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Improving self-esteem

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Abstract

I describe three ways in which self-esteem can be raised. The first way, using self-deception and self-enhancement, is deemed ineffective because it produces defensive, fragile self-esteem. The second way is from within, through self-contact and autonomy. However, there is no experimental evidence that this is sufficient to produce changes in self-esteem. The third way is to boost people's self-esteem by being accepting and approving of them, thus elevating their sociometer and their sense of relatedness. Research suggests that this is effective and that it can engender long-term changes in self-esteem, because outward reaffirmation produces the conditions that promote self-growth and self-determination.

Improving self-esteem

In raising the question “Can self-esteem change?”, we implicitly mean, “Can self-esteem be enhanced?” Although many theorists have argued that higher self-esteem is not the panacea that many in our society believe it to be (Baumeister et al., 2003; Dawes, 1994; Damon, 1995a,b; Hewitt, 1998; London, 1997), it is generally assumed that higher self-esteem is better: It is, among other things, associated with higher mental and physical health (Taylor et al., 1988, 2003) and stability in relationships (Murray et. al., 2001).

Because we know all the strategies and defenses that people use to maintain their self-esteem (see e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Crocker & Park, 2003), the most obvious answer to the question how to raise self-esteem, is to use these strategies. To name but a few, self-esteem may be raised if people learn to:

– atribute their failures and moral transgressions to external or unstable causes, and their successes to their own qualities;
– selectively remember successes by giving more attention to them, and focus on their positive qualities by spending more time thinking about them;
– compare themselves with others who are less well off when things are bad.

Although some of these strategies are actually recommended by positive psychologists (e.g., Seligman, 1998), I do not believe that they produce desirable outcomes at all. Granted, they might work in raising self-esteem, but this produces the kind of self-esteem that is associated with self-deception and with maladaptive responses when the self is threatened, such as aggression (Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996; Kernis et al., 1993), excessive self-enhancement (cf. Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001), and derogation of others (e.g., Aberson et al., 2000; Fein & Spencer, 1997).

The reason is simple: This type of self-esteem is not genuine, because it is based on distortion and does not concord with the facts of life. One of these facts is that people have flaws, make failures, and are rejected. A sense of self-esteem that denies these facts will always twist with reality. As a consequence, the self-concept continuously needs to be safeguarded; the individual can never truly relax and be at ease with the self.

Defensive vs secure self-esteem

The problem above is inherent to fragile, defensive high self-esteem. This self-esteem typically is based on reaffirmation by external sources. These sources may vary from person to person (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; cf. James, 1890): For some, self-esteem depends on being the best in school or work, for others on the love of their family, and for still others on how they look. In part because of these contingencies, self-esteem is unstable (Kernis & Waschull, 1995): Across multiple assessments, it shows more fluctuations than secure self-esteem.

Fragile self-esteem is not rooted in a fundamental sense of self-worth. This is also evidenced by results from implicit measures of self-esteem, such as the name-letter effect (Nuttin, 1985, 1987): People with high self-esteem tend to have a higher preference for the letters of their own name (Koole & Pelham, 2002). Because letter preferences can be assessed without participants' awareness of what is being assessed, this effect is assumed to reflect an unconscious, implicit evaluation of the self. A recent study by Bosson et al. (2003) confirms that participants with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem (a weak name-letter effect) are particularly likely to engage in defensive, ego-repairing processes.

Secure self-esteem, on the other hand, is not contingent because it is derived from within. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995, 2002), this type of self-esteem is associated with high self-determination, that is, (a) knowing one's inner self, and (b) behaving autonomously, in accordance with one's true needs – as opposed to external forces (e.g., the need to please others or achieve success). Secure self-esteem is grounded in unconditional positive regard for oneself (cf. Rogers, 1959, 1961). Depending on how their caregivers have responded to them, and the resultant attachment style they have developed (cf. Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1980), people differ in whether they have a firm sense of self-worth that is stable and noncontingent, and does not need to be deserved or protected.

The question, then, becomes: Can self-esteem be enhanced from within, independent from others' approval? Can it be enhanced without the ‘cheap tricks’ discussed earlier, by increasing self-determination instead? This would imply breaking the cycle of wanting to please others, being successful, or whatever it takes to maintain fragile self-esteem, because these efforts only make the individual more focused toward the outside world – hence making it increasingly less likely that self-contact and autonomy develops. In effect, I think that breaking this cycle and

restoring self-determination is exactly what is attempted in many psycho-therapeutic interventions.

