



Are Efforts to Improve Self-Esteem Misguided?

YES: Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger, and Kathleen D. Vohs, from "Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth," *Scientific American* (January 2005)

NO: William B. Swann, Christine Chang-Schneider, and Katie Larsen McClarty, from "Do People's Self-Views Matter? Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Everyday Life," *American Psychologist* (February-March 2007)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues found that despite its popularity, self-esteem contributes little of value to children and development.

NO: Psychologist William Swann and colleagues argue that substantive versions of self-esteem do facilitate positive developmental trajectories.

While promoting self-esteem as a benefit to many aspects of child and adolescent development has been a popular endeavor, years of accumulated research evidence has begun to raise important questions about the exact role feeling good about oneself plays in growing up.

Self-esteem has become such a popular concept in recent decades that many commentators have come to refer to the "self-esteem movement" as a prominent historical phenomenon. This movement took particular hold among parents and "experts" who proclaimed self-esteem to be the key concern for healthy development. The idea is to constantly praise and reinforce as a way of producing happy, eager, and productive youth. These attitudes were accompanied by a sense that problems and social ills were caused by low self-esteem and an absence of feeling worthy. This may have reached its apex in the 1980s when the California state legislature put together a commission using taxpayer dollars to promote self-esteem with the intention of facilitating the development of a generation of youth.

The California commission to promote self-esteem frequently has been cited, and mocked, by scholars who have collected evidence from years of self-esteem research. In general, the huge volume of research on self-esteem has found limited effects that *do not* match the popular claims of the self-esteem movement. Most researchers now agree that if self-esteem has a positive impact on development, it is more complicated than we usually assume. Among some academics, opinion has even gone to the opposite end of the spectrum, arguing that self-esteem has actually caused developmental problems by creating a generation of youth that have been indulged regardless of their achievements.

In response to this ongoing controversy, prominent social psychologist and self-esteem researcher Roy Baumeister and his colleagues engaged in an extensive evaluation of what research tells us about self-esteem. While their review deals with a variety of popular ideas about self-esteem (such as its role in mental health and interpersonal success) they note that ideas about the positive impact of self-esteem have been particularly influential in relation to adolescence, school, and achievement. Many teachers, parents, and administrators have taken for granted that high self-esteem produces achievement. Baumeister and colleagues find virtually no research support for this position, and assert that the relationship between achievement and self-esteem is much more a popular myth than an empirical reality.

Psychologists William Swann Jr., et al. argue that the pessimism about self-esteem has gone too far. In fact, they suggest, if you consider self-esteem in relation to multidimensional self-views then they think there is a lot of evidence to support the idea that self-esteem matters. Thus, from this perspective, the problem is not the quantity of efforts to promote self-esteem, but instead the problem is the quality.

POINT

- The value of self-esteem has been consistently overstated because it is something we want to believe can be a panacea.
- Self-esteem is difficult to study accurately because it biases how people report their own characteristics.
- Research shows that having high self-esteem does not really predict any specific positive outcomes, such as school achievement.
- Some people with high self-esteem may actually be dangerously narcissistic.

COUNTERPOINT

- Although the value of self-esteem may have been overstated, people have been too quick to completely dismiss self-esteem as having any value.
- Self-views, as cognitive constructions about who we are, do matter regardless of how accurate they may be.
- The research on self-esteem has been framed too narrowly—to predict specific achievements requires assessing specific self-views.
- There is a clear difference between true self-esteem and narcissistic efforts to protect the self.

Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth

People intuitively recognize the importance of self-esteem to their psychological health, so it isn't particularly remarkable that most of us try to protect and enhance it in ourselves whenever possible. What is remarkable is that attention to self-esteem has become a communal concern, at least for Americans, who see a favorable opinion of oneself as the central psychological source from which all manner of positive outcomes spring. The corollary, that low self-esteem lies at the root of individual and thus societal problems and dysfunctions, has sustained an ambitious social agenda for decades. Indeed, campaigns to raise people's sense of self-worth abound.

Consider what transpired in California in the late 1980s. Prodded by State Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, Governor George Deukmejian set up a task force on self-esteem and personal and social responsibility. Vasconcellos argued that raising self-esteem in young people would reduce crime, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, school underachievement and pollution. At one point he even expressed the hope that these efforts would one day help balance the state budget, a prospect predicated on the observation that people with high self-regard earn more than others and thus pay more in taxes. Along with its other activities, the task force assembled a team of scholars to survey the relevant literature. The results appeared in a 1989 volume entitled *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem* (University of California Press, 1989), which stated that "many, if not most, of the major problems plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society." In reality, the report contained little to support that assertion. The California task force disbanded in 1995, but a nonprofit organization called the National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE) has picked up its mantle. Vasconcellos, until recently a California state senator, is on the advisory board.

