

PSIHOLOGIA GENERALĂ

THE MICHELANGELO MODEL IN EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE REGULATION MECHANISMS IN IDENTITY CONTOURING

MODELUL MICHELANGELO ÎN MECANISMELE DE REGLARE EMOȚIONALĂ ȘI COGNITIVĂ ÎN CONTURAREA IDENTITĂȚII

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Abstract

The article examines the process of self-development from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating concepts from cognitive psychology, relational psychology, and an artistic framework inspired by the vision of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Building on the sculptural metaphor of releasing form from raw material, identity is conceptualized as a gradual process of revelation shaped by the interaction between internal cognitive structures and relational experiences. The paper explores the role of cognitive schemas in organizing experience, the function of relationships in shaping the self-concept, and the contribution of emotion regulation mechanisms to identity stability. The Michelangelo model is employed to explain how significant relationships support the actualization of the ideal self through validation and co-creative processes. The study advances an integrative understanding of self-development as a relational dynamic, where identity emerges through the regulation of internal tensions and continuous adaptation to context.

Keywords: Michelangelo model, relationships, emotional and cognitive regulation, identity.

Rezumat

Articolul analizează procesul devenirii sinelui dintr-o perspectivă interdisciplinară, integrând concepte din psihologia cognitivă, psihologia relațională și paradigma artistică inspirată de viziunea lui Michelangelo Buonarroti. Pornind de la metafora sculpturală a eliberării formei din materia brută, lucrarea conceptualizează identitatea ca proces de revelare graduală, modelat prin interacțiunea dintre structurile cognitive interne și experiențele relaționale. Sunt analizate rolul schemelor cognitive în organizarea experienței, funcția relațiilor în configurarea conceptului de sine și contribuția mecanismelor de reglare emoțională la stabilizarea identitară. Modelul Michelangelo este utilizat pentru a explica modul în care relațiile semnificative susțin actualizarea sinelui ideal prin procese de validare și co-creație. Articolul propune o înțelegere integrativă a devenirii sinelui ca dinamică relațională, în care identitatea se formează prin echilibrarea tensiunilor interne și adaptarea continuă la context.

Cuvinte-cheie: modelul Michelangelo, relații, reglare emoțională și cognitivă, identitate.

Introduction The metaphor of Michelangelo's sculptural process is not merely an aesthetic illustration but a genuine epistemological framework for understanding self-definition. In contemporary psychology, this metaphor articulates with several core concepts in a manner that is both intuitive and empirically grounded: the block of marble with cognitive schemas and the latent self; the sculptor with the relational partner or therapist; the chisel with intervention, feedback and validation process; the removal of excess with cognitive restructuring and emotional integration; the emergent form with the organized self-concept; and the dynamic tension with continuous adjustment and fine-tuning. Besides, the art of becoming who you are capable of being expresses a process of formation situated at the boundary between the individual's internal organization and the influence of the relational environment.

In Michelangelo Buonarroti's vision, sculpture involves releasing form from raw material—the figure exists within the marble, and the artistic intervention consists of removing the excess until the essence becomes visible. This perspective offers a suggestive framework for understanding psychological becoming, in which identity takes shape as a process of gradual revelation, guided by interactions and significant experiences. Psychologically, this conception supports the existence of a latent self, progressively actualized through relationships. Identity takes shape within a dynamic between internal predispositions and relational contexts, and others become active participants in its configuration. Significant relationships function as instances of reflection and shaping, in which emotional experiences, validation, and feedback contribute to the clarification of the self.

To better understand self-definition (which is a part of self-development), we can use an analogy inspired by Michel-

angelo's art. Just as the sculptor releases form from the marble block, the relational partner or therapist helps us discover our true self. The chisel represents interventions and received feedback, while the removal of material signifies the restructuring of limiting thoughts and beliefs. The final form reflects how we organize our identity. Hence, identity emerges from a continuous process of fine-tuning, through which our experiences are reinterpreted, assimilated, and reorganized. Contemporary psychology explains these dynamics through the interaction between *cognitive schemas* as basic mental structures; *the self-concept*, which answers at the question "Who we believe we are?"; and *emotion regulation mechanisms* (how we manage our emotions).

