Definition: **Self-Esteem** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

Beliefs and feelings about self. In 1890, James defined self-esteem mathematically as successes divided by failures. Self-esteem is currently defined as one's satisfaction or happiness with self, regard for self, or belief in one's importance. For more information, see James (1890) in the bibliography.

**See also**
Self-Concept, Self-Efficacy (psychology)

Summary Article: **Self-Esteem**
From *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science*

The term *self-esteem* was first coined by William James in 1890, which makes it one of the oldest concepts in psychology. Self-esteem’s importance is often seen in relation to such crucial areas as human motivation, development, performance, coping ability, relationship formation, psychopathology, and mental health or overall well-being. Self-esteem also appears to be the third most frequently occurring theme in psychological literature, with more than 25,000 articles, chapters, and books written on the topic (Rodewalt & Tragakis, (2003)). Given such a long and important history, it is not surprising to find several definitions of self-esteem in the field (Mruk, (2006)). Three of these definitions generate distinct schools of thought consisting of central ideas about self-esteem, major theories consistent with each set of ideas, and a related body of research concerning the role self-esteem plays in behavior. Therefore, understanding self-esteem and its field requires appreciating each position, especially in terms of relative strengths and weaknesses.

The original definition presents self-esteem as a ratio concerning one’s “success/pretensions” (James, 1890/(1983)). In this case, self-esteem is determined by the number of successes a person achieves in the domains of life that are important to him or her, divided by the number of failures that have occurred in those areas. One strength of this more behaviorally oriented position is that self-esteem is seen in relation to an individual's personal values, aspirations, efforts, and accomplishments—or the lack of them. A key problem with such a “competence”-based view is that making self-esteem contingent on success also makes failure equally important. One result of this formulation is that self-esteem is inherently unstable and may, under certain conditions, thereby contribute to such problems as defensiveness, insecurity, and related psychological difficulties (Crocker & Park, (2004)).

In the 1960s, behavioral scientists began to define self-esteem in terms of an attitude concerning one’s worth as a person (Rosenberg, (1965)). A major advantage of this approach is that attitudes, beliefs, or feelings may be easily measured through surveys and other self-report methods, which make researching self-esteem readily straightforward. In fact, defining self-esteem as a sense of personal worth and measuring it through self-report instruments is by far the most frequently used approach to studying self-esteem. This definition was also embraced in the educational setting, which helped to make understanding self-esteem as a sense of personal worth popular. In the 1980s, this view was connected to what is euphemistically known as the Self-Esteem Movement. However, it was recognized that such an approach has serious limits. One problem is that when self-esteem is defined in terms of general worth, it is difficult to distinguish between self-esteem and less desirable ways of

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feeling good about oneself, such as in narcissism. For some people, the perception of such a dark side to self-esteem, coupled with questions concerning whether self-esteem is a cause or effect of behavior, calls the importance of self-esteem into question (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

The third major way of defining self-esteem is based on both competence and worth (Branden, 1994). In this more existential approach, self-esteem is seen as a result of dealing with life’s challenges competently but in ways that are also worthy of a mature, healthy individual. This two-factor approach (Tafarodi & Vu, 1997), as it is also known, is a dynamic definition that may deal with some of the limitations seen in the others. For example, although success is never guaranteed in this view, doing one’s best to face a challenge in an authentic fashion does matter in regard to one’s self-esteem. Similarly, simply feeling good about oneself without earning such an experience may be associated with narcissism but not with authentic self-esteem. A key difficulty with this more complex definition is that it makes researching self-esteem more difficult and is, consequently, less frequently employed.

**Importance of Self-Esteem**

Given the historical depth and breadth of the field, it is not surprising that work on self-esteem involves many aspects of human life. Much attention is directed toward three areas in particular. One concerns a relationship between self-esteem and motivation, which may occur in two ways. On one hand, self-esteem is thought to help people avoid pain or to at least minimize negative experiences by providing a reservoir of positive affect. In this way, self-esteem helps individuals cope with such things as failure, rejection, and loss, thereby allowing them to be endured more easily. On the other hand, self-esteem is also seen as fostering certain desirable states or behaviors, such as the ability to take the risks that are necessary for learning, establishing healthy relationships, standing up for one’s beliefs, and so forth.

