


Why Do People Have Self-Esteem?

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The construct of self-esteem needs serious reconsideration. Although popular culture portrays high self-esteem as the Holy Grail of mental health, researchers have demonstrated that there is a dark side that emerges when the self is threatened (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Heatherton & Ambady, 1993; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). In a nutshell, research has shown that people with high self-esteem, when threatened, fail to self-regulate, become aggressive, and are viewed negatively by their interaction partners. These findings raise questions about what it means to have high self-esteem. At a more general level, however, it raises a more important question, which is: Why do we have self-esteem at all? It is surprising to us that there are so few functional accounts of self-esteem. After considering the model proposed by Kernis in the target article, we consider the fundamental question of why self-esteem exists in any form.

Kernis (this issue) answers the question about the negative aspects of putative high self-esteem by essentially dividing high self-esteem people into two groups: those with good high self-esteem (authentic, optimal, stable) and those with bad high self-esteem (fragile, contingent). Kernis goes well beyond the simple idea that the negative features of high self-esteem are defensive by articulating the multiple qualities of optimal self-esteem. For instance, he defines secure high-self esteem as being a positive sense of self that is well anchored with no strong need to be liked by others. Moreover, those with secure self-esteem are accepting not only of their positive qualities, but also their negative qualities, which means that negative feedback and rejection may be met with some initial disappointment, but will then be reinterpreted in ways that promote future growth. People with fragile self-esteem, on the other hand, react defensively to all types of negative feedback, using both self-protective and enhancing strategies to maintain their sense of self-esteem. In reaction, they may become angry and hostile or depressed and upset. Kernis also suggests that narcissism and boasting are aspects of fragile self-esteem.

Kernis’s portrayal of optimal self-esteem makes us feel warm all over. It embodies all that is good about the human condition. Indeed, it captures the humanistic accounts of positive psychological functioning pro-
posed by Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1951). Perhaps it is appropriate in this time of positive psychology to reclaim the positive in self-esteem. We agree with Kernis that his description represents optimal self-esteem. But, does it exist? Who has it? The problem with this idealistic representation is that it may apply to very few people in the real world. Certainly we know few people in our social worlds who appear to have optimal self-esteem (although we admit to knowing people who would describe themselves in precisely these positive terms.)

A central problem, fully acknowledged by Kernis, is that self-reports about the self are notoriously unreliable and inaccurate, perhaps reflecting the limited access that people have to self-knowledge in general. So, how do people with high self-esteem behave? In our studies, as well as those of many others, people with high self-esteem react defensively to ego threat; they sometimes become rude, obnoxious jerks who show poor self-control. Those are the data. Now, of course, not all of the people who say they have high self-esteem behave this way, but most of them do, enough so that the group as a whole is less likeable, less controlled, or more aggressive than are those with low self-esteem who are threatened. In keeping with Kernis, it is possible that those with fragile self-esteem are driving this effect because people with secure self-esteem should not be acting in these ways even when threatened. It is also possible that our findings are obtained because of the particular kind of participants in the research (i.e., college students). It is our hunch, however, that only a small percentage of people with high self-esteem are completely secure. The remainder—enough to carry statistical significance in our studies—respond to threat in a way that implies suboptimal self-esteem.

A question that seems to be driving a great deal of the research on self-esteem of late is how to explain people who say they have high self-esteem but who then act in ways that don’t fit our rosy view of self-esteem. Various proposals have been put forward, from defensive self-esteem, to uncoupling of implicit and explicit attitudes, to the proposal outlined by Kernis in his target article. From our perspective, however, how people feel about themselves is essentially orthogonal to the behavioral outcomes these people obtain. There indeed may be high self-esteem people who are secure, authentic, and so forth, just as surely as there are people who report high self-esteem but are fragile, defensive, and perhaps insecure. However, we think there are also people who like themselves a lot, are secure in their beliefs, act in ways that are authentic to their true selves, and are complete jerks or sensational failures. These people truly like themselves, but they just don’t fit with our view of what a person with high self-esteem should be like.

