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Why People Care So Much About Their Self-Esteem

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Despite the fact that self-esteem is acknowledged to be an important psychological phenomena and has been examined in thousands of studies, many questions remain regarding why self-esteem is important and why people appear to care about maintaining their self-esteem. Sociometer theory suggests that self-esteem is essentially a psychological monitor of the degree to which people are, or are likely to be, accepted vs. rejected by other people. This paper examines sociometer theory and supporting research, with a focus on why self-esteem relates to emotion and behavior, and why people appear to seek high self-esteem.

In the first textbook in psychology, William James (1890) suggested that the tendency to strive to feel good about oneself is a fundamental aspect of human nature, thereby fueling a fascination--some would say obsession--with self-esteem that has spanned more than a century. During that time, behavioral and social scientists have studied the determinants of low and high self-esteem, self-esteem's role in human development, ways in which people maintain and enhance their self-esteem, differences between people who possess low versus high self-esteem, and the importance of self-esteem to psychological well-being. Furthermore, many practicing psychologists and social engineers have suggested that high self-esteem is a remedy for many psychological and social problems, and the lay public has become convinced that it is important for people to pursue high self-esteem.

Yet, despite over 100 years of attention and thousands of published studies, fundamental issues regarding self-esteem remain poorly understood. Why is self-esteem important? Do people really have a need for self-esteem? Is low self-esteem associated with psychological difficulties and, if so, why? Do efforts to enhance self-esteem reduce personal and social problems as proponents of the self-esteem movement claim? And, perhaps most importantly, why do people care so much about their self-esteem?

Previous Perspectives on the Function of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem appears to be a human universal. Although the specific factors that affect self-esteem may differ by culture, no one has yet found a group of people who do not experience changes in how they feel about themselves as a result of their own actions and others' evaluations of them, who are indifferent to these self-relevant feelings, or who do not generally prefer to feel good rather than bad about themselves. The universality of the experience strongly suggests that self-esteem is probably an evolutionary adaptation that likely served some important function in helping our prehistoric ancestors deal with the challenges and opportunities of their everyday lives. Yet, most previous perspectives on self-esteem have difficulty explaining the function of self-esteem. Many writers have assumed that self-esteem is important because people possess an inherent "need" to feel good about themselves, but we must ask why self-esteem is so important and what function it might serve.

Some theorists suggest that self-esteem signals that people are behaving authentically–

that is, consistently with who they really are (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Rogers, 1959)–but it is difficult to identify the tangible, evolutionarily-significant benefits of being authentic. (Indeed, occasional inauthenticity might be expected to be more adaptive if it enhances survival and reproductive success.) Similarly, perspectives that regard self-esteem as a passive reflection of other people's perceptions of the individual can explain why self-esteem is strongly affected by interpersonal factors, but they do not articulate the benefits that derive from *feeling* good or bad about oneself (i.e., experiencing low vs. high self-esteem). Some writers have suggested that high self-esteem is beneficial in promoting adjustment, motivation, and well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988), but the data show not only that self-esteem is not as strongly related to well-being as often imagined but that, when it is, low and high self-esteem seems to be a concomitant rather than a cause of positive and negative psychological outcomes (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Colvin & Block, 1994; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989).

Only a few theories make the function of self-esteem explicit, albeit in different ways. For example, the ethological perspective (Barkow, 1980) suggests that self-esteem is an adaptation that evolved in the service of maintaining dominance in social relationships. According to this theory, human beings evolved mechanisms for monitoring dominance because dominance facilitated the acquisition of mates and other reproduction-enhancing resources. Because attention and favorable reactions from others were associated with being dominant, feelings of self-esteem became tied to social approval and deference. From this perspective, the motive to evaluate oneself positively reduces, in evolutionary terms, to the motive to enhance one's relative dominance.

A second, controversial explanation is provided by terror management theory, which suggests that the function of self-esteem is to buffer people against the existential terror they experience at the prospect of their own death and annihilation (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Several experiments have supported aspects of the theory but not the strong argument that the function of the self-esteem system is to provide an emotional buffer specifically against death-related anxiety. Furthermore, terror management theory proposes that this self-esteem-based anxiety buffer evolved through natural selection, but it is unclear how evolutionary processes could have produced a terror-management mechanism that makes people relatively unafraid of dying.