Was it reasonable for leaders in California to start fashioning therapies and social policies without supportive data? Perhaps, given that they had problems to address. But one can draw on many more studies now than was the case 15 years ago, enough to assess the value of self-esteem in several spheres. Regrettably those who have been pursuing self-esteem-boosting programs, including the leaders of NASE, have not shown a desire to examine the new work, which is why the four of us recently came together under the aegis of the American Psychological Society to review the scientific literature.

In the Eye of the Beholder

Gauging the value of self-esteem requires, first of all, a sensible way to measure it. Most investigators just ask people what they think of themselves. Naturally enough, the answers are often colored by the common tendency to want to make oneself look good. Unfortunately, psychologists lack good methods to judge self-esteem.

Consider, for instance, research on the relation between self-esteem and physical attractiveness. Several studies have generally found clear positive links when people rate themselves on both properties. It seems plausible that physically attractive people would end up with high self-esteem because they are treated more favorably than unattractive ones—being more popular, more sought after, more valued by lovers and friends, and so forth. But it could just as well be that those who score highly on self-esteem scales by claiming to be wonderful people all around also boast of being physically attractive.

In 1995 Edward F. Diener and Brian Wolsic of the University of Illinois and Frank Fujita of Indiana University South Bend examined this possibility. They obtained self-esteem scores from a broad sample of the population and then photographed everybody, presenting these pictures to a panel of judges, who evaluated the subjects for attractiveness. Ratings based on full-length photographs showed no significant correlation with self-esteem. When the judges were shown pictures of just the participants' unadorned faces, the correlation between attractiveness and self-esteem was once again zero. In that same investigation, however, self-reported physical attractiveness was found to have a strong correlation with self-esteem. Clearly, those with high self-esteem are gorgeous in their own eyes but not necessarily to others.

This discrepancy should be sobering. What seemed at first to be a strong link between physical good looks and high self-esteem turned out to be nothing more than a pattern of consistency in how favorably people rate themselves. A parallel phenomenon affects those with low self-esteem, who are prone to floccinaucinihilipilification, a highfalutin word (among the longest in the Oxford English Dictionary) but one that we can't resist using here, it being defined as "the action or habit of estimating as worthless." That is, people with low self-esteem are not merely down on themselves; they are negative about everything.

This tendency has certainly distorted some assessments. For example, psychologists once thought that people with low self-esteem were especially prejudiced. But thoughtful scholars, such as Jennifer Crocker of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, questioned this conclusion. After all, if people rate themselves negatively, it is hard to label them as prejudiced for rating people not like themselves similarly. When one uses the difference between the subjects' assessments of their own group and their ratings of other groups as the yardstick for bias, the findings are reversed: people with high self-esteem appear to be more prejudiced. Floccinaucinihilipilification also raises the danger that those who describe themselves disparagingly may describe their lives similarly, thus furnishing the appearance that low self-esteem has unpleasant outcomes.

Given the often misleading nature of self-reports, we set up our review to emphasize objective measures wherever possible—a requirement that greatly reduced the number of relevant studies (from more than 15,000 to about 200). We were also mindful to avoid another fallacy: the assumption that a correlation between self-esteem and some desired behavior establishes causality. Indeed, the question of causality goes to the heart of the debate. If high self-esteem brings about certain positive outcomes, it may well be worth the effort and expense of trying to instill this feeling. But if the correlations mean simply that a positive self-image is a result of success or good behavior—which is certainly plausible—there is little to be gained by raising self-esteem alone. We began our two-year effort by reviewing studies relating self-esteem to academic performance.

School Daze

At the outset, we had every reason to hope that boosting self-esteem would be a potent tool for helping students. Logic suggests that having a good dollop of self-esteem would enhance striving and persistence in school, while making a student less likely to succumb to paralyzing feelings of incompetence or self-doubt. Modern studies have, however, cast doubt on the idea that higher self-esteem actually induces students to do better.

Such inferences about causality are possible when the subjects are examined at two different times, as was the case in 1986 when Sheila M. Pottbaum and her colleagues at the University of Iowa, tested more than 23,000 high school students, first in the 10th and again in the 12th grade. They found that self-esteem in 10th grade is only weakly predictive of academic achievement in 12th grade. Academic achievement in 10th grade correlates with self-esteem in 12th grade only trivially better. Such results, which are now available from multiple studies, certainly do not indicate that raising self-esteem offers students much benefit. Some findings even suggest that artificially boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance.

Even if raising self-esteem does not foster academic progress, might it serve some purpose later, say, on the job? Apparently not. Studies of possible links between workers' self-regard and job performance echo what has been found with schoolwork: the simple search for correlations yields some suggestive results, but these do not show whether a good self-image leads to occupational success, or vice versa. In any case, the link is not particularly strong.

The failure to contribute significantly at school or at the office would be easily offset if a heightened sense of self-worth helped someone to get along better with others. Having a good self-image might make someone more likable insofar as people prefer to associate with confident, positive individuals and generally avoid those who suffer from self-doubts and insecurities.

