

Nature and Origins of Self-Esteem

Browse any bookstore in America and you will probably notice two things: Dozens of books have been written to help you lose weight and dozens more have been written to help you gain self-esteem. It's easy to understand all of the books on weight loss. After all, one can't be too thin in America. But why all this interest in having high self-esteem? What's it good for? Surprisingly, there is little agreement on the matter within the academic community. While some argue that high self-esteem is essential to human functioning and imbues life with meaning (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), others argue that it is of little value and may actually be a liability (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Between these two extremes lie various positions of an intermediary nature.

In this paper, we consider the origins of self-esteem by contrasting two models: An affective model and a cognitive model. Although each model has advocates, we will argue that the affective model provides the appropriate lens for viewing the origins of self-esteem.

I. Affective Models of Self-Esteem

A. *Two Components of Self-Esteem*

Affective models of self-esteem assume that self-esteem develops at an early age and is characterized by two types of feelings. One of these feelings (which we will call feelings of belonging) is rooted in social experiences; the other (which we will call feelings of mastery) is somewhat more personal in nature.

Belonging is the feeling that one is unconditionally loved and valued, not for any particular quality or reason but simply for who one is. A sense of belonging gives people a secure base in life. It gives them the feeling that no matter what happens, they are valued and respected. Some years ago, the American psychologist Carl Rogers highlighted this aspect of self-esteem when he discussed people's need for unconditional positive regard.

Feelings of belonging are a bit different than reflected appraisals. As discussed in Chapter 3,

reflected appraisals represent our conscious perception of how we are viewed by others. If I think other people think I'm funny, then I think I'm witty. Feelings of belonging do not occur at a conscious level. They are more intuitive. Belonging is the feeling that we are loved and the security that feeling brings.

The second important aspect of self-esteem is a sense of mastery. Mastery involves the perception that one is having an impact on the world—not necessarily in any large-scale sense, but in one's day-to-day life. Mastery is not the same as perceived competence. We needn't think we are an accomplished pianist or an "A" student to develop a sense of mastery. Rather, mastery is the feeling we get when we are immersed in an activity or are striving to overcome some obstacle.

One way to convey the difference between mastery and perceived competence is to consider a child who is making mud pies. The squishing, the feeling of the mud between the child's fingers and the sheer joy that comes from that experience creates feelings of mastery. These feelings promote high self-esteem. But this is not the same as thinking one is a "good mud pie maker." The squish is process oriented—it is joy in creating and manipulating; the evaluation is outcome oriented—it is a judgment of whether one is good at something. The affective model maintains that only the former is relevant to the genesis of self-esteem.

B. *The Development of Self-Esteem*

Affective models of self-esteem assume that feelings of belonging and mastery normally develop early in life. Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development (discussed in Chapter 4) provides a useful springboard for considering how these feelings arise. According to Erikson, the first developmental task infants face is establishing feelings of trust with their caregivers. These feelings of trust, which are thought to develop during the first year of life, correspond to the feelings of belonging we have said are integral to a sense of high self-esteem.

The next stage Erikson describes is the "autonomy versus shame and doubt" stage. This stage involves the development of feelings of mastery. Children develop feelings of mastery when they are encouraged to explore, create, and

modify their world (e.g., to build things, to draw, or paint); they may fail to develop these feelings when their parents subvert, ridicule, or are overly critical of their efforts.

C. *Attachment Bonds and Self-Esteem*

The caregiver-child relationship plays a key role in Erikson's theory. This relationship also plays a central role in other theories of self-esteem development (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Epstein, 1980; Sullivan, 1953). Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Bowlby was interested in understanding the basis and functions of attachment bonds. He noted that in humans, as well as in other animals, infants bond with their caregivers (particularly with their mothers). Why? What function do these mother-child bonds serve?

Bowlby surmised that the attachment relationship serves a paradoxical function. By becoming securely attached, the child feels safe enough to leave the mother and explore the environment. In this sense, Bowlby believed that a feeling of belonging (i.e., a secure attachment) facilitates a sense of mastery (willingness to explore the environment).

When individuals of any age are feeling secure they are likely to explore away from their attachment figure. When alarmed, anxious, tired, or unwell they feel an urge toward proximity. Thus, we see the typical pattern of interaction between child and parent known as exploration from a secure base. Provided the parent is known to be accessible and will be responsive when called upon, a healthy child feels secure enough to explore. (Bowlby, 1979, p.3)

A series of studies using a procedure known as the strange has documented these effects. In this situation, a young child (typically around 14 months of age) is brought into a psychological laboratory with his or her mother. The room contains a number of interesting toys and objects that most children enjoy looking at and playing with. The extent to which the child initially explores the objects in the room is one variable of interest.

Another variable of interest is how the child reacts to separation from the mother. After being

together for a few minutes, the mother unexpectedly leaves the child alone with a stranger. The child's emotional reaction to the mother's departure is noted. Several minutes later, the mother returns and the researcher notes the child's emotional and behavioral reaction to the mother's return. In this manner, the strange situation measures the extent to which a child uses the mother as a secure base from which to explore the environment and as a source of comfort in times of stress.