These perspectives offer insights into the nature of self-esteem, but each has conceptual and empirical difficulties (for critiques, see Leary, 1999; Leary, 2002; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Schreindorfer, 1997). In the past decade, a novel perspective--sociometer theory--has emerged that casts self-esteem in a somewhat different light as it addresses lingering questions about the nature of self-esteem.

Sociometer Theory

According to sociometer theory, self-esteem is essentially a psychological meter or gauge that monitors the quality of people's relationships with others (Leary, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995). The theory is based on the assumption that human beings possess a pervasive drive to maintain significant interpersonal relationships, a drive that evolved because early human beings who belonged to social groups were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who did not (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Given the disastrous implications of being ostracized in the ancestral environment in which human evolution occurred, early human beings developed a mechanism for monitoring the degree to which other people valued and accepted them. This psychological mechanism--the *sociometer*--continuously monitors the social

environment for cues regarding the degree to which the individual is being accepted vs. rejected by other people.

Specifically, the sociometer appears to be sensitive to changes in relational value--the degree to which others regard their relationship with the individual as valuable, important, or close. When evidence of low relational evaluation (and particularly, a decrement in relational evaluation) is detected, the sociometer attracts the person's conscious attention to the potential threat to social acceptance and motivates him or her to deal with it. The affectively-laden self-appraisals that constitute the "output" of the sociometer are what we typically call self-esteem.

Self-esteem researchers distinguish between *state self-esteem*--momentary fluctuations in a person's feelings about him- or herself--and *trait self-esteem*--the person's general appraisal of his or her value, and both are aspects of the sociometer. Feelings of state self-esteem fluctuate as a function of the degree to which the person perceives others currently value their relationships with him or her. Cues that connote high relational evaluation raise state self-esteem, whereas cues that connote low relational evaluation lower state self-esteem. Trait self-esteem, on the other hand, reflects the person's general sense that he or she is the sort of person who is valued and accepted by other people. Trait self-esteem may be regarded as the resting state of the sociometer in the absence of incoming information relevant to relational evaluation (Leary & MacDonald, 2003).

Many kinds of events can lower self-esteem–failure, rejection, embarrassing situations, negative evaluations, being outperformed by others, and so on–but, from the standpoint of sociometer theory, they all involve events that potentially lower people's relational value in the eyes of others. Experimental evidence clearly shows that state self-esteem is strongly affected by events that have implications for the degree to which one is valued and accepted by other people (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001; Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001; Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Leary, Tambor. Terdal, & Downs, 1995 Studies 3 & 4; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997; Snapp & Leary, 2001). Indeed, the events that affect self-esteem are precisely the kinds of things that, if known by other people, would affect their evaluation and acceptance of the person (Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995). Most often, self-esteem is lowered by failure, criticism, rejection, and other events that have implications for relational evaluation, and self-esteem rises when people succeed, are praised, or experience another's love, all of which are associated with being relationally valued. Even the mere possibility of rejection can lower self-esteem, a finding that makes sense if the self-esteem system is designed to warn people of possible relational devaluation in time to take corrective action (Haupt & Leary, 1997).

Furthermore, the personal characteristics upon which people's self-esteem is based are precisely those attributes that determine the degree to which people are valued and accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). High self-esteem is associated with believing that one possesses socially desirable attributes such as competence, personal likeability, and physical attractiveness (Leary & MacDonald, 2003). Furthermore, self-esteem is related most strongly to one's standing on attributes that the person believes are valued by others (MacDonald, Saltzman, & Leary, 2003), a finding that is also consistent with sociometer theory.

In linking self-esteem to social acceptance and rejection, sociometer theory runs counter to the widespread assumption that self-esteem that is based on approval from others is false or unhealthy (Deci & Ryan, 1995). On the contrary, if the function of self-esteem is to avoid interpersonal devaluation and rejection, then the system must be responsive to others' reactions to the individual. This system may lead people to do things that are not always beneficial but it

does so to protect their interpersonal relationships rather than their inner integrity.

