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PSYCHOLOGY Self-esteem loses its lustre

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The New York Times

SELF-ESTEEM had it all, once. Common sense and research showed that people who did best in life felt good about themselves, and it seemed a short leap to conclude that the reverse must also be true: If successful people enjoyed high self-esteem, then high self-esteem would foster success.

Students would do better if they had more self-esteem. Employees would work harder. Girls who felt inferior because of poor body image or math phobia would gain from self-esteem training.

By 1986, when California created a commission to bolster self-image as a statewide goal, the concept had become a popculture phenomenon. Celebrated in the media, in politics and in schools, self-esteem had become an end in itself – a commodity, like expanded memory for a personal computer, that could be installed in a do-it-yourself upgrade.

But self-esteem is having image problems these days.

Research is indicating that it is not in and of itself a strong predictor of success. Criminals and juvenile delinquents, it turns out, often have high self-esteem. New movements in education have blamed the emphasis on self-esteem for students' failures in learning.

"Self-esteem became mixed up in a whole series of issues, and people wanted it over," says Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College at New York's Columbia University.

But self-esteem is by no means dead, researchers say. The deep tradition of individualism guarantees that esteem or one of its many variants – from positive thinking to self-efficacy – will persist. What has changed is that self-esteem as an idea and a societal force has lost its unified champions and to a great degree its ability to be succinctly defined.

Like IQ tests and SAT scores, self-esteem has become but one gauge to indicate success in college or life.

"A dozen years ago, research was showing heavily positive things about high self-esteem," says Roy Baumeister, a psychology professor at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University. "Since then, questions have been raised about the size of effects, the direction of effects and whether in fact it's a mixed blessing to even have high self-esteem."

Even before William James, the Harvard professor, philosopher and psychologist, invented the term self-esteem in the late 1800s, people have worshipped the concept of self. The will to do, to achieve, to improve, was stained into the culture along with its icons – Horatio Alger, Dale Carnegie, rags to riches.

There were other ideas of psychology, such as alienation, with its darker, more European nuances. But it was bright-eyed, optimistic self-esteem that caught on.

It was not until the 1960s, when new analytic tools were developed to measure self-esteem, particularly the Rosenberg scale, developed by Morris Rosenberg at the University of Maryland, that the idea really took root. The scale, based on 10 questions, created what every academic craves – numerical measurability.

At the same time, some segments in society, especially the feminist movement, seized on the idea that low self-esteem among many girls and women could and should be raised through training.

But the zenith for self-esteem, often identified as the California project, was probably also the beginning of its undoing.

Confronted with the fact that self-esteem had become a goal for public schools and society, rather than a result of achievement, researchers realized they had no proof that the path of logic really worked that way. If you improved a person's self-image, did that translate into better behaviour? By contrast, did life's losers really have poor self-esteem?

"The idea of self-esteem is so ingrained in our culture, it's presumed to be a real thing inside the human condition," says Timothy Owens, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University. "But it got overblown on both ends – society's and the academy's."

In psychology, the idea has gained ground that there is no coherent self at all as people generally think of it, but rather a series of selves, like mirrors that reflect different aspects of an individual's connection to the world.

"The critical notion of the unified self whose levels can be fixed – that idea has ended," says Kenneth Gergen, a psychology professor at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

At the same time, the idea that high self-esteem is the exclusive province of those with admirable achievements has been rejected as simply wrong. Studies of gang members and criminals found their self-esteem – reinforced by peers or lawlessness – to be as high as that of any overachiever.

Another study crushes the idea that welfare women become pregnant to boost their self-esteem. Other studies found distortions in how self-esteem statistics have been gathered.

People, researchers conclude, are not the simple calculators of worth

Gauging Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is based on 10 questions. Respondents are asked to **strongly agree, agree, disagree** or **strongly disagree** with these items.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least the equal of others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Half the questions are phrased positively and half negatively. For the **positively** phrased questions – numbers **1, 3, 4, 7 and 10** – score as follows: Strongly agree, 4 points; agree, 3; disagree, 2; strongly disagree, 1. For **negative** questions – numbers **2, 5, 6, 8 and 9** – reverse the scoring so that strongly agree is worth 1 point, and so on. The maximum is 40 points, the minimum 10.

