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978-0-521-02842-4 - Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research: Sociological and Psychological Currents

Edited by Timothy J. Owens, Sheldon Stryker and Norman Goodman

Excerpt

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SECTION ONE. THE FRAME

1 The Future of Self-Esteem

An Introduction

Timothy J. Owens and Sheldon Stryker

THE IMPORTANCE OF A MISUNDERSTOOD AND MISAPPROPRIATED CONCEPT

The hypothesized link between the self-concept and various social problems has commanded a long-standing place in social and psychological theory as well as public discourse. Nowhere is this notion more strongly held than in the presumed relationship between self-esteem and various social and emotional difficulties, especially – though certainly not exclusively – with regard to youth problems (Smelser, 1989). It is not uncommon to hear parents, educators, politicians, and religious leaders blame school failure, delinquency, risky sexual behavior, impudence, drug and alcohol abuse, and more on children's diminished self-esteems (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). Indeed, shortly after President Clinton's reelection, *USA Today* reported Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala as saying that, if she remained in the president's cabinet, she would work to raise the self-esteem of the nation's children.

The typical discourse on the relationship between self-esteem and various social and emotional problems is twofold. Self-esteem, it is argued, safeguards people against the ill effects stemming from many of life's problems. This premise assumes that people with high self-esteem, in contrast to those with low self-esteem, will behave in more socially acceptable and responsible ways, will somehow be more resilient to life's vicissitudes, will generally display higher achievement in conventional pursuits, and will ultimately possess greater socioemotional well-being (Burns, 1979; Covington, 1992). This rationalist view of high self-esteem is deeply embedded in Western culture, but especially American. Why, the essential rationalist argument goes, would anyone who loves an object not want to see it protected and enhanced, much less bear to see it harmed? The same goes for the self. If one loves or at least

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likes oneself, the rational person should do everything in his or her power to protect it, grow it, and advance its best interests. To do anything less is, the logic goes, plainly irrational and inexplicable. Enter low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem, on the other hand, is said to open people to an array of social and psychological problems because low self-esteem people are presumed to be more susceptible to negative influences from their social and psychological environments. Low self-esteem has also been theorized as priming people to seek status and recognition in deviant pursuits, resulting in stigmatizing labels and secondary deviance (Lemert, 1951). It is arguable that people will try to confirm their sense of self (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), so that a person who feels “bad” will be inclined to do bad things (Heise & Smith-Lovin, 1981). Low self-esteem people may, in general, be at higher risk of various problems because of their presumed heightened vulnerability to corrosive influences (Burns, 1979; Mecca et al., 1989; Rosenberg & Owens, this volume) and because of their generally pessimistic outlooks toward self and society (Owens, 1993; Rosenberg & Owens, this volume). Still, some of the linkages that have been made between self-esteem and behavior need better clarification. For instance, for young people, low self-esteem is frequently invoked as an explanation for poor school performance, although the empirical evidence is inconclusive (Covington, this volume).

Sources of the Controversy

Beyond the rhetoric and beliefs surrounding self-esteem lies a construct with a mixed record that is causing a fissure among some academics regarding the importance, if not relevance, of the concept. We will touch briefly on three sources of this controversy. First, many researchers with both applied and basic orientations commonly “toss self-esteem in” their research as a control or explanatory variable and then find it coming up short. The question becomes: “Why?” Is self-esteem in fact a weak predictor? Is it an outcome variable of little significance? Then again, the problem may be rooted in a misunderstanding of the concept that leads to the naïve misapplication of self-esteem theory and methods. Considerable evidence leads us to conclude the latter (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Mecca et al., 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Swann, 1996). In our view, the indiscriminate and superficial application of this complicated concept, greased perhaps by the informal communication researchers often engage in with each other as they conduct their research and analyze their data, has diminished its reputation in some quarters. Yet when it comes to an intuitively appealing concept like self-esteem, which permeates our culture (Hewitt, 1998), misinformation is easily propagated, especially among relatively disinterested people with only a passing knowledge of this concept and its proper application.

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Over the past 30 years, articles and books employing self-esteem as a key variable or concept literally number in the thousands, with no slowdown in sight (as judged by the official journals and annual programs of the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, and the relatively new International Society for Self and Identity). Ironically, the disinterest in self-esteem among some scholars is partly a function of its very popularity. Not only are there a great many self-esteem scales to choose from (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Wylie, 1989), but there is considerable argument about such matters as: (1) how self-esteem should be employed, (2) how many and what kinds of dimensions it rightfully possesses, (3) how necessary and useful each of these is, and (4) whether one should employ general or role-specific conceptions of self-esteem. Because of its pervasiveness within the social sciences, some scholars have come to view self-esteem as almost passé, resulting in a concept too easily taken for granted, inappropriately ignored, or employed willy-nilly.

