[2000-word research summary/analysis for the *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology*]

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to one's overall positive or negative evaluation of oneself. Self-esteem is thought to develop in childhood and remains relatively stable over time. There is tremendous emphasis in North American culture on self-esteem. In popular culture, thousands of self-help books and childrearing manuals have been written on this topic; in the scientific community, over 15,000 journal articles have been published in this area in the last 30 years. Self-esteem has often been hailed as an antidote to society's problems. The Self-esteem Movement of the 1990s assumed that raising people's self-esteem could reduce social problems such as low academic achievement, high drop out rates, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. A recent review of the literature by Roy Baumeister and colleagues, however, suggests that the effects of trait self-esteem may be limited. High self-esteem, once thought to predict a variety of positive outcomes, was only found to be associated with a tendency to experience positive emotions and feelings of self-efficacy. Low self-esteem, once thought to be a cause of negative outcomes, was found to be merely a symptom or correlate of negative outcomes, rather than a reliable cause. Overall, their review suggested that there may be more to self-esteem than whether it is high or low.

In the present entry, I examine the multifaceted nature of self-esteem: how self-esteem affects people's responses to self-threats; the stability of self-esteem; contingencies of self-worth – the domains on which people base their self-esteem; and self-validation goals – the desire to prove that one possesses certain qualities on which self-esteem is based. I conclude with a discussion of cross-cultural differences in self-esteem and ways to reduce the costs associated with pursuing self-esteem.

Responses to Self-esteem Threats

High self-esteem people possess favorable, confidently held self-views. They are skilled at maintaining and enhancing their self-esteem, especially kin the face of self-threats. For example, following failure feedback, high self-esteem people, compared to low self-esteem people, are likely to call to mind their strengths relative to weaknesses, persist longer on tasks, take more risks, and affirm themselves in domains unrelated to the threat in order to boost their self-esteem. In addition, they are likely to deflect the threat away from themselves and make self-serving attributions, such as by blaming others or dismissing the validity of the negative feedback.

Low self-esteem people possess relatively less favorable, less confident self-views and are highly concerned about the possibility of being rejected by others. When low self-esteem people fail, they are quicker to call to mind their weaknesses relative to strengths, and tend to internalize and overgeneralize the negative feedback to themselves, viewing the failure as confirmation of their global inadequacy. Low self-esteem people engage in self-protective strategies following failure to avoid further loss of self-esteem, such as reducing their task motivation, avoiding risks, and showing decreased desire to repair their negative moods.

Low self-esteem people possess contingencies of interpersonal acceptance; when they fail, they automatically associate failure with being rejected by others. Indeed, low self-esteem is related to personality measures reflecting insecurity in relationships, such as rejection sensitivity, insecure attachment styles, and excessive reassurance-seeking in relationships. Following failure, low self-esteem people become more interpersonally-oriented which leads them to be liked more by strangers. In interactions with strangers, low self-esteem people may be more highly attuned to the possibility of rejection and thus, likely to expend much effort to ensure that the other person likes them. However, in the context of close relationships, low self-

esteem people show self-protective responses following self-threat; they distance themselves from their partners, devalue their relationships, and doubt their partner's love for them – preemptive responses to avoid the possibility of being rejected by their partners.

High self-esteem people are confident of their interpersonal acceptance and do not chronically worry about whether others will reject or accept them. In fact, high self-esteem people become more independent following failure, focusing on their unique abilities and competencies rather than on their interpersonal qualities, leading them to be liked less by strangers. However, in close relationships, high self-esteem people draw closer to their partners and affirm their relationships following self-threat, thereby repairing their self-esteem.

Research on high and low self-esteem people's responses to success are mixed. Some studies show that both high and low self-esteem people show increased self-esteem and positive mood following success. However, other studies suggest that low self-esteem people experience heightened anxiety following success, because positive feedback is inconsistent with their negative self-views. Indeed, low self-esteem people are likely to dampen experiences of positive affect, whereas high self-esteem people are likely to savor them. Such findings are consistent with Swann's self-verification theory which states that people are motivated to verify or confirm their existing self-views, even if they are negative.

Stability of Self-Esteem

In addition to trait self-esteem, researchers have also investigated the stability of people's self-esteem. In particular, Michael Kernis and colleagues have distinguished between stable high self-esteem and fragile high self-esteem. People with stable high self-esteem show relatively little fluctuations in feelings of self-worth over time, because their self-worth is less dependent on external feedback or circumstances. In contrast, people with fragile high self-esteem show

dramatic fluctuations in their feelings of self-worth; because they depend heavily on feedback from others and the external environment to determine their self-feelings, they experience instability of self-esteem and increased anger and hostility toward others upon receiving negative feedback. Indeed, narcissists are especially likely to have high fragile self-esteem – although they think highly of themselves, they possess an underlying fragility of self-worth that leads to an insatiable quest to be continually validated and admired by others.