People who regard themselves highly generally state that they are popular and rate their friendships as being of superior quality to those described by people with low self-esteem, who report more negative interactions and less social support. But as Julia Bishop and Heidi M. Inderbitzen-Nolan of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln showed in 1995, these assertions do not reflect reality. The investigators asked 542 ninth-grade students to nominate their

most-liked and least-liked peers, and the resulting rankings displayed no correlation whatsoever with self-esteem scores.

A few other methodologically sound studies have found that the same is true for adults. In one of these investigations, conducted in the late 1980s, Duane P. Buhrmester, now at the University of Texas at Dallas, and three colleagues reported that college students with high levels of self-regard claimed to be substantially better at initiating relationships, disclosing things about themselves, asserting themselves in response to objectionable behaviors by others, providing emotional support and even managing interpersonal conflicts. Their roommates' ratings, however, told a different story. For four of the five interpersonal skills surveyed, the correlation with self-esteem dropped to near zero. The only one that remained statistically significant was with the subjects' ability to initiate new social contacts and friendships. This does seem to be one sphere in which confidence indeed matters: people who think that they are desirable and attractive should be adept at striking up conversations with strangers, whereas those with low self-esteem presumably shy away from initiating such contacts, fearing rejection.

One can imagine that such differences might influence a person's love life, too. In 2002 Sandra L. Murray of the University at Buffalo found that people low in self-esteem tend to distrust their partners' expressions of love and support, acting as though they are constantly expecting rejection. Thus far, however, investigators have not produced evidence that such relationships are especially prone to dissolve. In fact, high self-esteem may be the bigger threat: as Caryl E. Rusbult of the University of Kentucky showed back in 1987, those who think highly of themselves are more likely than others to respond to problems by severing relations and seeking other partners.

Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll

How about teenagers? How does self-esteem, or the lack thereof, influence their love life, in particular their sexual activity? Investigators have examined this subject extensively. All in all, the results do not support the idea that low self-esteem predisposes young people to more or earlier sexual activity. If anything, those with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard risks and more prone to engage in sex. At the same time, bad sexual experiences and unwanted pregnancies appear to lower self-esteem.

If not sex, then how about alcohol or illicit drugs? Abuse of these substances is one of the most worrisome behaviors among young people, and many psychologists once believed that boosting self-esteem would prevent such problems. The thought was that people with low self-esteem turn to drinking or drugs for solace. The data, however, do not consistently show that low adolescent self-esteem causes or even correlates with the abuse of alcohol or other drugs. In particular, in a large-scale study in 2000, Rob McGee and Sheila M. Williams of the Dunedin School of Medicine at the University of Otago in New Zealand found no correlation between self-esteem measured between ages nine and 13 and drinking or drug use at age 15. Even when findings do show links between alcohol use and self-esteem, they are mixed and inconclusive. We did

find, however, some evidence that low self-esteem contributes to illicit drug use. In particular, Judy A. Andrews and Susan C. Duncan of the Oregon Research Institute found in 1997 that declining levels of academic motivation (the main focus of their study) caused self-esteem to drop, which in turn led to marijuana use, although the connection was weak.

Interpretation of the findings on drinking and drug abuse is probably complicated by the fact that some people approach the experience out of curiosity or thrill seeking, whereas others may use it to cope with or escape from chronic unhappiness. The overall result is that no categorical statements can be made. The same is true for tobacco use, where our study-by-study review uncovered a preponderance of results that show no influence. The few positive findings we unearthed could conceivably reflect nothing more than self-report bias.

Another complication that also clouds these studies is that the category of people with high self-esteem contains individuals whose self-opinions differ in important ways. Yet in most analyses, people with a healthy sense of self-respect are, for example, lumped with those feigning higher self-esteem than they really feel or who are narcissistic. Not surprisingly, the results of such investigations may produce weak or contradictory findings.

Bully for You

For decades, psychologists believed that low self-esteem was an important cause of aggression. One of us (Baumeister) challenged that notion in 1996, when he reviewed assorted studies and concluded that perpetrators of aggression generally hold favorable and perhaps even inflated views of themselves.

Take the bullying that goes on among children, a common form of aggression. Dan Olweus of the University of Bergen was one of the first to dispute the notion that under their tough exteriors, bullies suffer from insecurities and self-doubts. Although Olweus did not measure self-esteem directly, he showed that bullies reported less anxiety and were more sure of themselves than other children. Apparently the same applies to violent adults.

After coming to the conclusion that high self-esteem does not lessen a tendency toward violence, that it does not deter adolescents from turning to alcohol, tobacco, drugs and sex, and that it fails to improve academic or job performance, we got a boost when we looked into how self-esteem relates to happiness. The consistent finding is that people with high self-esteem are significantly happier than others. They are also less likely to be depressed.