Unfortunately, there is not much experimental evidence that promoting self-determination has the effect of raising self-esteem. In the extant literature, self-determination and 'true' self-esteem are regarded as individual differences variables. As a consequence of early childhood experiences, people have acquired a particular position on the 'true' self-esteem continuum, and they have to do with that. Indeed, the self-determination literature (Deci & Ryan, 2002) is based largely on correlational research. These correlations do show that self-determination is negatively related to self-esteem instability, contingency, and positively to self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-concept clarity (in our own data, Vonk et al., 2004, these correlations are all in the .20–.25 range). However, as we have argued elsewhere in this volume (Brandt & Vonk, 2004), in self-report data all of these correlations may be explained by one common underlying factor, which is the self-theory "I'm doing fine".

Thus, empirically the exact causal paths in these relations are unknown, and theoretically, self-determination is seen as rooted in early childhood. Consequently, little is known about interventions that could enhance self-determination and genuine self-esteem among adults.

Self-esteem as a sociometer: The role of others

In self-determination theory, self-esteem can be gained by increasing self-contact and autonomy in choices, rather than depending on reaffirmation by others. This view stands in sharp contrast with sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Based on people's fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), sociometer theory poses that self-esteem is an evolutionarily adaptive instrument that tells people how they are doing as a member of their group, and whether others are accepting them. This view implies that 'true' self-esteem, which does not depend on any social contingencies, such as described by Deci and Ryan (1995) and Kernis (2003), is an illusion. Imagine for one moment a person who does not accomplish anything, is not liked by others, contributes nothing to the group or to society in general, yet retains a solid sense of self-esteem. From this perspective, it may be argued that being entirely non-responsive to others' appraisals is a reflection of maladjustment (Leary, 1999). People's self-worth is sensitive to their social environment, and very functionally so.

Thus, being accepted by others is a major contingency for everyone. In line with this view, Leary and his colleagues have demonstrated that social rejection or disapproval produces sharp declines in participants' self-esteem; these effects occurred regardless of their initial self-esteem level (Leary et al., 1998) and regardless of whether they themselves acknowledged that their self-esteem depended on others (Leary et al., 2003). Similarly, social approval and acceptance enhanced self-esteem (Leary et al., 2003). These results suggest that self-esteem can indeed be raised, simply by being accepting and giving positive regard. However, we do not know whether others' appraisals can have long-term effects. It is conceivable that the beneficial effects of praise and acceptance subside as soon as the positive feedback ends (e.g., a day after the experiment or, in everyday life, when a Rogerian psycho-therapy ends, or when a friendship or relationship changes).

Note that self-determination theory acknowledges the important role of others as well; self-esteem is not seen as emerging in a social vacuum. Acceptance and positive regard by others are important because they fulfill people's need for relatedness. As long as the acceptance is unconditional, people will not be bothered with the issue of how to please others in order to be liked, and they can maintain their self-contact and autonomy. According to sociometer theory, however, self-esteem may drop when, for whatever reason, the positive feedback declines. This may happen when the feedback is conditional, but also when the provider of the feedback disappears off the stage. Note that, eventually, all external, social sources of self-esteem are contingent to some extent, because even a parent or spouse who provides unconditional positive regard may disappear from one's life at some point. The development of a sense of self-esteem that is sustained in such circumstances requires at least some inner, autonomous basis.

Changing self-esteem: The inward versus outward route

In a recent experiment (Vonk et al., 2004), we attempted to enhance self-esteem by means of two distinct interventions; one 'inward', based on autonomy and self-contact, and one 'outward', based on social reaffirmation. We also examined the long-term effects of these interventions. Participants (N = 3408 completed) filled out questionnaires at home via internet on twelve occasions (T1 through T12), throughout a period of eight months. (At present, the study is still continuing and we are up to T14, but those data have not yet been analyzed.)

In the second month of the study (after T3), three experimental groups were created. All three groups kept filling out questionnaires (e.g., on self-esteem, coping, authenticity, self-growth, happiness) every two weeks. The control group did nothing in addition to this. Participants in the 'inward' experimental group were asked to start keeping a diary at least twice a week during six weeks (i.e., up to T6). They were given specific directions that were designed to enhance their self-contact and autonomy. For instance, they were encouraged to regard the writing as "talking to yourself" about anything that was on their minds, and not to show their writings to anyone at all. They were also told that they were doing the writing for themselves; that it was part of the study, but that it was OK to skip it if for whatever reason it was inconvenient or they did not feel like it, in which case they could do it later. (Self-report measures indicate that the large majority of participants was highly motivated and did write at least twice a week.)