So, where do we go with the construct of self-esteem? We believe that more thought needs to be given to why self-esteem exists rather than what it is. What does having high or low self-esteem do for the individual? From our perspective, it is useful to consider how evolution has shaped self-relevant processes such as self-esteem (see Sedikides & Skowronsski, 1997). At a general level, characteristics that were adaptive, that increased survival or reproduction, were likely to have spread through the gene pool and be passed along to increasing numbers in future generations. So, how might the trait of self-esteem have evolved?

Our own thinking along these lines follows Leary’s recent sociometry theory (Leary, Tambor, Telch, & Downs, 1995). Sociometry theory begins with the assumption that humans have a fundamental need to belong that is rooted in our evolutionary history (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For most of human evolution, survival and reproduction depended on affiliation with a group. Those who belonged to social groups were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who were excluded from groups. According to the sociometry theory, self-esteem functions as a monitor of the likelihood of social exclusion. When people behave in ways that increase the likelihood they will be rejected, they experience a reduction in state self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem serves as a monitor, or sociometer, of social acceptance or rejection. At the trait level, those with high self-esteem have sociometers that indicate a low probability of rejection, and therefore, such individuals do not worry about how they are being perceived by others. By contrast, those with low self-esteem have sociometers that indicate the imminent possibility of rejection, and therefore, they are highly motivated to manage their public impressions. Thus, the essential feature of self-esteem is that it reflects the extent to which we feel belongingness, which is crucial for survival.

But if self-esteem is adaptive, why are there large individual differences among people in how they feel about the self? Natural selection ought to operate in such a way as to make people more similar rather than more different. After all, if a trait increased survival and reproduction, that trait should predominate in future generations. Of course, one possibility is that individual differences reflect characteristics that were of trivial importance over the course of evolution, perhaps resulting from random processes or representing "noise" in the system (Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). From this perspective, self-esteem may reflect nothing in terms of adaptiveness. This seems far from a satisfactory answer to the functional question about self-esteem. Let’s consider some other possibilities.

There are at least two ways that self-esteem may be adaptive. Individual differences may reflect the inheritance of alternative strategies that become activated depending on situational context (Buss & Greiling, 1999). Consider a situation in which most people are

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honest and cooperative and, therefore, routinely trust others to be honest and cooperative as well. A dishonest cheater could enter such a system and do well by exploiting the basic trust of others. Of course, if too many people did this, then people would become vigilant for cheaters, and therefore, the situation would discourage cheating. The important point is that evolution has bestowed multiple strategies that are differentially adaptive depending on the environment, and that there is a built-in calibration system that is sensitive to environmental demands.

In terms of self-esteem, early childhood experiences provide information about the extent to which people have belongingness in their family and peer groups. Those who experience threats to belongingness may adopt the protective strategy of being highly vigilant for possible rejection, which is at the core of feelings of low self-esteem. Thus, when people with low self-esteem perceive possible threats to self, they might focus their efforts at avoiding being rejected. This is consistent with our finding that people with low self-esteem are rated as more likable if they have received a threat to self (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). By contrast, perhaps those who are raised to feel loved and included may not worry about being accepted in future interactions. So, there is less need for a person with high self-esteem to act in a manner that will increase their likability. Indeed, we found that people with high self-esteem who are threatened are viewed as less likable. Perhaps by bragging about their own qualities, disregarding or insulting those who provide negative feedback, and perhaps even acting in a slightly hostile manner, these people are able to reassure themselves that negative information is either wrong or fails to demonstrate all their wonderful qualities.