One especially compelling study was published in 1995, after Diener and his daughter Marissa, now a psychologist at the University of Utah, surveyed more than 13,000 college students, and high self-esteem emerged as the strongest factor in overall life satisfaction. In 2004 Sonja Lyubomirsky, Christopher Tkach and M. Robin DiMatteo of the University of California, Riverside, reported data from more than 600 adults ranging in age from 51 to 95. Once again, happiness and self-esteem proved to be closely tied. Before it is safe to conclude that high self-esteem leads to happiness, however, further research must address the shortcomings of the work that has been done so far.

First, causation needs to be established. It seems possible that high self-esteem brings about happiness, but no research has shown this outcome. The strong correlation between self-esteem and happiness is just that—a correlation. It is plausible that occupational, academic or interpersonal successes cause both happiness and high self-esteem and that corresponding failures cause both unhappiness and low self-esteem. It is even possible that happiness, in the sense of a temperament or disposition to feel good, induces high self-esteem.

Second, it must be recognized that happiness (and its opposite, depression) has been studied mainly by means of self-report, and the tendency of some people toward negativity may produce both their low opinions of themselves and unfavorable evaluations of other aspects of life. Yet it is not clear what could replace such assessments. An investigator would indeed be hard-pressed to demonstrate convincingly that a person was less (or more) happy than he or she supposed. Clearly, objective measures of happiness and depression are going to be difficult if not impossible to obtain, but that does not mean self-reports should be accepted uncritically.

What then should we do? Should parents, teachers and therapists seek to boost self-esteem wherever possible? In the course of our literature review, we found some indications that self-esteem is a helpful attribute. It improves persistence in the face of failure. And individuals with high self-esteem sometimes perform better in groups than do those with low self-esteem. Also, a poor self-image is a risk factor for certain eating disorders, especially bulimia—a connection one of us (Vohs) and her colleagues documented in 1999. Other effects are harder to demonstrate with objective evidence, although we are inclined to accept the subjective evidence that self-esteem goes hand in hand with happiness.

So we can certainly understand how an injection of self-esteem might be valuable to the individual. But imagine if a heightened sense of self-worth prompted some people to demand preferential treatment or to exploit their fellows. Such tendencies would entail considerable social costs. And we have found little to indicate that indiscriminately promoting self-esteem in today's children or adults, just for being themselves, offers society any compensatory benefits beyond the seductive pleasure it brings to those engaged in the exercise.



William B. Swann Jr., et al.



Do People's Self-Views Matter? Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Everyday Life

For most of the past century, a deeply behavioristic field of psychology consigned theory and research on the self-concept and self-esteem to the backwaters of the discipline. Then, in the late 1970s, articles by Kuiper and Rogers, Markus, and others demonstrated that self-views had properties similar to schemas and beliefs—constructs that had recently been championed by cognitive psychologists. In so doing, these researchers legitimized the self-concept as a viable scientific construct. The result was a steep increase in research on the self during the 1980s.

At about the same time, an independent wave of enthusiasm within the lay community thrust the construct of self-esteem into the national limelight. On the basis of precious little evidence, the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility characterized self-esteem as a panacea whose cultivation would protect people from a host of ills, including welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of high school, and so on. Thousands of laypersons across America were smitten with the hope that in self-esteem they had found a modern-day Holy Grail.

No longer. With ample justification, members of the academic community pointed out that the extravagant claims of the self-esteem movement were nothing more than that. Yet, in very recent years, the pendulum has swung even further, both reflecting—and inspiring—deep doubts about the viability of the self-esteem construct. Several authors have questioned the utility of self-esteem in predicting important social outcomes, asserting that the effect sizes linking self-esteem to important outcome variables are small and inconsequential. Although some authors have championed more sophisticated strategies for using self-views to predict outcome variables of interest others have thrown up their hands, concluding that the evidentiary basis of self-esteem research is so fundamentally flawed that the entire enterprise should be reexamined. Recently, some of the original critics of self-esteem research have added that because self-esteem appears to be inconsequential, “efforts to boost people’s self-esteem are of little value in fostering academic achievement or preventing undesirable behavior.”

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In this article, we place this recent wave of pessimism regarding the importance of self-views in theoretical and historical context. Drawing on past research on attitudes and traits, we propose that recent critiques of global self-esteem have framed the issue in an overly narrow manner and that a broader conceptualization that considers other types of self-views as well (i.e., self-concepts) is needed. With such a conceptualization in hand, we identify several strategies for increasing the predictive validity of self-views, including the use of additional predictor variables and the implementation of several time-tested methodological and psychometric principles. We conclude that our analysis supports a more optimistic assessment of the predictive validity of self-views that justifies theoretically based efforts to improve self-concepts and self-esteem.

Lessons from Three Decades of Psychological Science

... We propose that it is not enough for researchers interested in predicting socially important outcomes to focus exclusively on global self-esteem. Instead, researchers should also consider self-concepts and their metacognitive aspects.

