The Three Faces of Self-Esteem

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We'll start with a riddle: "What does everyone want, yet no one is entirely sure what it is, what it does, or where it can be found?" Although there may be more than one answer to this question, "self-esteem" is certainly a candidate. In the past 30 years, self-esteem has become deeply embedded in popular culture, championed as the royal road to happiness and personal fulfillment, and touted as an antidote to a variety of social ills, including unemployment, gang violence, and teenage pregnancy. Despite its widespread usage within nonacademic circles, academic psychologists have been divided with respect to self-esteem's function and benefits. Whereas some argue that high self-esteem is essential to human functioning and imbues life with meaning (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004), others assert that it is of little value and may actually be a liability (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Between these two extremes lie various positions of an intermediary nature.

I.   **Three Ways the Term Self-Esteem is Used**

We believe that part of the confusion stems from a lack of agreement regarding the construct itself. As we see it, the term is being used in three different ways.

A.   *Global Self-Esteem (Aka Trait Self-Esteem)*

Sometimes self-esteem is used to refer to a personality variable that represents the way people generally feel about themselves. Researchers call this form of self-esteem, *global* self-esteem or *trait* self-esteem, as it is relatively enduring across time and situations. Depictions of global self-esteem range widely. Some researchers take a cognitive approach, and assume that global self-esteem is a decision people make about their worth as a person (e.g., Coopersmith, 1965; Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Others emphasize emotional processes, and define global self-esteem as a feeling of affection for oneself that is not derived from rational, judgmental processes (Brown, 1993, 1998; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2002). However it is defined, global self-esteem has been shown to be stable throughout adulthood, with a probable genetic component related to temperament

and neuroticism (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002).

B.   *Feelings of Self-Worth (aka State Self-Esteem)*

Self-esteem is also used to refer to self-evaluative emotion reactions to valenced events. This is what people mean when they talk about experiences that "threaten self-esteem" or "boost self-esteem." For example, a person might say her self-esteem was sky-high after getting a big promotion or a person might say his self-esteem plummeted after a divorce. Following James (1890), we refer to these self-evaluative emotional reactions as feelings of self-worth. Feeling proud or pleased with ourselves (on the positive side), or humiliated and ashamed of ourselves (on the negative side) are examples of what we mean by feelings of self-worth.

Many researchers use the term *state* self-esteem to refer to the emotions we are calling feelings of self-worth, and *trait* self-esteem to refer to the way people generally feel about themselves (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; McFarland & Ross, 1982; Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004). These terms connote an equivalency between the two constructs, implying that the essential difference is that global self-esteem persists while feelings of self-worth are temporary. Other researchers disagree, arguing that momentary emotional reactions to positive and negative events do not provide an appropriate analogue for how people generally feel about themselves (Brown, 1993, 1998; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2002).

C.   *Self-Evaluations (aka Domain Specific Self-Esteem)*

Finally, self-esteem is used to refer to the way people evaluate their various abilities and attributes. For example, a person who doubts his ability in school may be said to have low *academic* self-esteem and a person who thinks she is good at sports may be said to have high *athletic* self-esteem. The terms self-confidence and self-efficacy have also been used to refer to these beliefs, and many people equate self-confidence with self-esteem. We prefer to call these beliefs *self-evaluations* or *self-appraisals*, as they refer to the way people evaluate or appraise their physical attributes, abilities, and personality characteristics. Not everyone makes this distinction, however. In fact, many scales that assess self-esteem include subscales that measure self-evaluations in multiple domains (Harter,

1986; Marsh, 1993; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). From this perspective, people have different levels of self-esteem in different areas. One person could have high athletic self-esteem but low artistic self-esteem, while another person could have low math self-esteem but high social self-esteem.

II.   Relations Among the Three Constructs

Although conceptually distinct, the three constructs we have distinguished are highly correlated. High self-esteem people evaluate themselves more positively and experience higher feelings of self-worth than do low self-esteem people (Brown, 1998). These associations have led researchers to consider how these constructs are related.

A.   *A Cognitive (Bottom-Up) Model of Self-Esteem*

Most researchers in personality and social psychology assume that these constructs are related in a bottom-up fashion. As shown in Figure 1, the bottom-up model holds that evaluative feedback (e.g., success or failure, interpersonal acceptance or rejection), influences self-evaluations, and that self-evaluations determine feelings of self-worth and global self-esteem. We refer to this as a bottom-up model because it assumes that global self-esteem is based on more elemental beliefs about one's particular qualities. IF you think you are attractive, and IF you think you are intelligent, and IF you think you are popular, THEN you will have high self-esteem.
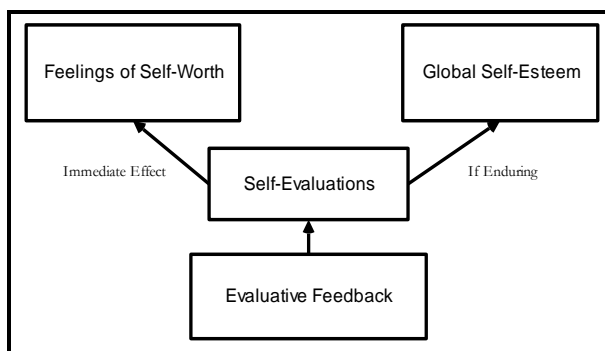