Finally, and perhaps most insidiously, self-esteem is such a ubiquitous concept, especially in the cultures of Western, industrialized societies, that many people – academics and nonacademics alike – assume that, because they have heard about self-esteem, are aware of their own sense of self-esteem, and may have formulated strong thoughts and feelings about its course and effect, that they are *de facto* self-esteem experts. This point can be illustrated by the following example. While doing research for an article on self-esteem for the science section of the *New York Times* (Johnson, 1998), a reporter contacted T. Owens and announced, rather matter-of-factly and without a hint of self-consciousness, that academics are abandoning the concept of self-esteem and that the public is growing indifferent to it. A key source for his conclusion was a rhetorician at a prestigious West Coast university who was prepared to make such a pronouncement about a concept she apparently knew little or nothing about, save perhaps her experience with her own self-esteem and the impressions she formed of the concept from her “reading” of the broader culture. Self-esteem as a topic of conversation is of seeming inherent interest to many people, suggested by the fact that it has spurred both a mythology and a large cottage industry of self-help books, tapes, videos, testimonials, and magazine articles on how to improve one’s own or another’s self-esteem (see Hewitt, 1998, for a cultural analysis of beliefs about self-esteem). Many of these works are written or produced by thoughtful people, others by charlatans and wags pontificating on an aspect of the human condition – the self – that has real and imagined consequences for social functioning and mental health. The accumulated effect of the circumstances outlined above is, perhaps, an unjustifiably “weakened” and misunderstood concept that deserves healthy skepticism (as do all theories and constructs) along with elaboration, extension, and refinement.

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[More information](#)**PURPOSE OF THIS VOLUME**

This volume seeks to examine the current state of self-esteem, identify some of its weaknesses, but, more important, explain it, extend it, and expand it. We do this through a unique device. Although many thousands of works utilizing self-esteem in whole or part have been published since James (1890) first outlined the concept over a century ago, and several people have since emerged as major theorists of the self and self-esteem (e.g., Bandura, Coopersmith, Gergen, Wylie), Morris Rosenberg has left arguably the most indelible contemporary mark on the field. Support for this claim comes from the immense and ongoing utilization of the self-esteem scales he invented 35 years ago (commonly known as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale). Researchers have employed that ostensibly simple 10-item global self-esteem measurement instrument across an enormous array of academic and professional disciplines (e.g., medicine and nursing, virtually all the social sciences, business administration, and education) and languages (e.g., Spanish, Polish, Mandarin Chinese, and phonetic Hmong). Moreover, his numerous books and articles on self-esteem, beginning with his classic *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (1965) and his comprehensive masterwork *Conceiving the Self* (1979), have helped shape an entire and flourishing field of study as well as several generations of researchers and students of the self. For these reasons, we have elected to orient this volume around his self-esteem theory and methodology. (In addition, all royalty income from this book is being donated to a fund in Dr. Rosenberg's name at the sociology department at the University of Maryland.) This volume is not, nor has it even been, intended as a static or strictly laudatory tribute to one man's lifework. Nor is it a Festschrift as the term is commonly used. Rather, each author has been instructed to initially orient his or her chapter around some aspect of Rosenberg's ideas, empirical findings, or self-esteem scale, and then extend, criticize, rebut, or rethink the theoretical, methodological, and substantive usefulness and future of self-esteem. Rosenberg, therefore, is the springboard, though not the exclusive focus of the volume. By using this device, we hope to have produced a unified and cohesive volume that digs deeply and critically into the phenomenology, methodology, theory, and application of self-esteem and thereby sets a course for future self-esteem research in a new century. In a phrase, we are honoring one of the field's pioneers by critically examining self-esteem, striving to improve people's understanding of it, and reduce its misappropriation.

Volume Structure

The volume includes 17 chapters organized under five sections or themes. Section One, The Frame, includes the present chapter and "The Self as Social Product and Social Force: Morris Rosenberg and the Elaboration of a

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Deceptively Simple Effect,” by Gregory C. Elliott. In the latter chapter, the reader is given an in-depth look at the career of what the author calls “arguably the most important self-esteem theorist since William James.” Examining his training and career is instructive because through it one gets a deeper, more fundamental understanding of the historical and intellectual context from which his theories of the self-concept in general and self-esteem in particular arose.

