



# The demographics of mate value and self-esteem

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## Abstract

A revised version of the sociometer hypothesis account of self-esteem holds that self-esteem is a function of multiple indexes of how a person stands in relation to those around him or her. One of the areas in which people are proposed to be sensitive to their relative standing is their mate value—how attractive they are as a potential mate. Elements of one's mate value are tied to age and sex of a person, and marital status may also be a demographic variable that reflects mate value. A study with 161 participants, representing a range of ages and marital standings, found that age, sex, and marital status were related to self-estimates of mate value and efforts to enhance mate value. In turn, mate value and mate value enhancement effort—in addition to marital satisfaction—were significant predictor variables for self-esteem.

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## 1. Introduction

Certain self-esteem enhancement programs, popular in schools and other public institutions, implicitly carry an assumption that self-esteem is primarily based upon subjective belief states. Specifically, the premise of such programs is that improvements in self-esteem can be made without a necessary reference to objective criteria in the external world. For example, self-esteem under this view can be characterized by the possession of traits such as tolerance and respect for others, accepting responsibility for one's actions, integrity, pride in one's accomplishments, being loving and lovable, ambitious, and being capable of self-direction (e.g. Branden, 1994; Owens, Stryker, & Goodman, 2001). Although these are certainly positive traits for people to have and

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we encourage their development in people, defining self-esteem exclusively in terms of these traits leads to implications as to the presumed nature of self-esteem. In particular, all these traits enjoy a property known as *non-zero-sumness*: increases in these traits in one person or group of people does not have any implications for decreases in these same traits for other persons. Instead, these traits can, and are, often assessed by comparing how an individual currently views him or herself (perceived self) and that person's ideals (ideal self).

Other theories of self-esteem make greater reference to the individual's position relative to others and the external world. The recently influential sociometer hypothesis (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) proposes that self-esteem acts as a monitoring and motivational system involved in the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Perceived inclusory status acts as the monitor and is related directly to self-esteem. Lowered self-esteem and anxiety are hence products of perceived exclusion. The sociometer hypothesis can efficiently explain situational constraints on self-esteem, as reinforced by the high correlation between self-esteem and individuals' performances in domains that are judged important to others (Harter & Marold, 1991). Some of the findings of Leary and colleagues illustrate how the sociometer theory of self-esteem includes the assumption that self-esteem is indexed to a person's state in the world. In one study, either positive feelings about oneself (i.e. self-esteem) were generated by inclusion in a working group, or negative feelings about oneself were generated by exclusion. In another study, the same manipulation of people's feelings about themselves was found when they were included or excluded from interpersonal interactions. Thus, the sociometer model of self-esteem is fairly directly keyed to objective world states, rather than to purely subjective belief states.

That the sociometer model (and similar models) of self-esteem holds that self-esteem is based on objective world states is not problematic per se for self-esteem enhancement programs. There is very strong potential for conflict, however, in that a great many aspects of the world involve *zero-sum* situations—situations in which an increase in the standing of one person necessarily involves a decrease in standing for others (e.g. higher social status for one person in a hierarchy involves a relative decrease in status for at least one other person). If aspects of self-esteem are zero-sum in nature, then those elements of self-esteem cannot be enhanced in a population *en mass*. The processes of social inclusion and exclusion central to the sociometer hypothesis have zero-sum aspects to them (and in the studies by Leary et al., 1995, 1998 they were clearly zero-sum), but it is not entirely clear how rigidly social exclusion and inclusion must conform to a zero-sum format. Recent expansions proposed for the sociometer hypothesis, however, have suggested more research avenues that clearly involve zero-sum contexts.

### 1.1. Multiple sociometers

One of the lines of support for the initial proposal of the sociometer hypothesis was that monitoring social inclusion and exclusion was an adaptive problem; that the evolutionary processes that sculpted the functional design of the mind would likely have included a system to monitor social inclusion and motivate corrective action if the level of inclusion became too low (i.e. social exclusion; Leary et al., 1995). An adaptationist analysis of what evolutionary functions were likely to have been served by self-esteem, however, indicates that social inclusion in only one of such evolutionarily recurrent situations (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002). Self-esteem can be considered as a system that monitors the environment

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