In the 'outward' experimental group, participants were also invited to start keeping a diary, but these participants were instructed to send in their diary by e-mail twice a week. Within one or two days after sending it, these participants always received a personal comment on their diary from a trained psychologist. So, within the six-weeks period, they sent in their diary and received a comment twelve times. To avoid that a personal relationship with the psychologist would develop, there was a team of five psychologists who wrote their comments anonymously and alternated across participants. Participants were told that the comments were not intended to help them solve problems, but simply to show them that we were reading their diaries and to encourage them to keep writing. The comments were between 100 and 250 words. They were entirely personalized, but they were always supportive and approving of what the participant was doing or the way in which s/he reflected upon it. We assumed that, in this condition, participants' attention would be directed outwardly; during writing they would not be talking to themselves, but to their image of the psychologist who liked and appreciated them.

Results showed that after two weeks of diary writing (i.e., at T4), self-esteem of these participants had already increased. This increase progressed further at T5 and T6. For participants in the 'inward' condition, on the other hand, increases in self-esteem and self-determination were similar to those in the control group. Thus, writing a private diary and, thereby, turning attention inward, did not have any effects over and above the small effects of the self-reflection that were induced merely by responding to the questionnaires every two weeks.

Contrary to what we expected, the effects of the positive feedback lasted some time beyond the week in which the feedback was terminated. At T7 (2 weeks after termination), there was no decrease in self-esteem whatsoever. Remarkably, in a follow-up study conducted more than four months after the diary intervention, participants in the 'outward' group were still significantly higher on implicit self-esteem (i.e., the name-letter effect) than the other two groups.

Although it is possible that our 'inward' manipulation by means of the diary method was not effective, these results do suggest that changes in self-esteem can quite effectively be induced by means of approval and acceptance by others. Interestingly, another effect of the positive feedback was that contingent self-esteem (assessed at T10) decreased and that self-determination (assessed at T6) increased (especially choice/autonomy), as compared with the other two groups. Thus, whereas these participants in fact demonstrated the crucial influence of others on self-esteem, they were utterly unaware of this influence and started to see themselves as more autonomous and less dependent upon others' approval.

This result corroborates Cooley's comment, that we live "in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up" (1902, p. 208). In effect, what we did for the participants in the 'outward' group is to create a more solid ground for them. Paradoxically, it appears that, the more solid the ground – i.e. , the more others are accepting and approving – , the more people become unaware of what they are walking on, and the higher is their sense of autonomy. When the road gets bumpy, on the other hand – when people cannot rely on others' reaffirmation – they become aware of it. This is when self-esteem becomes contingent and 'shaky', and when people may enter the cycle of looking to receive reaffirmation from others, thereby losing self-contact and autonomy.

Outward turning inward

The results from our study converge with those of longitudinal studies which refute the idea that self-esteem is developed in childhood and remains stable across the life span. Dramatic changes in self-esteem do occur in adulthood, but they are typically associated with major life transitions, such as marriage, parenthood, job loss or promotion, or entering junior high school, high school, or college (Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the NAMHC, 1996). Presumably, these changes are connected to changes in support and acceptance by one's peer group or spouse, or changes in how one's performance is evaluated. Eventually, this may

produce changes in self-esteem that persist until the individual's life changes again.

It is noteworthy, however, that in our study some of the changes were maintained until long after the intervention, and occurred on implicit measures (although stability of self-esteem was not affected by the intervention). This suggests that the change was far more than 'skin deep', and that the reaffirmation from others induced an increase in genuine self-esteem. In my view, that is exactly what happened: When people feel accepted and appreciated – in sociometer theory, when their sociometer is lifted; in self-determination theory, when their need for relatedness is satisfied – , they start to feel safe and relaxed. The positive embedding by others is like a comfortable cushion that protects them, so they feel at ease and can drop their defenses. These are precisely the conditions that promote openness, self-growth, self-contact, and other 'sixtiesh' variables, thus producing changes from within (cf. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Goldenberg, 2003, who note that people first need to feel safe in order for growth and self-expansion motives to arise). Indeed, our results also show that participants who received positive feedback rated higher on self-growth and authenticity (at T5, i.e., during the intervention period).

In sum, I suggest that positive regard by others, even if it is only temporary, is the 'entrance' to true self-esteem changes: When people are accepted and reaffirmed by others, they feel that they are on solid ground. Because they are utterly unaware of how shaky the ground is, and how dependent their self boost is upon others, they start to feel relaxed and autonomous. They become more open and less defensive, and their self-determination, self-growth, and other intrinsic drives are enhanced. As a consequence, their self-esteem is reinforced from within. Because of this, the change may last until long after the social approval, and it may even be permanent if there are no major changes in the individual's life. But, unfortunately, as the social environment can instigate increases in true self-esteem, it can instigate decreases just as well.

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