In studies using this procedure, three different attachment styles have been identified.

- Approximately 60 percent of American infants are classified as being securely attached. Securely attached infants show a healthy balance between closeness to the mother and independence. During the first phase of the procedure, they readily separate to explore the environment. Although they may be distressed when their mother leaves, they are eager to see her when she returns and enjoy drawing her into their play and sharing their discoveries with her.
- Approximately 15 percent of American infants are classified as anxious/ ambivalent. These children have difficulty separating during the first phase of the procedure. They are unwilling or afraid to explore the environment. When their mother leaves, they become very distressed and upset. Although they are somewhat comforted when she returns, they cling to her and show other signs of insecure dependence (e.g., they continue whining).
- Approximately 25 percent of American infants are classified as avoidant children. These children tend to avoid or ignore their mothers altogether. They appear to have little difficulty separating during the first phase of the procedure, and they outwardly exhibit few signs of distress when their mother leaves. Furthermore, they show little interest in her when she returns, preferring instead to play alone rather than to interact with her. Importantly, the indifference these infants display toward their mothers is contradicted by an inner sense of anxiety and distress. Rather than being secure and independent, avoidant

children are evading intimacy and closeness with their mothers.

The roots of self-esteem would seem to lie within these different attachment styles. The avoidant infants may develop feelings of mastery (because they willingly explore the environment), but they lack a sense of belonging. They do not exhibit a strong emotional bond to their mother. The anxious/insecure infants may display a sense of belonging, but they are unlikely to develop feelings of mastery. They are easily distressed and are unwilling to meet the world head on. Only the securely attached children exhibit both a strong sense of belonging and a strong sense of mastery. It is these children, then, who are most apt to develop high self-esteem.

Research supports this conjecture. Different attachment styles in infancy predict self-esteem in preschool and kindergarten, with securely attached children showing the highest self-esteem. Similar patterns have been found with adolescents and young.

Bowlby (1973) invokes the concept of an "internal working model" to explain why the early attachment relationship has an enduring effect. As children mature, they develop a cognitive representation or working model of the attachment relationship. A child who develops a secure attachment relationship comes to believe she is essentially good and worthy of love; a child who develops an insecure attachment comes to believe she is bad and unworthy of love. These beliefs generalize to other people and situations and form the basis for the development of self-esteem.

An unwanted child is likely not only to feel unwanted by his parents but to believe that he is essentially unwantable, namely unwanted by anyone. Conversely, a much-loved child may grow up to be not only confident of his parents' affection but confident that everyone else will find him lovable too. Though logically indefensible, these crude overgeneralizations are nonetheless the rule. Once adapted, moreover, and woven into the fabric of working models, they are apt henceforward never to be seriously questioned.

D. *Summary*

Affective approaches to understanding self-

esteem make the following points: (a) unconditional feelings of belonging and a sense of mastery comprise the essence of high self-esteem, and (b) these feelings typically develop early in life, largely as a result of parent-child interactions. This emphasis on early childhood experiences does not mean that self-esteem can never change. It simply means that early experiences lay the foundation for high self-esteem or low self-esteem. Later experiences in life may also affect self-esteem, although none is apt to be as important as the parent-child relationship.

One reason that later experiences are less consequential is that they are always viewed through the prism or schema that is established earlier. Once high or low self-esteem develops, it guides the way we view ourselves, other people, and the experiences and events we confront. Often, this guiding process occurs at an automatic or preconscious level, making it difficult to detect and even harder to correct. For this reason, self-esteem tends to persist

II. **Cognitive Models of Self-Esteem**

Cognitive models offer a different perspective on the nature and origins of self-esteem. They view self-esteem as a more or less conscious decision people make regarding their worth as a person. If you think you possess many socially desirable qualities, then you will have high self-esteem. In terms of the three meanings of self-esteem we discussed earlier, cognitive models emphasize that how we evaluate ourselves in various domains determines our overall level of self-esteem.

A. *Three Cognitive Models of Self-Esteem Formation*

The simplest of these models assumes that self-esteem is the aggregate of the way people evaluate their specific qualities and attributes. The top portion of Table 8.1 illustrates this add-em-up approach. Here we have asked two (imaginary) people to indicate how attractive, intelligent, well liked, and athletic they think they are using seven-point scales (e.g., 1= not at all attractive; 7= very attractive). Person A thinks he is quite attractive, not terribly intelligent, reasonably well liked, and very athletic; Person B thinks he is not terribly

attractive, very intelligent, moderately well liked,
and not very athletic.

Table 8.1. **Three Cognitive Models of Self-Esteem Formation** (Note: For each example, two (hypothetical) people have indicated how attractive, intelligent, well-liked, and athletic they think they are (1 = not at all; 7 = very).

	Add-em-up Model				
	Attractive	Intelligent	Well-Liked	Athletic	Self-Esteem
Person A	5	2	5	7	19
Person B	3	7	4	3	17

The add-em-up model assumes that global self-esteem represents the sum of the way people evaluate their more specific qualities. To test this approach, we would simply add up the four self-evaluation scores to determine each person's self-esteem score. Using this approach, we would predict that Person A has higher self-esteem than Person B.