To be sure, we are not the first to propose that predictive validity can be enhanced by measuring aspects of self-views other than global self-esteem. Why, then, have recent critics focused exclusively on the predictive utility of global self-esteem? One reason is that, until now, the extravagant claims of the California task force have defined the term of the debate. A second reason is that at least some critics have assumed that self-esteem is “affective” and self-concepts are merely “cognitive,” with the implication being that if either of the two constructs would predict important outcomes, it would be self-esteem. Although common, such categorical distinctions between self-esteem and self-concepts have received virtually no empirical support. There is a good reason for this. Clearly, both self-esteem and self-concepts have cognitive as well as emotional elements: just as self-esteem is a cognition about the self (e.g., a belief about how worthwhile one is) as well as a feeling, so too are self-concepts emotional (e.g., people care enormously about personal attributes they deem important) as well as cognitive. From this vantage point, there is little basis for dismissing self-concepts as merely cognitive or for focusing on the predictive capacity of self-esteem at the expense of self-concepts.

We suggest that a more useful framework for assessing the predictive utility of self-views builds on treating self-esteem and self-concepts as members of a common self-view category. From this perspective, both self-esteem and self-concepts refer to thoughts and feelings about the self. People derive these self-views by observing the reactions others have toward them their own behavior, and the relative performances of others. Once formed, self-views give meaning to people’s experiences, thereby enabling them to make sense of, and react appropriately to, such experiences. . . .

Specific combinations of certainty and importance can give rise to a metacognitive aspect of the self-view, an aspect that is associated with defensive

and narcissistic reactions. Attitude researcher Gross and his colleagues for example, distinguished true certainty in beliefs from "compensatory confidence," with the latter actually reflecting a lack of certainty in the attitude. People with compensatory confidence about their self-views will theoretically be threatened by information that is inconsistent with self-views of which they are uncertain. These feelings of threat may be compounded when the self-view is important, as perceived importance and high goal commitment may trigger emotional reactivity in response to performance feedback. Thus, when people with self-views that are both low in certainty and high in importance encounter threats, an emotional, defensive lashing out may result. This idea is reminiscent of discussions of the narcissistic reactions that theoretically occur when people who are highly invested in uncertain, fragile self-views encounter challenges or threats. All of these perspectives clash sharply with recent efforts to equate the self-protective statements of narcissists with those of people with true high self-esteem. Indeed, we believe that conflating narcissism and true high self-esteem is profoundly problematic for the same reasons that it is problematic to mistake for a friend an enemy who is merely masquerading as a friend. . . .

Predictor-Criterion Relationships: Specificity Matching

A key insight gained by attitude and trait researchers was the specificity or specificity matching principle. This principle was designed to accommodate that fact that in naturally occurring settings, outcomes are typically caused by multiple factors, many of which may be rivals of the particular predictor variable the researcher is studying. To compensate for the influence of such rival predictors, the specificity matching principle holds that the specificity of predictors and criteria should be matched. When the predictor variable is relatively specific, then the impact of rival influences on the predictor-criterion relationship can be minimized by selecting an equally specific behavior (e.g., People's attitudes toward potato chips will predict how many chips they eat in a given year but not the total amount of food they consume that year). When the predictor variable is relatively general, the impact of rival influences can be averaged out by combining numerous behaviors (e.g., General predisposition to eat will predict how much food of all types that one consumes in a given year). In short, specific predictors should be used to predict specific behaviors and general predictors should be used to predict general behaviors. Specificity matching and related principles have received ample support in studies of both attitudes and traits.

Applied to research on the self, the specificity matching principle suggests that researchers interested in predicting relatively specific outcomes (e.g., math proficiency) should use a specific self-concept (e.g., self-perceived math ability) as a predictor rather than a global measure such as self-esteem. Similarly, researchers using global self-esteem as a predictor should focus on global outcome measures, such as several outcomes bundled together. From the perspective of the specificity matching principle, then, recent reviews of the self-esteem literature have violated that specificity matching principle by focusing on the capacity of global measures of self-esteem to predict specific outcomes (e.g., Does

self-esteem predict grades in a math class?). It is thus not surprising that researchers have concluded that self-esteem does not predict much of anything.

To determine whether following the specificity matching principle would bolster estimates of the predictive validity of self-views, we examined two research traditions, each of which has approached specificity matching in a distinct way: specific self-views predicting specific behavior and global self-views predicting bundles of behaviors. We attempted to locate meta-analytic reviews that have the advantage of offering explicit criteria for determining which studies to include in a given pool of studies as well as statistical techniques for estimating the strength of relationships.

