Social approval and trait self-esteem☆

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Abstract

Interpersonal theories of self-esteem that tie self-esteem to perceptions of one's acceptability to other people suggest that self-evaluations should predict global self-esteem to the degree to which an individual believes that a particular attribute is important for social approval. In the present study, participants completed a measure of global self-esteem, rated themselves in five domains, and indicated how important those domains were for approval or disapproval. The results showed that, in four of five domains, the interaction between self-evaluations and the perceived approval-value of that domain aided in the prediction of global self-esteem. Generally, for participants who rated themselves positively in a domain, those who believed that the domain was important in affecting social approval or disapproval had higher self-esteem than those who did not believe it would influence acceptability.
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1. Introduction

Theories of self-esteem have been based on one of two fundamentally different assumptions about the essential nature of self-esteem. Traditionally, *intrapersonal* theorists have conceptualized self-esteem as a person's private self-evaluation. For example, James (1890) characterized self-esteem as the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions, a personal assessment of how well one is doing in areas that the

individual regards as important. Humanistic approaches that dominated thinking about self-esteem in the middle of the 20th century likewise viewed self-esteem as a personal evaluation of one's goodness or worth. For example, Rogers (1959) proposed that self-esteem arises when people live congruently with their personal, "organismic" values. This view was echoed more recently by Deci and Ryan (1995) who argued that true self-esteem (as distinguished from contingent self-esteem) results when people behave autonomously in ways that are consistent with their intrinsic or core self. Bednar, Wells, and Peterson (1989) offered an alternative intrapersonal perspective suggesting that true self-esteem arises when people recognize that they are coping effectively with psychological threats.

Although intrapersonal perspectives are based on the notion that individuals' own self-evaluations are at the root of self-esteem, they do acknowledge that others' evaluations of the individual may also play a role. However, they diminish the importance of such interpersonal influences in one of two ways. Some theorists, including James, view interpersonal evaluations simply as one of many sources of information from which people derive their personal self-evaluations. Others suggest that interpersonal effects on self-esteem reflect a maladaptive reliance on the approval of other people, arguing that healthy self-esteem ought not to be influenced by what other people think of the individual but rather should emerge from personal judgments of one's own worth. As May (1983) remarked, "…if your self-esteem must rest in the long run on social validation, you have not self-esteem, but a more sophisticated form of social conformity" (p. 102).

In contrast to these intrapersonal perspectives, other theorists have conceptualized self-esteem explicitly in *interpersonal* terms. These theorists echo the symbolic interactionists' claim that the self is an inherently social construction that arises in the context of interpersonal relations (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1932). Interpersonal theorists conclude that people's feelings about themselves are—and ought to be—related to how they believe others evaluate them because subjective feelings of self-esteem provide information regarding one's standing in the eyes of other people or society at large. Three such interpersonal theories promote this theme: Dominance theory (Barkow, 1975) suggests that self-esteem reflects one's relative dominance in social groups, sociometer theory (Leary & Downs, 1995) proposes that self-esteem monitors relational evaluation (i.e., the degree to which one is valued as a relational partner by others), and terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) argues that self-esteem reflects the degree to which the individual meets cultural standards for being a good and worthwhile person.

These interpersonal theories propose that self-esteem is, by its nature, highly responsive to social feedback, at least within limits. From this perspective, such responsivity is by no means a sign of dependency or dysfunction. To the contrary, self-esteem serves its evolved function, according to each of these theories, only if it is sensitive to feedback from other people. Although differing in specifics, interpersonal theories suggest that a person's level of self-esteem is a function of two factors. First and most obviously, self-esteem reflects a person's beliefs about his or her personal characteristics. Believing that you possess positive attributes ought to be related to higher self-esteem than believing that you do not possess positive