Some people maintain that their feelings about themselves are absolutely unaffected by other people's evaluations, a claim that, if true, suggests that sociometer theory may not apply to everyone. To examine this question, we designed two experiments to determine whether people who make such claims are, in fact, unaffected by rejection (Leary, Gallagher, Fors, Buttermore, Baldwin, Kennedy, & Mills, 2002). After pre-selecting participants who steadfastly insisted that their self-esteem either was or was not affected by disapproval and rejection, we led participants to believe that others had either accepted or rejected them in a laboratory group. In both studies, acceptance and rejection greatly affected state self-esteem, but this effect was not moderated by participants' personal beliefs about whether their own self-esteem was affected by approval and acceptance. In other words, even people who adamantly claim that their self-esteem is unaffected by social evaluation show decreased self-esteem when they believe that others have devalued or rejected them.

Sociometer theory provides a parsimonious explanation for most of the empirical findings and helps to explain why people seem to care so much about their self-esteem. Previous writers have puzzled over the fact that self-esteem is so strongly tied to people's beliefs about how they are evaluated by others. If self-esteem is a *self*-evaluation, as most theorists have assumed, why do we judge ourselves by other people's standards? Sociometer theory easily explains why self-esteem is strongly affected by the real and imagined reactions of other people. As a monitor of relational evaluation, the self-esteem system is inherently sensitive to real and potential reactions of other people.

The Self-Esteem Motive

Few would doubt that people often behave in ways that seem designed to protect or increase their self-esteem. According to sociometer theory, when people do things that appear intended to maintain self-esteem, their actual goal is to protect and enhance their relational value so as to maximize their likelihood of interpersonal acceptance. Elsewhere, I have compared self-esteem to the fuel gauge on a car–a device that serves an incredibly important function by alerting drivers to how much gas is in the tank (and motivating them to keep the tank from being empty) but that does not actually play a direct role in the car's operation. In seeing a driver stop to refuel as the fuel indicator approaches *E* (empty), a person who did not understand the fuel gauge's purpose might conclude that the driver had some inherent tendency to avoid the *E*-state, or perhaps had a "need to maintain *F*," because he or she engaged in actions that increased *F* whenever it fell too far toward *E* (Leary et al., 1995). Without knowing that the fuel gauge was, in fact, just a gauge, the ignorant observer might attribute unwarranted importance to having a high level of *F* in its own right instead of as seeing it as an indicator of the amount of gas in the tank. In fact, if a car ran entirely out of gas, the observer might even attribute the car's failure move to the fact that the fuel gauge had reached *E*. In the same way, we have erred by misperceiving self-esteem as an important entity that people seek in its own right rather than as an indicator of something important for human well-being–relational value and social acceptance.

Self-Esteem and Human Behavior

The primary reason that self-esteem has attracted so much attention is that hundreds, if not thousands of studies have shown self-esteem to be related to a wide array of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral variables, including achievement, motivation, emotion, independence, and social skill. Writers have tended to assume that high and low self-esteem *cause* these various

outcomes, but the data are inherently correlational, and causal interpretations should not be drawn. In fact, we have no evidence whatsoever that self-esteem causally influences any of the phenomena that have been attributed to it.

According to sociometer theory, variables that correlate with self-esteem are related to self-esteem because they are antecedents, consequences, or concomitants of relational value. Many cognitive, emotional, and behavioral variables that correlate with self-esteem do so because they are associated with the perception that one is (or is not) valued as a relational partner by other individuals (Leary & MacDonald, 2003). For example, beliefs that one is competent, physically attractive, and likeable predict trait self-esteem because such perceptions are related to the degree to which people believe that they are relationally valued by other people. In fact, MacDonald et al. (2003) found that people's beliefs about their personal attributes predicted their self-esteem to the degree that they believed that these attributes were associated with acceptance and rejection by other people.

Other variables correlate with self-esteem because they reflect ways of dealing with low relational value. For example, conformity may be related to self-esteem because people who believe they have low relational value (and who, thus, have lower self-esteem) conform in order to increase their chances for acceptance.

In many cases, variables that correlate with self-esteem may be both a cause and a consequence of feeling accepted or rejected. For example, feeling unaccepted may lead people to pursue social acceptance through deviant behaviors such as drug use (because the standards for acceptance by antisocial groups are lower), but then such behaviors may result in disapproval and rejection, thereby lowering self-esteem.