	Weight-em By Importance Model				
	Attractive	Intelligent	Well-Liked	Athletic	Self-Esteem
Person A	5 * (2)	2 * (3)	5 * (4)	7 * (1)	43
Person B	3 * (1)	7 * (4)	4 * (3)	3 * (2)	49

The weight-em by importance model assumes that self-esteem depends not only on how you evaluate yourself in specific domains, but also on how important you think it is to be good in those domains. To test the model, we have each person rank order the four attributes in terms of their personal importance (1 = least important; 4 = most important). We then multiply each self-evaluation score by its corresponding importance rating (in parentheses), and add the products. Using this approach, we would predict that Person B has higher self-esteem than Person A. This is because Person B values what he thinks he is good at more than does Person A.

	Self-Ideal Model				
	Attractive	Intelligent	Well-Liked	Athletic	Self-Esteem
Person A	5 - (7)	2 - (6)	5 - (7)	7 - (6)	-7
Person B	3 - (3)	7 - (4)	4 - (7)	3 - (2)	+1

The self-ideal model assumes that self-esteem depends on the difference between who we think we are now and who we would ideally like to be. To test the model, we have each person indicate how attractive, intelligent, well-liked, and athletic they would like to be (1 = not at all; 7 = very). We then subtract these ideal self-ratings (in parentheses) from their corresponding self-evaluation score, and sum the differences. Using this approach, we would predict that Person B has higher self-esteem than Person A.

According to the add-em-up approach, we would simply add up these various scores to determine the person's overall level of self-esteem. In this example, we would predict that Person A has higher self-esteem than Person B. This is because Person A evaluates himself more positively than does Person B.

One problem with this method (which you may have already identified) is that it ignores the fact that different things are important to different people. If athletic ability is unimportant to Person A, and intellectual ability is extremely important to Person B, then Person B may feel better about himself than Person A.

The idea that self-esteem depends on what you think about yourself in domains of high personal importance is reminiscent of James's (1890) claim that "self-esteem = success/pretensions." In Chapter 2 we noted that James uses the word pretensions in two ways. Sometimes it refers to what we value in life or to what we think is important. Here James is saying that outcomes in domains of high personal importance have a greater effect on self-esteem than do outcomes in domains of low personal importance. James also uses pretensions to refer to a person's level of aspiration. In this case, he is saying that we feel good about ourselves when our outcomes exceed our personal standards and bad about ourselves when our outcomes fall short of our personal standards.

Of the two meanings, most contemporary psychologists have focused on the one that emphasizes the importance of different attributes for self-esteem. Morris Rosenberg stated the case for the "importance of different attributes" as follows:

Ordinarily, we assume that if someone respects himself in certain particulars, then he respects himself in general. If he thinks he is smart, attractive, likable, moral, interesting, and so on, then he thinks well of himself in general. Yet it should be apparent that . . . a person's global self-esteem is based not solely on an assessment of his constituent qualities but on an assessment of the qualities that count. . . . The differential importance of

self-concept components is thus critically significant for self-esteem. (Rosenberg, 1979, p.18)

The middle portion of Table 8.1 illustrates one way to test this weight-em-by-importance model. For this example, we have asked the two people to rank the four attributes in terms of their importance (1 = least important; 4 = most important). We have then multiplied their attribute ratings by their importance ratings (in parentheses), and then added up the products to form a weighted self-esteem score. Now we would predict that Person B feels better about himself than does Person A. This is because Person B values what he thinks he is good at more than Person A values what he thinks he is good at.

Despite its intuitive appeal, research has not found strong support for the weight-em-by-importance model. Simply adding up the person's self-evaluations and ignoring importance often provides as good an indication (if not better) of the person's level of self-esteem. This may be because people tend to believe all of these attributes are important, so that the importance rating does not add much information. Another possibility is that it is not the individual's own importance rating that is critical, but how important the attribute is to society in general. This possibility assumes that individuals are not entirely free to decide what is important and what is not.

A final approach to understanding self-esteem looks at the discrepancy between the way people view their specific qualities and their ideal of who they should be in that domain. This approach also derives from James's (1890) formula, but here we are treating pretensions as level of aspiration—what kind of person do you want to be, think you should be, or ought to be—rather than as values. The more our current self-image matches these idealized self-images, the higher is our self-esteem.

One way to test this model is to have people indicate how they would like to see themselves in various domains (e.g., "How intelligent would you like to be?"). We then subtract these ideal self-ratings from the person's current self-evaluation. The bottom portion of Table 8.1 presents a hypothetical example. Person A is a perfectionist.

He needs to be great at everything. Consequently, although he evaluates himself highly, he falls short of his ideals and we would predict that he has low self-esteem. Person B doesn't evaluate himself as highly, but he doesn't think he has to be "great" at everything either. So, we predict that he has high self-esteem.

Empirical tests of this model have found support for the claim that high self-esteem is associated with small "self-ideal self" discrepancies. Unfortunately methodological problems associated with the use of difference scores cloud the interpretation of these findings.