Thereby, the cognitive theory formulated by Aaron T. Beck highlights the role of schemas as basic structures for interpreting experience [2], and subsequent developments in schema therapy, proposed by Jeffrey Young, emphasize the influence of early relationships in the formation of these patterns [15]. Schemas function as an initial matrix, an internal organization that guides perception and emotional reaction. The self-concept gradually takes shape within these structures, through the integration of cognitive and affective experiences. From a phenomenological perspective, the self acquires meaning in relation, in line with the ideas of Carl Rogers, who emphasizes the importance of acceptance and validation in the development of a coherent identity [10]. At the same time, relationships provide the framework in which these structures become more flexible and reorganize. Emotional regulation reflects the way internal tensions are managed and integrated within this dynamic. The process model of emotional regulation, developed by James Gross, describes the stages through which individuals influence the occurrence, intensity, and expression of emotions [7]. Emotional regula-

tion is recognized as a central mechanism, transversally involved in multiple forms of psychological functioning and difficulty [1]. Emotion is defined, in this context, as a tension of the psychic material, and emotional regulation represents a process of balancing and harmonization necessary for maintaining identity coherence.

The Michelangelo phenomenon, formulated by Stephen M. Drigotas and his collaborators, provides a framework for understanding how relationships contribute to the development of the ideal self. Research highlights that significant partners support the actualization of individual potential through validation, encouragement, and behaviors congruent with the person's values [6]. The relationship thus becomes a space of intervention upon identity, in which latent traits are recognized and consolidated, so that the becoming of the self takes the form of a co-creative process. The individual and the other participate simultaneously in the configuration of identity, and the outcome reflects the interaction between structure and experience. Identity takes shape in a relational space where potential is expressed, and internal organization continuously adapts to context.

The aim of this theoretical study is to develop an integrative understanding of how the Michelangelo phenomenon could serve as a model that articulates with cognitive schemas and emotion regulation mechanisms in shaping identity. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how significant relationships function as sculptural spaces for revealing the ideal self; analyse the role of emotion regulation as a mediating process between relational validation and identity coherence; and propose a conceptual framework that unifies the artistic metaphor of Michelangelo with contemporary findings in cognitive and relational psychology.

Foundations of the Self and its Becoming The self-concept occupies a cen-

tral position in the architecture of psychological functioning, organizing experience and integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions into a coherent structure. In contemporary approaches, the self is understood as a dynamic reality, engaged in a continuous process of reorganization and transformation. Identity thus acquires the meaning of a becoming, in which the final form is not fixed in advance but takes shape gradually, through the interaction between internal organization and relational context [2]. This perspective aligns with the artistic process, in which form does not emerge as the result of rigid construction but as an expression of progressive becoming. Just as, in Michelangelo Buonarroti's vision, the figure already lies within the marble, and the sculptural act brings it to the surface, the self takes shape over time through a process of organizing and clarifying experience-identity is not imposed from the outside but is revealed through interaction, adjustment, and integration. Ty-lee mentions that a specific method may ultimately include a variety of non-pharmacological treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) designed by a therapist, self-administered or computer-administered CBT, telephone counseling, or graded exercise programs [14, p. 43]. The structure of the self is constituted through the integration of lived experiences, organized around systems of meaning that reflect how the individual interprets reality. Cognitive models show that these systems are supported by relatively stable structures, developed following early experiences, which influence information processing and contribute to the stabilization of identity [15]. Moreover, contemporary models highlight the role of emotional regulation as a central mechanism in organizing psychological experience, supporting a transdiagnostic perspective on identity development [9]. These structures function as an internal framework of

organization, similar to the resistance and direction of sculptural material, guiding the way in which form can develop.

Self-coherence represents an essential dimension of psychological functioning, reflecting the individual's capacity to integrate diverse experiences into a stable and consistent structure. This coherence involves a flexible organization that allows adaptation to change without loss of identity continuity. Symbolically, this balance can be associated with the stability of an artistic form, in which internal tensions are harmonized, and the whole retains its expressive unity [10]. The internal dynamics of the self are closely linked to emotional regulation processes, which reflect how affective experiences are integrated and managed. Emotions acquire meaning within a system of evaluation and interpretation, in which the significance attributed to experiences influences the intensity and direction of affective responses. Emotional regulation supports the balance between tension and stability, contributing to the maintenance of identity coherence [7]. As in the artistic process, where tensions within the material are integrated to support form, emotional experience becomes part of the identity structure.

