



## Do you "self-reflect" or "self-rumininate"?

By Alain Morin

[http://psych.pomona.edu/scr/LN\\_Dec02\\_SelfRumininate.htm](http://psych.pomona.edu/scr/LN_Dec02_SelfRumininate.htm)

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We all spend time analyzing our inner thoughts and feelings; past research looked at this activity as being unitary in nature (i.e., simply focusing on the self), examined how frequently people introspect, and identified the effects of self-focus on behavior. Current studies indicate that people actually engage in two different types of self-analysis: self-reflection (enjoying analyzing the self) and self-rumination

(not being able to shut off thoughts about the self), each leading to opposite consequences.

Self-awareness represents a higher form of consciousness which makes it possible for us humans to become the object of our own attention and to acknowledge our own existence. When self-aware we actively examine our personal characteristics, that is, our physical appearance, typical behaviors, emotions, motives, personality traits, values, attitudes, thoughts, sensations, etc. Self-awareness can be scientifically studied by using brain imaging techniques or by placing infants or animals in front of mirrors to test self-recognition. One popular approach stems from the field of personality psychology. Personality psychology is mainly interested in the measurement of differences among people; researchers typically use questionnaires, and in the past the Self-consciousness Scale (SCS—see Box 1 for representative items) has been repeatedly administered to participants in psychological studies to tap variations in self-awareness.

**When self-aware we actively examine our personal characteristics**

I'm concerned about my style of doing things.

I'm self-conscious about the way I look.

I'm generally attentive to my inner feelings.

I'm constantly examining my motives

I reflect about myself a lot.

Differences in levels of self-focused attention deeply affect our behavior. For example, past studies suggest that if you are highly self-aware you will know yourself better than less self-aware people, engage more effectively in self-regulation (i.e., monitoring and modifying your behavior), feel emotions more intensely, behave more consistently with your attitudes, conform less to social pressure, self-disclose more in intimate relationships, and react more strongly to social rejection.

**Self-rumination:  
anxious attention  
paid to the self**

The SCS has been extensively used in research these last 25 years; however, doubts about the unitary nature of self-consciousness recently let Paul Trapnell and Jennifer Campbell at the Ohio State University to reconceptualize it. After all, if we think carefully about it, self-awareness certainly represents a complex mental activity, and it might be naïve to believe that only one form of introspection exists. Surely people must analyze themselves differently. This is precisely what Trapnell and Campbell propose. I will deliberately set technical details aside—basically, in their 1999 paper, Trapnell and Campbell performed a full statistical re-analysis of the SCS and showed that self-consciousness does *not* represent a unitary construct (i.e., focusing on the self) but instead is actually made up of “self-rumination” and “self-reflection”; each type of introspection would lead to very different cognitive and behavioral consequences.

The problem identified by Trapnell and Campbell is that most items of the SCS are motivationally ambiguous. Let's suppose that “I am always trying to figure myself out”—one typical item of the SCS; this can mean two things: I'm always mulling over or second guessing myself (self-rumination), or I love trying to figure myself out (self-reflection). In both cases the focus of attention is still the self, but one is motivated by fear and self-doubts, and the other by epistemic interest in the self.

**Surely people  
must analyze  
themselves  
differently**

Maybe you personally know people who spend a lot of time analyzing themselves—they seem to constantly be “beating around the bush”, re-evaluating themselves, always questioning their behavior and appearance, being unsure of themselves, nervous, etc. This is self-rumination: anxious attention paid to the self, where the person is afraid to fail and keeps wondering about his/her self-worth. Then maybe you have other acquaintances who are also highly self-aware, but instead of being anxious about themselves, they have wisdom—they know themselves very well, are the “contemplating” type, feel secure, have depth, and are philosophical about their shortcomings. This is self-reflection: a genuine curiosity about the self, where the person is intrigued and interested in learning more about his/her emotions, values, thought processes, attitudes, etc. So we all analyze our inner thoughts and feelings (self-awareness), but some of us feel anxious about what we might discover about ourselves (self-rumination) while others feel intrigued and fascinated about ourselves (self-reflection).

This fundamental distinction within self-awareness has proven to be increasingly useful in explaining an apparent paradox in research findings—now called the “self-absorption paradox”. In theory, highly self-aware people should be happy; they know themselves better when compared to low self-aware people because they attend to themselves more; this enhanced self-knowledge in turn should lead to better psychological adjustment, since when you know who you are you can start defining what you really want to become and grow toward self-improvement and contentment. Yet past research consistently shows that high self-consciousness is actually associated with both psychological health *and distress*—depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety. How can this be? How can someone simultaneously be happy and dysfunctional?

**Self-reflectors  
are characterized by better  
mental health**

Again, if we keep conceptualizing self-consciousness as a unitary construct, then we can't explain this paradox—it's impossible! However, if we recognize the *dual nature* of self-focus, then it becomes clear. Self-ruminators, because they anxiously examine the self and keep finding—or focusing on—bad things about themselves, are more prone to sadness, poor self-image, and apprehension. Self-reflectors, because they enjoy examining themselves and learning new things about themselves, and indeed know more about themselves and are more in control of their destiny, are characterized by better mental health.

Trapnell and Campbell designed the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ) to assess these two forms of self-awareness. (See Box 2 for representative items.) It is being progressively used in research to reinterpret inconsistent results found in the past. A good

example is a recent study conducted at Washington State University by Joireman and colleagues (2002) on empathy and self-awareness. In theory, self-awareness should enhance empathy: the only way you can intuitively “feel” what John is experiencing after a visit to the dentist is by yourself having been aware of what it is like to be in pain after such an ordeal. So empathy for others presupposes self-awareness. On the other hand, if you are anxiously focusing on, and obsessively preoccupied by, yourself (if you are “*self-absorbed*”), then you won’t pay attention to what others might be experiencing—thus self-awareness could also impede empathy. Past results on this problem are indeed contradictory, and one elegant way to solve this other apparent paradox is by proposing that self-reflection increases empathy whereas self-rumination decreases it. This precisely what Joireman and his team found.

<p><u>Reflection</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- I love exploring my “inner” self.</li><li>- I’m very self-inquisitive by nature.</li><li>- My attitudes and feelings about things fascinate me.</li></ul> <p><u>Rumination</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Often I’m playing back over in my mind how I acted in a past situation.</li><li>- My attention is often focused on aspects of myself I wish I’d stop thinking about.</li><li>- I always seem to be rehashing in my mind recent things I’ve said or done.</li></ul>
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The discovery that self-consciousness does not represent a unitary construct but instead is made up of two fundamentally different types of self-focus is very exciting and informative; this distinction between self-reflection and self-rumination already allows for qualifications and refinements of important assumptions and past findings about self-awareness. This is just the beginning.

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