Specific self-views (academic self-concepts) predicting specific outcomes (academic performance). In this social cognitive theory, Bandura defined perceptions of self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances." Theoretically, efficacy self-views influence the choices people make, the effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of challenge, and the degree of anxiety or confidence they bring to the task at hand. Although these perceptions do not alter people's capabilities, they help determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have. Efficacy self-views thus help explain why performances differ among people who have similar knowledge and skills. Consistent with the specificity notion, Bandura insisted that self-efficacy judgments should be specifically rather than globally assessed, must correspond directly to the criterion task, and must be measured as closely as possible in time to that task.

Several meta-analyses have now been conducted that have evaluated the ability of measures of self-efficacy to predict academic outcomes. In one particularly well-controlled analysis, Robbins et al. examined 109 prospective studies in which various psychosocial and study skill factors were used to predict college outcomes. The predictors were categorized into nine broad constructs, such as academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, academic-related skills, and academic goals. Two college outcomes were targeted: performance, as measured by cumulative grade point average, and persistence, as measured by the length of time a student remained enrolled at an institution toward completion of a degree. Of all the studies analyzed, 18 studies ($N = 9,598$) met the inclusion criteria of academic self-efficacy predicting grade point average. Only academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation were strong predictors ($\rho_s = .50$ and $.30$, respectively, where ρ is the estimated true correlation between the predictor construct and the performance criterion, corrected for measurement error in both the predictor and criterion). An additional six studies ($N = 6,930$) met the inclusion criteria of academic self-efficacy predicting persistence. In this case, academic-related skills, academic self-efficacy, and academic goals were all strong predictors ($\rho_s = .37$, $.36$, and $.34$, respectively).

Other investigators have shown that as the specificity of the predictor and criterion variables increases, so too does the strength of the relationship between them. For example, in their meta-analysis of a large body of prospective studies, Hansford and Hattie found that relatively specific academic self-concepts offered

better predictions of academic ability ($r = .42$) than did global self-esteem ($r = .22$). Similarly, Valentine et al. reported that predictor-outcome associations were stronger when the researchers assessed self-views specific to the academic domain and when measures of self-beliefs and achievement were matched according to subject area. Finally, in their review article, Marsh and Craven concluded that academic self-views predicted several types of academic outcomes, but global self-esteem did not. In one especially striking demonstration of this phenomenon, Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, and Baumert reported that math self-concept was substantially related to math grades ($r = .71$), math standardized achievement test scores ($r = .59$), and selection of advanced math course ($r = .51$), but global self-esteem was not systematically related to academic self-concepts ($r_s = -.03$ to $.05$). Such findings provide direct support for the notion that the specificity of predictor and criterion variables systematically determines the strength of the relationships observed between them.

The benefits of matching predictors and criterion is also supported by evidence that the predictive validity of self-esteem measures can be bolstered by breaking self-esteem into two components and matching each component with an appropriate criterion variable. Bosson and Swann used the distinction between self-liking and self-competence to bolster their ability to predict the feedback preferences of participants. They found that just as participants' feelings of self-liking (but not self-competence) predicted choice of feedback that confirmed their sense of self-liking, their feelings of self-competence (but not self-liking) predicted their choice of feedback that confirmed their sense of self-competence. This pattern emerged among people who had negative as well as positive self-views. Thus, in the spirit of the specificity matching principle, predictive validity was maximized insofar as predictors and outcomes referred to the same conceptual variable.

Global self-views (self-esteem) predicting bundled outcomes (various indices of adjustment). Let us preface this section by acknowledging some important nuances in applying the specificity matching principle. One such nuance involves the proper identification of global outcomes. Consider the well-documented finding that low self-esteem predicts subsequent depression. At first glance, this finding may seem to violate that specificity matching principle, as it involves an instance in which a global predictor (self-esteem) is linked to a single criterion (depression). Nevertheless, in reality, clinically diagnosed depression actually represents a global behavior. That is, a diagnosis of clinical depression is typically based on detection of at least five symptoms, including, but not limited to, depressed or irritable mood, diminished interest in activities, insomnia or hyper-somnia, fatigue or loss of energy, recurrent thoughts of death, and feelings of worthlessness. Much the same argument applies to most indices of psychological adjustment. In such instances, although a single variable may be used to describe the outcome measure, the fact that the outcome is a summary assessment based on multiple behavioral observations means that it should be considered a global outcome.

With this caveat in hand, we shall discuss a few investigations in which the researchers used measures of global self-esteem to predict global or

bundled behaviors. One of the earliest studies that met this criterion was reported by Werner and Smith. These researchers focused on a sample of extremely impoverished youth in the Kauai Longitudinal Study. Self-esteem was assessed using interviews at age 18. When participants were 32 years old, the investigators collected a global measure of quality of adult adaptation. The findings indicate that the self-esteem ratings of teenagers significantly predicted their adaptation 14 years later ($r = .24$ for men, $r = .41$ for women).

