

Is the Allure of Self-Esteem a Mirage After All?

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Recently, Swann, Chang-Schneider, and McClarty (February–March 2007) argued that people's self-views, and their global self-esteem in particular, yield a suite of behavioral effects that are beneficial to the individual and to society at large. The Swann et al. article is the latest link in a debate on the causal utility of self-esteem. Specifically, the article is a reply to a report published by the American Psychological Society Task Force on Self-Esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). As members of that task force, we wish to express our broad agreement with Swann et al. At the same time, we need to clarify pockets of disagreement.

The analysis presented by Swann et al. (2007) is careful and thorough. We agree that self-esteem should not be taken as the sole mental representation of a person's self-concept. Global affective self-esteem ignores domain-specific variation and cognitive self-schemata that often turn out to be relevant for self-regulation and behavior. Swann's own research program on self-verification is a good example. We disagree, however, with Swann et al.'s claim that we "have violated the specificity matching principle by focusing on the capacity of global measures of self-esteem to predict specific outcomes" (p. 87). We specifically drew attention to the specificity matching principle, stating that "it is difficult to detect a correspondence between a global attitude and specific behaviors" (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 6). We also recognized the inverse implication, namely that "the difficulties of relating global self-esteem to specific behaviors can be overcome, in part, by aggregating behaviors into bundles" (p. 6). Our review was focused on the putative effects of global affective self-esteem in specific behavioral domains because the evaluation of such effects was the charge set before the Task Force on Self-Esteem. The nature of this charge is understandable in the historical context of the self-esteem movement, as Swann et al. are aware.

As a psychometric principle, specificity matching is too important to be passed over lightly. As Swann et al. (2007) noted, this principle was used in the 1970s to save the then-moribund trait psychology and attitude research. Psychometric theory ensures that correlations between predictor and criterion variables increase inasmuch as the two classes of variables are equally homogeneous. Significantly, the benefits of specificity matching are statistical rather than substantive. To rescue trait and attitude theories, it was necessary to adduce extrastatistical evidence. One type of such evidence is implicational relations. The trait of extraversion implies that people who have it are more likely than introverts to sing at a party. The attitude of authoritarianism implies that people who have it are more likely than others to carry out legitimate commands.

Looking for the behavioral implications of self-esteem, we find a yawning gap. People with high self-esteem are happier, less depressed, and more self-satisfied than others, but what are they motivated to do other than try to prolong this pleasant state? Rosenberg's (1965) 10 classic items give little guidance. Consider item number 2, for example, which states, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." What are these qualities, and what can I do to maintain or strengthen them? The lack of implicational relations suggests that self-esteem is of little self-regulatory use. As Swann et al. (2007) noted, specific cognitive-motivational structures (e.g., self-efficacy) do a better job.

The self-esteem movement and many academic investigators have taken a cavalier attitude toward the choice of behavioral criteria. In hindsight, it seems that theory and research in this field have been beholden to a simple version of Plato's idea that ultimately, good things will go together. Hence, it was thought that high self-esteem should somehow be related to and conducive to *any* kind of behavior regarded as desirable by society. Our review suggested that what individuals want is not necessarily what society values. Dominating others or getting away with risky behavior can be highly attractive prospects to individuals. In contrast, most social values stress collective welfare, peace, kindness, and honesty. Why would, one wonders, high personal self-esteem be designed to foster self-effacement for the sake of the group? Indeed, our review showed that high self-esteem is closely associated with self-enhancement, a bias that has both beneficial and detrimental consequences. Jean Twenge, Keith Campbell, and their colleagues have recently found that narciss-

ism, the dark side of high self-esteem, has risen dramatically over the last 25 years (Associated Press, 2007).

The motive of self-enhancement and the dependency of self-esteem on the approval of others who are also motivated to self-enhance virtually ensure that not everyone will get the esteem they desire. Research inspired by sociometer theory has shown that self-esteem is closely attuned to social acceptance (Leary, 2004). Consider a pair of individuals, each of whom has a choice between approving of the other and withholding approval. The self-enhancement motive implies a preference ranking that constitutes a Prisoner's Dilemma. John would like it best if Paul approved of him, while he, John, withheld approval from Paul. The next best outcome would be mutual approval. Mutual withholding would still be less desirable, and unilateral approval of Paul would be the worst for John. As approval is the socially valued response and withholding is the selfish response, the correlation between preference (i.e., resulting self-esteem) and desirability ranking (give vs. withhold approval) is $-.45$.

