that even the ideal self is influenced by society and expectation, so people may confuse who they are with who they want to become, or with who others expect them to be. Section 4.3 showed that people need language to explain who they are, but words place the self inside a limited frame. At the same time, people are able to notice misunderstandings and repair them. Awareness is what connects these findings. It means recognizing that the words people use, the ideals they pursue, and the images they create of themselves are all incomplete, and that one's own interpretation is only one possible perspective.

5.2. Comparing Theory and Evidence

Setting the theories beside the empirical studies reveals one point of tension. Bourdieu's concept of habitus suggests that social frames operate without awareness, while research on communication shows that people regularly notice misunderstandings and work together to repair them (Dingemanse *et al.*, 2015). Akrivou and Di San Giorgio (2014) offer a way to connect the two, arguing that dialogue with others can gradually reshape habits first formed without reflection. In other words, habits learned unconsciously are not permanent. When people talk with others and encounter different perspectives, they can begin to change those habits. Awareness, then, is not only an individual act but something developed through communication. A person may not see her own frame until someone else interprets her words differently, and that difference makes the frame visible. What neither the theories nor the studies fully explain is how a person moves from noticing a single misunderstanding to questioning the larger frames behind it. Repairing one confusing conversation is not the same as recognizing, for example, that the role of the eldest child has shaped how one sees oneself, and the sources reviewed here do not show how the first leads to the second.

5.3. Relation to Previous Research

This analysis places the paper's answer closest to James (1890) and Taylor (1991) in the debate outlined in Section 2.1. The self is neither a fixed core, as Descartes and Reid held, nor only a loose bundle, as Hume suggested, but something real that is formed through others and within inherited horizons of meaning. The emphasis on awareness also connects to McAdams and McLean's (2013) view of identity as a life story, since a story can be retold once a person notices how others have shaped it. Reading the fields together also addresses the gap identified in Section 2.3. Research on social structure shows how frames are formed, while research on communication shows how they can be noticed and revised.

5.4. Directions for Future Research

As an integrative review, this paper selected sources purposefully rather than exhaustively and did not collect new data. Some examples, such as the expectations placed on eldest children in Asian families and self-portrait writing in school, come from particular cultural and educational contexts and may not apply in the same way elsewhere. Future research could test whether becoming aware of a social frame, for example through conversation or reflective writing, changes how people describe themselves.

6. Conclusion

This paper began with two familiar situations: an eldest child growing into the responsibilities assigned to her, and a person choosing words to introduce herself. Both show that self-definition begins inside frames a person did not choose. The analysis found that these frames reach further than they first appear. Family roles and social position shape identity early, personal ideals carry the expectations of others, and words can be misunderstood even when chosen carefully. Yet neither the role nor the words ever become the whole person. What the analysis points to is not an escape from these frames, but a way of living within them knowingly.

Although these examples may begin from personal experience, they lead to a more universal problem. Misunderstanding, different perspectives, and the limits of language do not belong to one person only. They exist in every relationship, every family, and every society. Therefore, understanding the self is also connected to understanding how human beings communicate with one another. Even if language can never explain the whole self perfectly, awareness allows people to see how language, society, and relationships shape the way they understand themselves and others. This also has a practical meaning for how self-portrait writing is taught. Instead of asking students to find one correct answer about who they are, such tasks could also ask what has shaped that answer, whether family roles, personal ideals, or the words available to them. Writing about oneself would become not only a description of the self, but a practice of noticing the frames behind it. All in all, awareness does not free a person from the frames that shape her, but it allows her to notice them. It is this awareness that makes it possible to keep questioning, changing, and understanding the self-more deeply.

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