More recently, a second team of researchers also reported that self-esteem significantly but weakly predicted specific outcomes and more strongly predicted global outcomes. The initial article reported that low self-esteem predicted externalizing problems two years later. This finding emerged whether they examined self-, teacher-, parent-, or interviewer-based measures of self-esteem and externalizing problems, and for participants from different nationalities (United States and New Zealand) and age groups (adolescents and college students). Moreover, this relation held when the investigators controlled for potential confounding variables such as supportive parenting, parent and peer relationships, socioeconomic status, and IQ. In a follow-up study that built on the methodological strengths of the earlier work, Trzesniewski et al. followed a group of adolescents for 11 years into adulthood. Even after controlling for numerous rival predictors of the outcome measures, the investigators found that self-esteem was a significant predictor of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, tobacco dependence, criminal convictions, school dropout, and money and work problems. Once again, these relations held whether the outcome measures were reports by the participants or observers.

Skeptics might point out that most of the effect sizes reported by Donnellan et al. and Trzesniewski et al. seemed small using conventional criteria. Additional findings, however, indicate that the predictive validity of self-esteem was bolstered when outcomes were aggregated. That is, when self-esteem was used to predict global outcomes, teenagers with low self-esteem ran an elevated risk for developing difficulties as adults. For example, among adults with five or more problems during adulthood, 63% had low self-esteem during adolescence and only 15% had high self-esteem during adolescence. Similarly, among problem-free adults, 50% had high self-esteem when they were adolescents and only 16% had low self-esteem during adolescence.

This evidence of the capacity of global self-esteem to predict global outcomes suggests that it may be limiting to frame questions regarding the predictive validity of self-concept and self-esteem in either-or terms as some scholars have. Rather, both types of self-views offer useful predictions as long as the criterion variables are defined at the appropriate level of specificity.

More generally, the findings reported by Donnellan et al. and Trzesniewski et al. are noteworthy in at least three more respects. First, the range and social significance of the outcomes predicted by self-esteem (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, criminal convictions, school dropout, money and work problems, etc.) are impressive by any standard. Second, numerous potential confounding variables (e.g., depression, neuroticism) were appropriately controlled for, and objective outcome measures were examined. Third, the 11-year time lag between the measure of the predictor and criterion in Trzesniewski

et al.'s study was substantial. The fact that self-esteem scores predicted outcomes over such a long period supports the idea that self-esteem can have enduring effects on people. As critics of past research on the predictive validity of self-esteem disparaged the lack of studies using objective measures, longitudinal designs, large representative samples, and appropriate controls to test the predictive utility of self-esteem indices, the methodological features of Donnellan et al. and Trzesniewski et al. counter critics who have claimed that measures of self-esteem predict outcome variables only because they happen to be correlated with variables that are causally related to these outcome variables. In short, although the Donnellan-Trzesniewski team's research was correlational, its methodological features help make the case that self-esteem exerted a causal impact on the outcome variables. . . .

Is It Worthwhile to Try to Improve Self-Views?

If self-views are meaningfully related to socially significant outcomes, does this mean that it makes sense to take steps to improve those self-views? We believe that it does. Furthermore, contrary to the critics of self-esteem research who "have not found evidence that boosting self-esteem (by therapeutic interventions or school programs) causes benefits," we have encountered evidence that programs designed to improve self-esteem improve standardized test scores, reduce school disciplinary reports, and reduce use of drugs and alcohol.

In acknowledging empirical support for the efficacy of programs designed to improve self-esteem, we must emphasize that such evidence should be treated cautiously because little is known about the precise mediators of these effects. Indeed, at this juncture, what is needed is careful, theory-driven research designed to specify how effective self-esteem programs work. Such mediational research is vitally important for two reasons. First, of the effective programs of which we are aware, all are multifaceted schemes that include efforts to improve self-efficacy and interpersonal relationships as well as self-esteem. Because the effectiveness of the individual components (focus on changing self-views, modifying social skills, academic achievement, or other behaviors, etc.) of these programs is rarely, if ever, documented, it is quite possible that such programs include a mix of effective and ineffective strategies (or strategies that are effective for some people but ineffective for others). If so, the effectiveness of such programs could be enhanced still further by bolstering the effective components and eliminating the ineffective ones.

Identifying the effective components of such programs could also help silence critics by distinguishing treatments based on nonsense from those based on psychological principles. Consider the caricatures of self-esteem programs occasionally supplied by the media. Perhaps the best known example is satirist Al Franken's parody of self-esteem enhancement programs in which his character on *Saturday Night Live* (Stuart Smalley) gazed tentatively into the mirror, smiled, and then carefully recited, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like me". The newly esteemed Smalley then beamed triumphantly. This scenario was amusing because it was so obvious to everyone (except Stuart) that such affirmation procedures are hopelessly misguided.