Contingencies of Self-Worth

Contingencies of self-worth reflect specific domains on which people base their self-worth. Jennifer Crocker and colleagues identified 7 domains of contingency among college students: Academic competence, physical attractiveness, others' approval, competition, virtue, having support from one's family, and having God's love. Individuals differ in their bases of self-worth, with consequences for how they spend their time, their mental and physical health, and interpersonal outcomes. For example, people who base self-worth on attractiveness spend more time shopping, grooming, and socializing; people who base self-worth on virtue spend more time volunteering and attending church. Research has shown that certain domains of contingency incur more costs to mental and physical health than others. For example, basing self-worth on appearance is associated with depressive symptoms and eating disorders, whereas basing self-worth on virtue is associated with less alcohol use and higher GPA. Basing self-worth on academics, although associated with more time spent studying, does not predict GPA; one explanation is that staking self-worth on academics leads to increased stress and anxiety which, in turn, interferes with optimal performance.

Although contingencies are highly motivating, they are also a source of vulnerability because people are likely to experience negative events in domains of contingency that threaten

their sense of self-worth. For example, people who base self-worth on academics report more negative self-evaluative thoughts following failure than those who are less contingent on their academic competence. Furthermore, low self-esteem people who base self-worth on academics and experience failure are likely to disengage from the goal to appear competent and be quicker to associate themselves with failure than with success. Finally, research has shown that among college seniors applying to graduate schools, those whose self-worth was highly contingent on academics showed dramatic fluctuations in self-esteem and mood in response to acceptances versus rejections from graduate schools, which, in turn, led to instability of self-esteem and an increase in depressive symptoms over time.

Interpersonally, research has shown that high self-esteem people who base self-worth on academic competence and receive an academic self-threat become less responsive to others' personal problems and ultimately, become less likeable. In contrast, low self-esteem people who are contingent on academics and experience academic threat become more supportive toward others' personal problems and thus, are more liked by others.

Self-Validation Goals

People are likely to adopt self-validation goals aimed at proving and validating that they possess those qualities on which their self-esteem is based. Research has shown that students who base self-worth on academics are likely to possess academic self-validation goals aimed at proving their competence to others. Although self-validation goals are motivating, when students focus on validating their ability, they are likely to experience more academic anxiety, show less intrinsic motivation, make more negative ability-based attributions, and perform more poorly on tasks following failure than those who are not as focused on demonstrating their ability.

Culture and the Pursuit of Self-Esteem

Although some researchers have proposed that self-esteem is a fundamental need, others have argued that self-esteem is not universal but, instead, a cultural construction unique to cultures emphasizing individuality and personal achievement. For example, Steve Heine and colleagues have shown that in East Asian cultures such as Japan, there is more focus on self-improvement and self-criticism, whereas in North American culture, the focus is on protecting and enhancing self-esteem.

Recently, self-esteem has been conceptualized as a goal pursuit, in which people adopt the goal to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem. In North American culture, people spend much of their time and energy pursuing self-esteem. This pursuit is highly motivating because when people succeed, they experience boosts to their self-esteem and increases in positive mood. However, because success is not guaranteed, people are also likely to experience threats to their self-worth, leading to drops in self-esteem and increases in negative affect. Over time, the pursuit of self-esteem may interfere with the fulfillment of psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness with others. For example, when people are focused on protecting self-esteem, they are less open to learning from their mistakes or examining areas that they need to improve.

An alternative to pursuing self-esteem may be to shift from goals focused on protecting and enhancing self-esteem, to goals that are larger than the self and include others, such as adopting learning goals aimed at making a contribution to one's field. Along these lines, research has shown that students who adopt mastery goals in the classroom show deeper cognitive processing and more intrinsic interest than those with performance-oriented goals.

Conclusion

In sum, self-esteem can be viewed in a variety of ways: as an enduring trait, as stable versus fragile, as specific domains of contingent self-worth, or as a goal that people pursue. There is continuing discussion over whether self-esteem is a universal need or is unique to North American culture. Finally, although there are costs associated with different types of self-esteem, there are alternatives to pursuing self-esteem that may help to reduce the costs.

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See Also: Self-Concept, Self-efficacy, Ego Threat, Motivation, Goals

Further Readings

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