Section Two, Conceptual and Methodological Issues, consists of four chapters. Chapter 3, “Theorizing the Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Identity” by Laurie H. Ervin and Sheldon Stryker, examines the theoretical and predictive importance in linking self-esteem research and identity theory. The authors argue that juxtaposing identity and self-esteem in a common framework of role choice behavior can serve the larger contemporary purpose of viewing social behavior as a product of jointly operating cognitive (identity) and affective (self-esteem) variables. They attempt this linkage by drawing on a set of conceptual developments and refinements in both the self-esteem and identity theory literatures that may reveal linkages between aspects of self-esteem and aspects of identity theory that have previously gone unnoticed. Chapter 4, “Measuring Self-Esteem: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Considered” by Timothy J. Owens and Adam B. King, examines and compares unidimensional and bidimensional self-esteem measurement models among a national sample of 12th grade black, white, and Hispanic boys and girls. Concluding that a bidimensional model fits the data best, the authors go on to examine the discriminating power of self-deprecation and self-worth among an array of social and psychological variables across male and female whites and blacks. Chapter 5, “The Self as a Social Force” by Viktor Gecas, argues the importance of self-esteem as a causal agent in human society. Picking up on this underdeveloped theme in Rosenberg’s work and in the work of self-concept scholars in general, the author argues that, when examining the self as a social force, researchers need to not only consider the nature of self-reflexivity, self-objectification processes, and the motivational significance of emotions, but particularly the nature and types of self-motives. Chapter 6, “Self-Certainty and Self-Esteem” by Ron Wright, argues that in order to understand people’s psychological experiences and predict their responses requires knowledge not only of their level of self-esteem (however multifaceted), but also the certainty, clarity, consistency, and stability of their self-image. He does this by distinguishing one’s cognitive representation of oneself (self-schema) and one’s evaluation of oneself (self-esteem). Acknowledging these distinctions is important because uncertainty in either of these two domains leads to different consequences.

Section Three, Social and Life Course Contexts of Self-Esteem, includes four chapters. Chapter 7, “Self-Esteem of Children and Adolescents” by David H. Demo, takes its lead from Rosenberg’s work on the dynamics, cor-

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relates, and consequences of children's self-concept. Accepting the challenge, the author reviews and assesses what we know and what we do not know about how children see themselves, and suggests some important directions for extending and refining the study of children's self-concepts to include not only self-esteem but other dimensions of the self as well. Chapter 8, "Failure of the Dream: Notes for a Research Program on Self-Esteem and Failed Identity in Adulthood" by Norman Goodman, outlines the broad parameters of a nascent research program focused on understanding how failure to achieve or succeed in a central personal identity is incorporated into a person's sense of self, particularly her or his level of self-esteem, and how the person copes with this situation. Chapter 9, "Self-Esteem and Work Across the Life Course" by Carmi Schooler and Gary Oates, examines the empirical relation of self-esteem and work by positing a causal relationship between self-esteem and occupational conditions as people age. Using longitudinal data spanning three decades, the authors find that the causal role of self-esteem in shaping the nature of one's adult work is not very predictable, while reporting the intriguing, though apparently counterintuitive, finding that being self-deprecating leads to doing substantively complex work. Chapter 10, "Comfort with the Self" by the late Roberta G. Simmons, extends her concept of "arenas of comfort" by defining comfort with one's self, linking it to the literature on emotional states tied to self, and addressing two key research questions: (1) What particular aspects of the self-picture are related to being comfortable or uncomfortable with oneself? (2) How does the social and cultural context alter the likelihood that individuals experience comfort or discomfort with the self?

Section Four, *Self-Esteem and Social Inequalities*, consists of five articles dealing with a variety of inequality and social stratification issues surrounding self-esteem. Chapter 11, "Self-Esteem and Race" by Pamela Braboy Jackson and Sonia P. Lassiter, examines the current state of research on race and self-esteem. The authors conclude that too little specific attention has been focused on some of the fundamental assumptions underlying this research tradition, including self-esteem development among ethnic minorities. Calling for a more social definition of the self, the authors not only hope to bring the research on race and self-esteem more in line with broader self-concept theory, but also draw attention to the disproportionate theoretical and empirical work devoted to black-white differences in self-esteem. Chapter 12, "Gender and Self-Esteem: Narrative and Efficacy in the Negotiation of Structural Factors" by Anne Statham and Katherine Rhoades, employs feminist identity theories and two unique datasets (one of women currently or recently receiving public assistance and the other of Native American men and women) to address two key research questions. First, how do social expectations surrounding the norms "individualism" or "The American Dream" (which are differentially available to and absorbed by var-