Clearly, people cannot magically affirm their way into possessing high self-esteem. For this reason, any program organized around such affirmation procedures will (at best) produce positive self-images that are fanciful and ephemeral. Note, however, that although some self-esteem enhancement programs indeed are based on such simple-minded strategies, these Panglossian strategies are a far cry from the demonstrably effective ones reviewed in the recent literature. Instead of focusing exclusively on people's momentary self-esteem, the effective programs emphasize procedures that are also designed to alter the raw materials that are also designed to alter the raw materials that provide a basis for healthy, sustainable self-esteem. Ideally, these programs cultivate behaviors that produce self-views that are both realistic (i.e., based on objective evidence) and adaptive (i.e., emphasizing activities that are predictive of long-term adjustment in society). Therefore, the principles that underlie such programs make sound theoretical sense, and it is misleading and unfortunate to confuse them with programs that do not. Furthermore, these programs are effective; although the effect sizes are modest, they compare favorably with other types of interventions that are designed to change similar behaviors, self-reported personality functioning, and academic performance.

Skeptics could hypothetically object: "If the active ingredients in self-esteem change programs involve changing people's behaviors and life circumstances as well as their self-views, then perhaps improved self-esteem is an effect of such programs rather than a key ingredient in such programs. Indeed, calling these programs 'Self-esteem enhancement programs' is a misnomer because they do so much more than that."

We believe that it is legitimate to point out that although self-esteem enhancement is the overarching goal of such programs, the strategies through which this end is pursued often involve changing the behaviors and situations that feed into people's self-views rather than the self-views per se. That said, we also believe that it is misguided to underestimate the critically important role that changing self-views ultimately plays in such programs. Rather, just as it is not enough to change self-views only, so too is it not enough to change people's behaviors and life circumstances only.

Imagine, for example, a school boy who has a negative self-view that leads him to be hostile to his classmates. Thinking that a new environment might improve matters, the school counselor arranges to have the boy transferred to a new classroom in which the boy is unknown. Although the boy's new environment may be more benign initially, his self-view may inspire behaviors that quickly bring his classmates to see him just as negatively as he sees himself. And even if his classmates are slow to reciprocate the boy's hostile overtures, his negative self-views may nevertheless cause him to "see" their behaviors as more negative than they actually are. Moreover should he experience failure in this new setting, the research literature suggests that his negative self-views will hamper his coping ability. That is, research suggests that in the wake of failure experiences, people with negative self-views are more likely to suffer emotional trauma and impaired motivation than are people with positive self-views. For example, Greenberg et al. showed that whereas people whose self-views had been bolstered by personality feedback

displayed relatively little anxiety in response to the threat of a shock, those whose self-views had not been bolstered suffered considerable anxiety. In these and other ways, negative self-views may sabotage people's ability to cope successfully with events in their lives. . . .

Summary and Conclusions

From this vantage point, people's self-views do matter, and the task of future researchers is to determine how, when, and with what consequences. This conclusion has direct implications for programs designed to change self-views. That is, given that people with negative self-views think and behave in ways that diminish their quality of life, it is incumbent on behavioral scientists to develop and refine strategies for improving these negative self-views.

CHALLENGE QUESTIONS



Are Efforts to Improve Self-Esteem Misguided?

- Both sides agree that opinions about self-esteem have involved a lot of misunderstandings. What seem to be the crucial misunderstandings about self-esteem, and how do those influence your response to the issue at hand?
- Why is self-esteem such a difficult issue to research? Why do you think so much research has been done on self-esteem, and yet it is still difficult to draw clear conclusions?
- Baumeister et al. suggest that self-esteem is more than just limited in its ability to help individuals, but rather it is something of a social problem. Do you think the other side would agree that self-esteem has social and cultural influence?
- Swann and colleagues suggest that when people talk about "self-esteem" they are really talking about things such as cognitive self-views and self-efficacy. Does that seem right? When you think about self-esteem, what does it mean to you?

Suggested Readings

- R. F. Baumeister, "Should Schools Try to Boost Self-Esteem?" *American Educator* (Summer 1996)
- R. Baumeister, J. Campbell, J. Krueger, and K. Vohs, "Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth," *Scientific American* (January 2005)
- P. Bronson, "How Not to Talk to Your Kids: The Inverse Power of Praise," *New York Magazine* (February 9, 2007)
- J. Crocker and L. Park, "The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem," *Psychological Bulletin* (2004)
- M. Donnellan, K. Trzesniewski, R. Robins, T. Moffitt, and A. Caspi, "Low Self-Esteem Is Related to Aggression, Antisocial Behavior, and Delinquency," *Psychological Science* (April 2005)
- D. DuBois and B. Flay, "The Healthy Pursuit of Self-Esteem: Comment on and Alternative to the Crocker and Park (2004) Formulation," *Psychological Bulletin* (2004)
- D. L. DuBois and H. D. Tevendale, "Self-Esteem in Childhood and Adolescence: Vaccine or Epiphenomenon?" *Applied & Preventative Psychology* (1999)
- Carol S. Dweck, "Caution—Praise Can Be Dangerous," *American Educator* (Spring 1999)