Most people in the general population score in the 30-to-40 range. A much smaller number are in the 20s. A score of 10 to 20 is often associated with clinical depression, according to Timothy Owens of Indiana University.

Sources: Conceiving the Self *by Morris Rosenberg (Basic Books, 1979); Timothy Owens.*

(*continued overleaf*)

that the Rosenberg scale might indicate. Some people achieve great things in life while gripped by feelings of worthlessness. Others set low standards and feel great.

In the end, says Albert Bandura, a psychology professor at Stanford University, in his 1997 book *Self Efficacy*: *The Exercise of Control*, "self-esteem affects neither personal goals nor performance."

Self-esteem became a cornerstone of the feminist critique of society beginning in the 1960s. But many feminist thinkers now say that trying to raise the self-esteem of girls and women may be self-defeating.

"Early feminism went in the direction of saying, 'Give every girl assertiveness training so she can get in there and compete', and that made some sense at the time", says Judith Jordan, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School and director of training at the Stone Center for women's studies at Wellesley College. "Now we say, 'Why are we accepting that as the norm, why not change the norm?'"

Judith Butler, a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley, adds: "If you take an 11-year-old girl who's got failing self-esteem because her friends have name clothes or fancy haircuts, the real issue is to get that 11-year-old girl to think critically about how femininity is defined in the culture."

One of the great paradoxes of self-esteem is that, in politics at least, conservatives are the people who came to oppose it. An idea that had, in earlier incarnations, been draped with all the trappings of bootstrapping individual self-improvement became, instead, associated with liberal values and political correctness, perhaps because of its surge to prominence in the unruly 1960s.

When education came under attack in the 1990s because of declining achievement, says Columbia's Prof. Levine, conservatives led the charge against "all the things that looked different, whether those things were elective curriculum or whole language, or self-esteem or multiculturalism – all became items to be attacked because they represented departures from the tried and true of years past."

The movement in education toward higher standards – visible everywhere from New York City public schools to efforts in Washington to create U.S. education standards – has shifted the emphasis toward achievement. The new view looks toward the world, rather than the self, and toward results rather than motivation.

Richard Elmore, a professor of education at Harvard who has been working with the New York City public school system, says self-esteem – originally posited as a way to help underprivileged students – mutated into a kind of crutch that explained and even reinforced low achievement and low performance.

"For most teachers, self-esteem is a theory they invent to cover the fact that they have low expectations for kids", he says. By contrast, the premise of an experimental program in a district that includes much of Manhattan's poor Lower East Side, is to train teachers to "accept no excuses" and to expect the same level of achievement required of any middle-class student.

Deanna Burney, a former principal who helped put the Lower East Side program together, says: "We've led a lot people astray about self-esteem – children feel good about themselves when they can read and write."

1 A major statistical theme of the article EM9810 reprinted overleaf and above is *measuring* – in this instance, a human characeristic (*i.e.*, a *response variate*) described as *self-esteem*. A measuring *instrument* is the *questionnaire* given at the lower right overleaf; what (at least formally) are the *other* three components of the measuring process under discussion?
- Which two components of this measuring process are likely to be the *same* entity in practice? Discuss briefly how this identity might affect the performance of the measuring process.

2 Discuss critically the questionnaire, given overleaf at the lower right, from the perspective of obtaining *truthful* responses.
- To which category of error would *un*truthful responses give rise?
  - Outline whether, under conceptual repetition, untruthful responses would be likely to lead to measuring *inaccuracy* or measuring *imprecision* or both.

3 Compare and contrast the statistical issues raised by measuring processes based on questioning humans to quantify level of:
- a psychological characteristic (such as self-esteem);
- knowledge of a subject area (such as science or geography – see also articles EM8906 and EM9019);
- a particular class of activities (such as leisure pursuits or sexual behaviour);
- consumer spending on:
  - durable household items;
  - alcohol and tobacco;
  - food;
- an unacceptable behaviour (such as illegal drug use, theft or cheating on tests).

4 *Causation* is another statistical issue in the article EM9810 reprinted overleaf and above; outline how this issue arises here.
- Which (two) paragraphs of the article best capture the causation issue? Explain briefly.

The article EM9810 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Figure 8.8e of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Figure 3.5e of the STAT 332 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #42, together with articles EM0303, EM0210 and EM0208.