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ious social groups) function in the complex interweave of factors shaping self-esteem? Second, what factors, if any, prevent or impede certain individuals from incorporating such basic expectations of American life? Chapter 13, "Bereavement and the Loss of Mattering" by Leonard I. Pearlin and Allen J. LeBlanc, looks at the family caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease. Operating under the supposition that the shift away from a two-way relationship between the caregiver and the cared for to a much more one-sided relationship directed almost exclusively at the person with Alzheimer's is easier to accept and less detrimental to the caregiver when reciprocated mattering (e.g., feeling needed by and significant to the other) had been embedded in the history of the relationship. The analyses are framed around two concerns: One, looking for the circumstances and conditions underlying differences in a caregiver's perceived loss of mattering to the cared for, and (2), examining some of the possible consequences of loss of mattering. Chapter 14, "Self-Esteem and Social Inequality" by L. Edward Wells, notes the many competing, contradictory, and inconsistent findings and conclusions in the literature on self-esteem and stratificational bases of social inequality (e.g., socioeconomic class, race, gender, and ethnicity). Rather than throw our hands up in despair, he argues for researchers to exercise modesty and caution in their analytical aspirations and theoretical pretensions, and offers two noteworthy cautions. First, scholars need to avoid oversimplified, unidirectional, mechanically causal, and overly deterministic models of self-evaluation. The empirical research reveals the complexity and nonlinearity of the self. The second caveat entails the need to avoid decontextualized accounts of self-evaluation. Self-awareness and self-evaluation are variable aspects of ongoing behavioral processes that occur within specific social contexts (e.g., social settings, occasions, relationships, and role-identities). They are not simply in people's heads. Failure to acknowledge this leaves us with a pale abstraction with weak predictive and explanatory utility for real experiences and behaviors. Chapter 15, "Self-Evaluation and Stratification Beliefs" by Matthew O. Hunt, explores the empirical relation of self-esteem and mastery to ideological beliefs about the causes of poverty. Using a sample of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, he addresses three essential questions. First, does a relationship between self-evaluation and stratification beliefs exist? Two, do any such relationships exist net of the effects of race/ethnicity and other sociodemographic variables? Three, are there differences in the relationships between self-evaluations and stratification beliefs among African Americans, Latinos, and whites?

Finally, Section Five, Self-Esteem and Social Problems, consists of three chapters. Chapter 16, "The Science and Politics of Self-Esteem: Schools Caught in the Middle" by Martin V. Covington, argues that the current and ongoing debate regarding self-esteem and success in school has misguided the American public and policymakers alike for two fundamental reasons.

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First, the basic target of public concern should not be school achievement per se. Student achievement flourishes to the extent that the reasons for striving in school are taken into account. This, he argues, is the essential and proper message of the self-esteem perspective. Second, not only is increased achievement the wrong goal, but so too are many of the proposed means to achieve it. Attempts by pro-esteem advocates to encourage self-pride in students solely by reason of their uniqueness as human beings, for instance, will fail if feelings of well-being are not accompanied by well-doing. Chapter 17, “Self-Esteem and Deviant Behavior: A Critical Review and Theoretical Integration” by Howard B. Kaplan, acknowledges that inherent appeal of linking self-esteem issues with deviant (especially delinquent) behavior. Unfortunately, however, the empirical literature on the relationship is rife with contradictory or weak findings. The author attempts to remedy this problem by drawing on the extant literature and posing a theoretical framework that is both coherent and inclusive. Chapter 18, “Low Self-Esteem People: A Collective Portrait” by the late Morris Rosenberg and Timothy J. Owens, examines the pernicious effect that persistent low self-esteem has on people’s lives. Combining a literature review with empirical findings, the authors show the complex social, psychological, emotional, and behavior correlates engendered in the low self-esteem syndrome.

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2 The Self as Social Product and Social Force

*Morris Rosenberg and the Elaboration of a
Deceptively Simple Effect*

Gregory C. Elliott

INTRODUCTION

Among sociologists and other behavioral and social scientists, Morris Rosenberg is most widely known for his comprehensive and theoretically rich work on the self-concept. Indeed, Rosenberg is arguably the most important self-esteem theorist since William James. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, the seminal contribution to the field, shared the American Association for the Advancement of Science Sociopsychological Prize in 1963; *Black and White Self-Esteem: The Urban School Child* (1972) resolved an anomaly that had vexed researchers of self-esteem for years; and *Conceiving the Self* (1979) earned him the Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Award from the American Sociological Association in 1981.

Therefore, to understand contemporary work on self-esteem and the self-concept in general, one has to have some understanding of the context from which Rosenberg's theories of the self-concept have arisen; hence, a look at his training and career is highly instructive.

But Morris Rosenberg's bequest to the discipline of sociology is much broader and deeper. In particular, a close reading of his theoretical and empirical studies reveals that his singular contribution to our fuller understanding of society is his ability to construct connections between sometimes apparently unlinked elements of our discipline.

I will focus on three important examples of synthesis. First, within microsociology, his study of the self has combined two distinct paradigms: cognitive social psychology and symbolic interactionism; his ability to see the

My deepest thanks go to Florence Rosenberg for providing me with unpublished material from Manny's files and personal insights into his sociological imagination. Her conversations with me were simultaneously informative, insightful, and amusing. David Segal provided constructive suggestions on an earlier draft, and I am indebted to him for his insights. Any errors or distortions that remain are my responsibility.