The temporal dimension of the self brings to the fore the evolutionary character of identity. The self reflects a continuity between past, present, and future, in which previous experiences are integrated and reinterpreted according to the current context. This continuity supports the development of a sense of stability, while openness to the future maintains the direction of becoming. Artistically, this process recalls the evolution of a work over time, in which each intervention modifies and refines the existing form [6]. The relationship between the actual self and the ideal self, occupies a central role in this dynamic. Differences between these dimensions generate motivational tensions that can orient the development process.

When these tensions are integrated, they support transformation and approach to individual potential. Developing self-confidence is an essential resource, which is built by identifying personal values, stimulating motivation, overcoming fears, and strengthening social relationships [16, p. 133]. In a relational context, this approach is supported through validation, feedback, and recognition, elements that contribute to consolidating identity direction [8].

The integration of these dimensions allows for an understanding of the self as a complex system, characterized by the interdependence of cognitive structures, emotional processes, and relational influences. Psychological becoming thus appears as a process of continuous reorganization, in which identity takes shape through experience and relationship, in a dynamic between stability and transformation. The self takes the form of an open structure, capable of integrating external influences in an adaptive manner. Relationships contribute to orienting this becoming, providing the context in which identity gains clarity and coherence. These processes are also supported at the neuropsychological level, through the integration of relational experiences into the individual's internal structure [12]. The process does not imply a loss of autonomy, but rather the development of a deeper capacity for integration and adaptation. Thus, the foundations of psychological becoming are built on the interaction between internal organization and relational influences, in a continuous process of shaping and clarification. This perspective opens the framework for analyzing the role of relationships in configuring identity and for exploring the mechanisms through which they support the development and reorganization of the self.

The Michelangelo Model – The Relationship as a Space for Shaping the Self The Michelangelo model, developed by Stephen M. Drigotas together with Caryl Rusbult and his collaborators, was in-

troduced into the specialized literature at the end of the 1990s, in a context where psychological research was granting increasing importance to the role of relationships in identity development. The study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1999) highlights how close partners actively contribute to the development of the ideal self through relational processes that are sustained and repeated over time [6, p. 293]. The model starts from the premise that each individual possesses an internal representation of their own becoming, expressed through traits, values, and directions of development that orient identity. The central mechanism of this effect is based on the idea that each person holds an ideal self, an internal image of who they can become under optimal conditions. In healthy relationships, partners support the expression of these potentialities through behaviors that reinforce the desirable dimensions of the self [13, p. 477]. This ideal self becomes progressively clarified through interaction, gaining consistency through relational experiences that confirm and support its expression. An essential contribution of the model lies in placing the relationship at the center of the identity configuration process. Significant relationships become the space in which the self is clarified, adjusted, and consolidated, through continuous processes of validation, support, and integration of experiences.

Viewing this process through the lens of artistic creation offers a deeper understanding of its dynamics. In the spirit of Michelangelo Buonarroti's vision, the intervention does not create the form but makes it visible, and the relationship supports the expression and consolidation of the traits that define the individual's direction of becoming. Identity gains coherence through successive adjustments, supported by relational experience. The central mechanism of the model consists

of facilitating the congruence between the actual self and the ideal self, through the recognition and support of characteristics that reflect individual potential. The relationship contributes to the consolidation of these traits within the identity structure, through constant processes of validation, feedback, and behavioral support, which manifest in daily interactions and sustain the direction of development [12, p. 102]. Relational validation influences the way the individual perceives their own capacities and limitations, contributing to the integration of traits congruent with the ideal self into the identity structure and to the increase of internal coherence. Understanding the motivation, history and causes of limiting beliefs is of major importance in anchoring and strengthening self-confidence congruent with the concepts of Self and Social Identity [17, p. 136]. Relationships characterized by congruence and support provide a framework in which identity acquires stability and clarity, while discordant relational experiences intensify internal tensions and affect the organization of the self [11]. The process of relational shaping involves mechanisms of mirroring and internalization, through which interpersonal experiences are transformed into stable internal structures. The reactions and responses of others contribute to the formation of self-image, and the internalization of these experiences influences behavior and emotional experience. In this context, Cozolino Louis, in his book *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships*, highlights that relational influence transfers from the plane of interaction to that of internal organization, supporting the reorganization of identity [4]. Expectancy is the subjective probability that a particular behavior will lead to a specific outcome or reward. When a person has low expectancies, they believe that their actions are unlikely to be followed by a reward. If multiple outcomes are equally desirable, the person

will choose to engage in those behaviors that have the highest chance of being rewarded (i.e., the highest expectancy) [16, p. 61]. The evolution of this model takes shape through the progressive accumulation of relational experiences. Repeated interactions, sustained by involvement and validation, contribute to the stabilization of functioning patterns that become an integral part of the self. Relationships acquire the function of continuous development environments, in which identity is structured through experience and constant feedback [5].

