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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem remains one of social psychology's central constructs, despite disagreements about its theoretical interpretation and methods of measurement. This entry provides an overview of alternative views of structure and empirical controversies about the function of self-esteem in personality. Special emphasis is placed on recent advancement in implicit measurement of self-esteem, with a brief discussion of implications for developmental research.

KEYWORDS: Self-esteem functioning, Implicit measures, Development of self-esteem

SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem remains one of social psychology's central constructs, despite disagreements about its theoretical interpretation and methods of measurement. This entry provides an overview of alternative views of structure and empirical controversies about the function of self-esteem in personality. Special emphasis is placed on recent advancement in implicit measurement of self-esteem, with a brief discussion of implications for developmental research.

Many personality theorists have characterized self-esteem as an essential ingredient of personality. Remarkably, however, there are wide variations in their conceptions of how to conceive the functioning of self-esteem. For Carl Rogers, self-esteem was essential both to psychological health and to the likelihood of achieving life goals. Similarly, for Abraham Maslow, self-esteem was a basic human need, fulfillment of which contributed to self-actualization. Gordon Allport conceived self-esteem as one of the seven aspects of the self that characterize the healthy, mature adult personality, also viewing self-esteem's development as occurring in early childhood. Rogers, Maslow, and Allport all associated high self-esteem with a broad range of desirable outcomes, a view similar to that of psychoanalytic theorists who conceived low self-esteem as maladaptive (e.g., Alfred Adler's "inferiority complex" and Karen Horney's "self-contempt").

Structure of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is widely conceived as a relatively stable trait, consisting of positive self-regard or attitude, and arising from normal maturation. At the same time, there exist multiple conceptions of self-esteem's structure, ranging from relatively simple networks to multi-faceted evaluative schemas. At the simpler end are ideas of self-esteem as "a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely, the self" (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 30) and "the association of the concept

of self with a valence attribute” (Greenwald et al., 2002, p. 3). At intermediate levels of complexity are cognitively based views of self-esteem such as “a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself” (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 5) and more affectively based ones such as “feelings of affection for oneself, no different, in kind, than the feelings of affection one has for others” (Brown & Dutton, 1995, p. 712). More complex are models of self-esteem as a “combination of cognitions and evaluations of many attributes of self” (Wylie, 1979, p. 4), as “a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our success” (James, 1890, p. 310), as a difference “between an individual’s ideal and actual concepts of himself” (Cohen, 1959, p. 103), as “the component of the self-system which regulates the extent to which the self system is maintained under conditions of strain” (Ziller, Hagey, Smith, & Long, 1969, p. 84), and as “the feeling that one is an object of primary value in a meaningful universe” (Greenberg et al., 1992, p. 913).

Functions of Self-Esteem

Despite wide endorsement of the importance of self-esteem, there is substantial variation in theoretical conceptions of *how* self-esteem functions in ways that justify its status as an essential ingredient of personality. The first of three categories of functional views includes those that postulate a *protective or defensive* function. The nature of how a threat is conceived varies, including (a) threats to social acceptance (sociometer theory), (b) negative consequences of achievement failure (affect regulation model of self-esteem functioning), or (c) the prospect of death (terror management theory).

A second category of theories proposes *self-promotive* functions. These include: (a) self-determination theory’s view that positive self-esteem fulfills needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, (b) self-actualization theory’s view that self-esteem is a learned human need,

which, once met, paves the way for satisfaction of higher-order needs such as self-actualization and (c) humanistic personality theory's view that self-esteem serves a need for unconditional positive regard.

A third category of theories postulates that self-esteem serves an *identity-maintenance* function.

These include: (a) social identity theory's view that low self-esteem motivates identification with positively regarded groups, (b) self-affirmation theory's view that high self-esteem provides a resource to affirm a threatened identity in an alternative domain, (c) self-verification theory's view that people seek to maintain stable and coherent self-views (identities), and (d) balanced identity theory's view that identities, attitudes, and self-esteem tend to self-organize on principles of affective–cognitive consistency .

Defensive and promotive functions of self-esteem can be seen as homeostatically linked, with the defensive function sustaining self-esteem at a level high enough for promotive functioning to be effective. The identity-maintenance function also suggests that self-esteem is acting homeostatically. Thus, all three types of function are consistent with a higher-order theme that self-esteem serves a personality-stabilizing function.

Predictive Validity of Self-esteem

The uniformity of these views in treating self-esteem as a desirable trait makes it somewhat surprising that none of the theories of self-esteem function has an accompanying conclusive body of supporting empirical research. An extensive literature review by Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) concluded that predictive validity of self-esteem measures with respect to psychological health, well-being, school achievement, and occupational success, is generally very modest at best, with the majority of variance in these indices left unaccounted for: High self-esteem does not cause better academic performance, occupational success, or

leadership (nor does low self-esteem cause aggression, tobacco/alcohol use, or becoming sexually active at an early age). This lack of strong predictive validity of self-esteem for positive outcomes suggests that the benefits of high self-esteem may be fewer and weaker than personality psychologists such as Rogers and Allport had conceived.