Research has shown that low self-esteem is related to a variety of psychological difficulties and personal problems, including depression, loneliness, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, academic failure, and criminal behavior. The evidence in support of the link between low self-esteem and psychological problems has often been overstated; the relationships are weaker and more scattered than typically assumed (Baumeister et al., 2003; Mecca et al., 1989), and high self-esteem also has notable drawbacks (Baumeister et al., 2003). Even so, low self-esteem tends to be associated with psychological difficulties more than high self-esteem.

From the standpoint of sociometer theory, these problems are not caused by low self-esteem but rather by a history of low relational evaluation, if not outright rejection. As a subjective gauge of how one is evaluated and accepted by others, self-esteem may parallel these problems, but it is a co-effect rather than a cause. Much research shows that interpersonal rejection results in emotional problems, difficulties relating with others, and maladaptive efforts to be accepted (e.g., excessive dependency, membership in deviant groups), precisely the concomitants of low self-esteem (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995). In addition, many personal problems lower self-esteem because they lead other people to devalue or reject the individual.

The claim that self-esteem does not cause psychological outcomes may appear to fly in the face of evidence showing that clinical interventions that enhance self-esteem lead to positive psychological changes. Programs that enhance self-esteem are effective in resolving people's problems because these interventions change people's perceptions of the degree to which they are socially valued individuals. Self-esteem programs always include features that would be expected to increase real or perceived social acceptance, such as enhancing social skills and interpersonal problem solving, improving physical appearance, and increasing self-control

(Leary, 1999).

Cognitive Control of Self-esteem

Although many efforts to maintain or enhance self-esteem are clearly interpersonal tactics intended to increase one's relational value as sociometer theory suggests, people do sometimes try to maintain positive feelings about themselves in their own minds in ways that have no interpersonal consequences (Greenwald, 1980). Because of the importance of interpersonal acceptance, people learn from a very early age to engage in a wide array of behaviors that promote their relational value to others. As a result, the tendency to construe events in self-serving and relationally enhancing ways becomes overlearned. Thus, people may interpret events in esteem-maintaining ways even when those interpretations are not conveyed to other people, but this fact does not contradict sociometer theory's claim that the original function of such actions was to maintain relational value rather than self-esteem per se. Furthermore, the uniquely human ability to self-reflect in complex and abstract ways allows people to construe the meaning of events in ways that promote positive feelings (as when a patient with a troubling medical symptom talks herself into believing that everything is alright). These motivated construals of potentially threatening events are sometimes maladaptive in the long run–as when the patient decides not to go to the doctor–but they nonetheless reduce negative emotions in the short term. In the same way, people sometimes interpret self-relevant events in ways that allow them to maintain self-esteem and positive affect even in the face of events that objectively "ought" to make them feel badly about themselves. In essence, people sometimes cognitively override their sociometers.

Theorists have debated whether these private self-serving biases or positive illusions are beneficial or detrimental to people's well-being (Colvin & Block, 1994; Robins & Beer, 2001; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Viewing the self-esteem as a sociometer that is involved in the regulation of interpersonal relationships suggests that they are probably detrimental in the long run. The sociometer effectively regulates interpersonal relations only to the extent that it provides a reasonably accurate picture of other people's reactions to the individual vis-a-vis acceptance and rejection. Positive illusions about oneself undoubtedly make people feel better and, occasionally, allow them to maintain a positive attitude and motivation in the face of adversity. But, over the long haul, these biases circumvent the sociometer's function and increase the likelihood of misregulation. It makes no more sense to convince oneself that one is more socially acceptable than one actually is than it does to convince oneself that the fuel tank on one's car contains more gasoline than it really does. It may temporarily make one feel better but, to the extent that it deters appropriate or remediative action, the ultimate outcome will often be negative.

Conclusions

Sociometer theory suggests that the emphasis that psychologists and the lay public have placed on self-esteem has been somewhat misplaced. Self-esteem is certainly related to many psychological phenomena, but its role is different than has been supposed. Subjective feelings of self-esteem provide people with ongoing feedback regarding their relational value vis-a-vis other people. Instead of trying to protect their self-esteem self-esteem per se, people are generally trying to maintain or enhance their relational value in others' eyes, using self-esteem as a gauge of their success in doing so.

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