The integration of the Michelangelo model with cognitive theories highlights the role of schemas in how relational experiences are perceived and internalized. Cognitive structures orient the interpretation of the validation and support received, influencing the effectiveness of the identity consolidation process [3]. Congruence between relational experiences and these structures supports self-development, while discrepancies between them favor the maintenance of rigid patterns [15]. The emotional dimension of relationships contributes to the shaping of the self through co-regulation processes, which support the integration of affective experiences and the stabilization of emotional responses. Interactions characterized by safety and support facilitate the reorganization of difficult experiences and contribute to the development of a coherent and stable identity structure.

Conclusions The integrated analysis of cognitive, relational, and emotional perspectives highlights that self-development unfolds within an interactive field, in which internal organization and relational experience mutually shape each other. The shaping of the self is achieved through validation, emotional co-regulation, and relational congruence. Identity gains consistency through processes of progressive integration, supported by contexts in which validation, recognition, and the

involvement of the other provide direction and stability. The Michelangelo model proposes a significant reconfiguration of the way psychological development is understood, by placing the relationship at the center of identity transformation. Close relationships do not function merely as a backdrop to experience, but as active environments in which traits relevant to the individual's direction of becoming are selected, consolidated, and organized. From this perspective, identity is formed through a process of fine-tuning between internal potential and the responses received from the relational environment.

Research findings support the idea that the proximity between the actual self and the ideal self depends on the quality of significant interactions and on their capacity to support coherent validation and emotional integration processes. Congruent relationships facilitate the organization of a stable and flexible identity, while incongruent relational experiences may intensify internal tensions and the fragmentation of the self. Thus, identity development reflects a balance between existing cognitive structures and the experiences that can reorganize them.

The present work, although aiming for a relevant theoretical integration between cognitive psychology, relational psychology, and the Michelangelo model, also presents a number of limitations that must be mentioned: the absence of a quantitative or qualitative study, which limits the possibility of directly testing the postulated relationships between variables such as relational congruence, emotional regulation, and identity coherence; the risk of confirmation bias, in which sources supporting the central metaphor are privileged to the detriment of critical or alternative perspectives on the Michelangelo model (for example, possible negative effects of excessive relational influence on self-autonomy); the fact that the process of self-becoming is neither linear nor cumulative,

and is often marked by contradictions; as well as the existence of cross-cultural and personality differences, depending on age, gender, attachment style, or personality traits.

To overcome these limitations, future research could pursue the following research directions: the development of a set of scales to measure the subjective perception of the “Michelangelo effect” in the most significant relationships (partner, therapeutic, and parent-child); the design of a brief protocol (e.g., 4–6 sessions) in which the therapist would systematically provide behavioral validation congruent with the client’s reported direction of development (similar to the Michelangelo model); the application of semi-structured interviews with individuals who report having experienced a significant self-transformation within a relationship (couple, therapeutic, or mentoring), exploring the “sculptor” metaphor; investigating Siegel and Cozolino’s suggestions regarding the activation of circuits associated with social reward (ventral striatum) and emotional regulation (medial prefrontal cortex) using EEG and the analysis of moderators and mediators.

Otherwise, the Michelangelo model would not remain a mere metaphor, but an empirically validated framework, with direct applications in psychotherapy, personal development, career counseling, and education.

To create and to become involve the same kind of relationship with form: a relationship of discovery, adjustment, and refinement. Intervention does not impose meaning, but clarifies it, and form is defined by the relationship between what exists and what is supported to emerge. The implications of this approach extend beyond the theoretical framework and into psychological and artistic practice. The therapeutic relationship, like the artistic relationship, becomes a space in which potential gains direction and experience acquires coherence. In this space, identity is not fixed, but is organized through integration processes that support adaptation and continuity. In the end, becoming who you are capable of being takes the form of a relational process of identity organization, in which the final form reflects the integration of potential in the encounter with the other, where each relationship contributes to defining the shape of identity.

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