Implicit Measures of Self-Esteem

Some of the weakness of empirical evidence for the various theories is almost certainly due to limitations of available measures of self-esteem. The most widely used self-esteem measures are highly transparent sets of self-report items, for which most respondents will know that they are responding to an assessment of some aspect of self-positivity. Widespread understanding that self-esteem is a desirable trait assures that these transparent measures will assess a mixture of self-positivity and impression management. For example, the estimates of contamination by impression management for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale range between .26 and .45 in terms of correlations with social desirability and self-deception.

A more recent development in assessing self-esteem that may avoid self-presentational distortion is use of the Implicit Association Test (IAT). It has been found that IAT measures of self-esteem correlate quite weakly with self-report measures of self-esteem. However, there is no strong reason to expect implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem to be more than weakly correlated, and discrepancies between explicit and implicit self-esteem may be meaningful and of theoretical importance.

Disappointingly, implicit measures of self-esteem correlate weakly with one another. A likely explanation of this weak intercorrelation is in psychometric weaknesses in most of the available implicit measures. However, among implicit measures, the IAT has the highest test-retest reliability and the best temporal stability over a 4-week period.

A notable exception to the observation of predictive validity problems for self-esteem measures is the substantial body of theoretical confirmations of predictions of balanced identity theory (BIT; Greenwald et al., 2002) from studies that have used IAT self-esteem measures. According to BIT's *balance–congruity* principle, the association between two concepts should strengthen when both concepts are associated with the same third concept. For people who already associate self with *good*, associating a *group* with *good* should lead to the development of an additional association between *self* and that *group*. One resulting prediction is that those high in self-esteem will identify with their in-group more than will those low self-esteem. In research testing BIT's balance–congruity principle, confirmations have been obtained consistently with IAT self-esteem measures, while results with parallel self-report self-esteem measures do not reveal the theoretically expected patterns (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2012).

Self-esteem in Children

Developmental scientists investigate the origins, causes, and developmental progression of self-esteem. Important work on young children's self-evaluations has been done by Harter and colleagues using picture identification and self-report. Harter has found that young children (ages 3–7) can evaluate themselves in terms of *particular* cognitive abilities (“I know the alphabet”), physical abilities (“I can tie my shoes”), their appearance (“I am happy with the way I look”), and other specific characteristics. Findings show that these domain-specific self-evaluations are highly positive for the majority of young children, agreeing with social psychology research showing that the vast majority of adults have a positive attitude toward self.

Harter and colleagues have described difficulties in investigating self-esteem in preschool children. Due either to cognitive limitations or to limitations of available measuring instruments, young children show no evidence of integrating the domain-specific self-evaluations into a

higher-order, overall evaluation of themselves. Children apparently cannot verbally report on their global self-esteem, but only on their self-concepts in particular areas (such as math, physical achievements, etc.). This limitation does not dictate that they lack a global form of self-esteem. It has been hypothesized that, although young children are unable to demonstrate global self-esteem in self-report, it nevertheless is manifest in their *behavior*. Using a Q-sort method with experienced preschool teachers, researchers have identified behaviors that are interpreted as reflecting levels of global self-esteem in preschool children (e.g., displays of confidence, curiosity, and independence).

Indirect measures (ones not relying on self-report) are used increasingly by developmental psychologists. To measure preschool children's self-esteem, recent studies have adapted the IAT to measure self-esteem without relying on self-report (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2016). This has permitted investigations that compare roles of implicit and explicit self-esteem in children, revealing now that self-esteem—when measured implicitly but not when measured by self-report—is evident in children as young as 5 years of age, who display affective–cognitive consistency of the same type previously demonstrated for adults.

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Further Reading:

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Biography

Dr. Dario Cvencek (Ph.D., University of Washington, 2007) is a research scientist at the University of Washington’s Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences. Dr. Cvencek addresses early self-esteem from a developmental perspective using implicit and explicit measures. His research emphasizes the role of self-esteem in the maintenance and formation of children’s emerging identities, and examines how such processes might be facilitated by a tendency of the human mind to keep one’s cognitions consistent with one another. Cvencek is one of the co-inventors of the Preschool Implicit Association Test (PSIAT)—an adaptation of the IAT for children between 3- and 6-years-old.

Dr. Anthony G. Greenwald (Ph.D., Harvard, 1963) is Professor of Psychology at University of Washington. His recent research has been on implicit and unconscious cognition, especially applied to phenomena of stereotyping and prejudice and to mental processing of subliminal stimuli. He has received the **Distinguished Scientist Award** from the *Society of Experimental Social Psychology* (2006), the **Lifetime Achievement Award** from the *Association for Psychological Science* (2013), and the **Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions** from

the *American Psychological Association* (2017). In 1995 Greenwald invented the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which became a standard for assessing individual differences in implicit social cognition.