Another possible explanation for individual differences in self-esteem is that human groups depend on their members possessing multiple skills; groups that have people with diverse skills and qualities have a selective advantage over other groups. Members of successful groups and their relatives would all benefit from being members of a strong group because they would be more likely to survive and reproduce. Having members of the group who are confident and bold would mean that they would seek out and explore new territory, which might lead to the discovery of new resources, such as new food sources. At the same time, these bold individuals expose themselves to greater risks, and the group would suffer if all its members followed this strategy. It is to the advantage of the group to have cautious members in addition to bold members because the more cautious individuals may enhance the group in other ways, such as providing social support and paying attention to social relations. Thus, some contribute to the group by providing resources, by being brave and taking risks, and through their overall competence. These individuals prevent rejection by being valuable group members. Those who do not feel competent would need to be especially vigilant to possible rejection, and this increased sensitivity might motivate them to focus increased attention on how others viewed them. Thus, high and low self-esteem perhaps were adaptive because through different mechanisms they forestalled rejection by the group. The important point here is that groups consisting of people with high and low self-esteem may have had a selective advantage over other groups. This would predict that there would now be a stable ratio of high to low self-esteem across all modern cultures.

We are not declaring that either of our possible mechanisms is responsible for individual differences in self-esteem. Rather, we are suggesting that researchers ought to consider the question of why people differ in terms of level of self-esteem. This may lead to testable hypotheses that provide a new insight into how we ought to define self-esteem. By asking the "What is this for?" question, we might gain insight into the functions of self-esteem for individuals and groups. The idea that there are different forms of high self-esteem, such as the model proposed by Kernis's target article, is not inconsistent with the functional perspective. We are trying to convey the idea that we think theories such as Kernis's may be most useful when they consider the why as well as the what of self-esteem.

Notes

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References


Optimal Is as Optimal Does

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When can we say that something is optimal? Providing an answer to this question requires us to consider the costs and benefits associated with different alternatives and to declare the one with the best overall payoff as optimal. Of course, the costs and benefits of any object or process are not intrinsic to the objects or processes themselves; the payoffs are accrued by interacting with a system that renders consequences of the object or process as costly or beneficial. For example, consider the question “What is the optimal tool to have in one’s toolbox?” The answer to this is contingent upon the environment within which one lives. If one lives in a world held together by screws, then the optimal tool would be the screwdriver; life in a world of nails would dictate that the hammer is the best solution. There is nothing inherent about screwdrivers or hammers by themselves that makes them optimal tools; it is only through their interaction with their environment that their optimality is afforded.

The same rationale needs to be applied to the question “What is optimal self-esteem?” Kernis (this issue) conceptualizes optimal self-esteem as that which is high, genuine, and stable. He provides much convergent evidence that this kind of self-esteem may indeed provide the best payoff, warranting its label of “optimal.” However, it does not appear to me that there is anything intrinsic about the self in isolation that renders this kind of self-esteem as optimal. It is only by considering the contingencies of the environment that afford this maximal payoff to the self that we are able to conceive of this as optimal self-esteem. To the extent that these contingencies are not constant across different contexts or cultures, the nature of optimal self-esteem will also vary accordingly. It is my contention that cultures vary significantly in terms of the contingencies associated with what Kernis describes as the features of optimal self-esteem.

One feature of optimal self-esteem is that it arises from the “operation of one’s core, true, authentic self as a source of input to behavioral choices” (Kernis, this issue). Kernis describes an authentic self as one that is unified and is experienced similarly across contexts. Behavior arises from individuals acting in accordance with their values, preferences, and needs, rather than by behaving in ways that are sensitive to others’ expectations or contextual pressures. It seems reasonable to me that this logic often holds true within a North American cultural context, in which authenticity and inner-directed behavior are encouraged and valued.

However, acting in accordance with one’s “true” self would seem to be of considerably less utility in some other cultures, for example, within a Japanese cultural context. Much literature has described the self-concept common in Japan as largely a relational phenomenon (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), in which an individual’s relationships and roles within particular contexts take precedence over abstracted and internalized attributes, such as attitudes, traits, and abilities (Cousins, 1989). Hence, thoughts and behaviors need to be adjusted to the role requirements of a given situation. The ability to distinguish between the demands across situations (kejime in Japanese) and to behave appropriately is viewed as integral to a Japanese individual’s maturity in ways that it is not in North America (Bachnik, 1992). From a theoretical perspective, “authenticity,” in the way that Kernis defines it, is of less value in Japan than in North America.

There is much empirical evidence to show that acting in ways consistent with an inner self yields a smaller return in East Asian than in North American.