A second major area of the field concerns the relationship between self-esteem and human development. Such work focuses on understanding self-esteem in relation to various social and developmental factors. They include the impact of parenting styles on self-esteem, the role self-esteem plays in mastering various developmental tasks, and the relationship between self-esteem and personality development. More recent work in this area suggests that self-esteem is a lifelong developmental issue. For example, whereas the particular issues, tasks, and challenges in which self-esteem plays a role change over time, having and maintaining self-esteem appears to be a steady concern throughout the life cycle.

Finally, self-esteem is also seen as playing a crucial role in helping individuals reach and maintain psychological well-being. Humanistic psychology regards self-esteem as a basic human need that plays a key role in behavior, especially concerning whether one moves toward authentic (healthy) or inauthentic (unhealthy) behavioral choices and patterns. Some empirical research on self-esteem indicates that individuals who have high, healthy self-esteem are more able to take the risks necessary for self-actualization, such as exploring one’s own interests or making independent decisions, than are others. Even critics of work on self-esteem concede that it buffers the individual from stress, thereby enhancing coping ability. Finally, it has long been recognized that problems with self-esteem are associated with distress, unhappiness, anxiety, defensiveness, rigidity, and a good number of mental disorders found in the DSM IV-TR.

**Major Theories of Self-Esteem**

There are many theories about the nature of self-esteem and the role it plays in behavior. In Epstein’s experiential self theory, for instance, self-esteem acts to stabilize personality so that one may balance...
the need to minimize psychological pain with the desire to take the risks necessary for growth. Leary's sociometer theory emphasizes the ways in which self-esteem has evolved in our species to help regulate social behavior as well as individual behavior. Terror management theory understands self-esteem as a way of creating meaning that helps us to cope with an otherwise overwhelming fear of death. Two-factor theory focuses on how self-esteem plays a role in helping individuals face the challenges of living in ways that foster the development of authenticity and optimal functioning. Some of these theories suggest or lead to ways of increasing self-esteem in clinical and related settings. Other theories, such as self determination theory, recognize self-esteem as an important phenomenon, though not necessarily a primary determinant of behavior.

Major Research Issues Concerning Self-Esteem

It has long been known that researching self-related phenomena is difficult. One problem concerns accessing and analyzing subjective data. This issue runs throughout the field because most of its studies are based on self-report methods, including personal descriptions, interviews, surveys, and tests. Whether designed to assess explicit or implicit levels of self-esteem, these measures are prone to such contextual factors as situation or mood and the general tendency to see oneself in a positive light. Although there are exceptions, such as Epstein and O'Brien's Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory, few scales even attempt to address this problem. Some researchers suggest that culture plays a role in determining whether self-esteem is important. However, other cross-cultural work suggests that while culture may influence self-esteem toward one particular factor more than another, self-esteem is a universal concern.

Another major research issue concerns the relationship between self-esteem and behavior. Early work suggested that self-esteem acts in a causal fashion, meaning that one's level of self-esteem influences behavior. In this case, low self-esteem would suggest poorer performance, less general happiness, and a greater likelihood of personal or social problems. Similarly, higher self-esteem would be associated with more positive outcomes in these areas. However, research also suggests that self-esteem is a by-product of other factors, such as attitudes, expectations, and performance. Other work advances reciprocal models of interaction between self-esteem and behavior, where one affects the other in a dynamic fashion.

In sum, self-esteem has been and remains an important phenomenon, concept, and topic in behavioral science, especially in psychology. Although more work needs to be done methodologically to understand self-esteem (Wells & Marwell, (1976)), such difficulties pertain to much of the research on human behavior and are very familiar to social scientists.

See also

Narcissism.

References


Suggested Readings

CHRISTOPHER J. MRUK
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