Figure 1. A Cognitive (Bottom-Up) Model of Self-Esteem Formation and Functioning

A variant on this approach assumes that not all self-evaluations influence self-esteem. Self-evaluations in domains of high personal importance exert a strong effect on self-esteem, but self-evaluations in domains of low personal importance do not. For example, it has been suggested that some people (typically men) base their self-esteem on their perceived competence, whereas other people (usually women) base their self-esteem on their social skills (e.g., Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). To predict self-esteem, we first weight each self-evaluation by its importance and then sum the weighted values. A related model assumes that cultures specify attribute importance, and that self-esteem derives from the perception that one possesses an abundance of culturally-valued attributes (Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

The bottom-up model makes an additional assumption. Because it assumes that self-evaluations underlie global self-esteem, the model assumes that global self-esteem effects are due to underlying self-evaluations. For example, if we find that high self-esteem people persist longer after failure than do low self-esteem people, it must be because high self-esteem have more confidence in their ability to succeed (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Several important social psychological theories, including Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988) and Steele's self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) adopt this assumption. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that global self-esteem is of little value and that researchers should concentrate instead on self-evaluations (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Marsh, 1990).

B.   *An Affective (Top-Down) Model of Self-Esteem*

Affective models offer an alternative way to think about the origins and function of self-esteem. According to this more top-down approach, self-esteem develops early in life in response to temperamental and relational factors and, once formed, influences self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth (Brown, 1993, 1998; Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001; Brown & Marshall, 2001, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Figure 2 depicts a schematic drawing of the model. The lack of an arrow between global self-esteem and evaluative feedback signifies that evaluative feedback does *not* influence global self-esteem. Instead, global self-esteem and evaluative feedback combine to influence self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth (see right hand side of Figure 2). This interactive effect is particularly pronounced when people confront negative feedback, such as failure in the achievement domain or interpersonal rejection. When low self-esteem people encounter negative feedback, their self-evaluations become more negative and their feelings of self-worth

fall. When high self-esteem people encounter negative feedback, they maintain their high self-evaluations and protect or quickly restore their feelings of self-worth. In our view, this is the primary advantage of having high self-esteem: It allows you to *fail* without feeling bad about yourself.
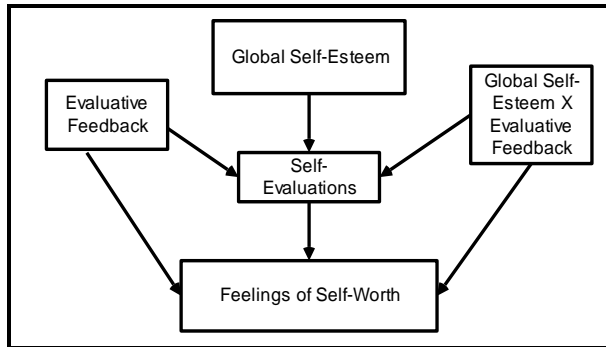

Figure 2. An Affective (Top-Down) Model of Self-Esteem Formation and Functioning

C.   *Testing the Two Models*

A study by Brown and Dutton (1995) tested the hypothesis that self-esteem regulates feelings of self-worth following success and failure. Participants completed two mood scales after receiving (bogus) feedback regarding their performance at an alleged test of their creativity and intelligence. One of the scales assessed very general emotional responses to success and failure (happy, sad, unhappy, glad), the other assessed feelings of self-worth (proud, pleased with myself, ashamed, and humiliated).

Self-esteem did not influence how happy or sad participants felt following success or failure, but it did influence how they felt *about themselves* after they succeeded or failed. Low self-esteem participants felt proud of themselves when they succeeded, but humiliated and ashamed of themselves when they failed. In contrast, high self-esteem participant's feelings of self-worth did not vary as a result of performance feedback (see also, Brown & Marshall, 2001).

Cognitive models assume that self-evaluations explain these differences (e.g., Steele, 1988). From this perspective, low self-esteem people feel bad about themselves when they fail because they lack positive qualities. To test this hypothesis, Dutton and Brown (1997, Study 2) had participants complete a measure of global self-esteem, and then indicate the extent to which 10 attributes described them (e.g., intelligent, attractive, incompetent, inconsiderate). Later, they

performed an intellectual task and received success or failure feedback (determined by random assignment). Finally, they rated their feelings of self-worth.

Self-evaluations did not influence participants' emotional reactions to success and failure. Instead, low self-esteem participants who thought they had many positive qualities felt just as bad about themselves after they failed as did those who thought they had few positive qualities (and high self-esteem participants who believed they lack many positive qualities felt no worse about themselves following failure than did high self-esteem participants who believe they have many positive qualities). Other analyses showed, however, that people's *cognitive* reactions to evaluative feedback (e.g., to what extent is your performance due to your ability?) did depend on self-evaluations not self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem and self-evaluations seem to govern different aspects of psychological life (see also, Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2003).

III.   **Concluding Remarks**

The term self-esteem is used in different ways by different researchers. In this paper, we have argued that the three terms are theoretically distinct, and have different developmental antecedents and consequences. Our point is not that one of these constructs is most important, only that they should not be used interchangeably. We base this recommendation on evidence that thinking you are good at things is not the same as having high self-esteem.

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