Matters improve inasmuch as people find a way to coordinate their behaviors by projecting their own choices strategically onto one another or by playing the approval game repeatedly (Krueger, 2007). Still, it is unrealistic to expect perfect coordination where everyone pats everyone else on the back. Members of human groups are notorious for negotiating status, power, and prestige, often by creatively deceitful means. In a provocative urban ethnography, Anderson (1994) found self-esteem to be a scarce and contested resource, which individuals could gain at the expense of others. The goal of raising self-esteem across the board is seductive because it is not a zero-sum game. Yet because individuals are, in part, the source of the self-esteem of others, not everyone can attain the highest score.

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Yes, Cavalier Attitudes Can Have Pernicious Consequences

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In their thoughtful commentary on our article (Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, February–March 2007), Krueger, Vohs, and Baumeister (2008, this issue) brought up many points with which we agree. Nevertheless, as they noted these points of agreement, we focus instead on several points of continued disagreement. In addition, we comment on a few new twists that they have added to their argument.

Krueger et al. (2008) began by disputing our claim that they “have violated the specificity matching principle by focusing on the capacity of global measures of self-esteem to predict specific outcomes” (Swann et al., 2007, p. 87). They protested that they specifically drew attention to the specificity matching principle, reminding the reader that in their original article (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003) they indicated that “it is difficult to detect a correspondence between a global attitude and specific behaviors” (p. 6).

It is true that Baumeister et al. (2003) acknowledged the specificity matching principle in their original article. Nevertheless, as Krueger et al. (2008) themselves allowed, after acknowledging the principle, Baumeister et al. focused their review on the relative incapacity of measures of global self-esteem to predict specific outcomes, which is to say they violated the principle repeatedly. If Baumeister et al. had faithfully followed the implications of

the specificity matching principle, they would have likely reached the same conclusion we reached, which is that most of the research conducted on self-esteem offers little insight into the capacity of self-knowledge to predict important outcomes because it violates the specificity matching principle. Furthermore, they also would have acknowledged (as we did) that when researchers have conformed to the specificity matching principle, they have discovered that the relationship between self-views and outcome variables improves considerably. For example, we cited evidence that specific academic self-concepts offered better predictions of academic ability than did global self-esteem (Hansford & Hattie, 1982).

Krueger et al. (2008) introduced a novel argument into their comment, suggesting that the alleged predictive impotence of self-esteem stems from a tendency for responses to measures of self-esteem to have no motivational implications. To make their point, they singled out an item from the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale: “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.”

We were startled by Krueger et al.'s (2008) attempt to discredit one of psychology's most venerable constructs by questioning the properties of this single item of a single self-esteem scale. But even if the viability of the self-esteem construct could be imagined to rest on the validity of a single item, the research literature suggests that believing that one has lots of good qualities does indeed have motivational implications. Indeed, Baumeister himself (McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984) has published evidence that people with high self-esteem persist longer in the wake of failure than do people with low self-esteem.

Also, there is growing evidence that people who feel that they lack good qualities will be surprised and upset by positive treatment and that such reactions guide subsequent behavior. In fact, in our article we cited evidence that people with positive self-views withdraw from their marriage partners (either psychologically or through divorce/separation) insofar as their partners perceive them negatively and that people with negative self-views withdraw from their marriage partners insofar as their partners perceive them positively (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Moreover, in a recent series of four studies, Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, and Bartel (2007) discovered that self-esteem moderated people's reactions to “procedural justice” (how fairly one is treated by one's organization). For people

with high self-esteem, being treated more fairly by their work organization increased emotional and behavioral commitment to the organization, but people with low self-esteem showed no such preference for fair treatment. In short, there is growing evidence that believing that one has good qualities and is worthwhile has profound motivational implications, influencing behaviors ranging from task persistence and relationship longevity to the frequency with which people show up for work.

Krueger et al. (2008) also reinforced one of their key assertions in their original article (Baumeister et al., 2003), which was that self-esteem and narcissism are closely allied. From their vantage point, self-esteem is, by association, guilty of all the negative qualities that have been empirically linked to narcissism. This association, in turn, supposedly explains why success in maintaining high self-esteem is a nasty, competitive process in which one person's success requires another person's failure. Although it is true that measures of self-esteem and narcissism are related, the relation is modest. More important, narcissism is a multifaceted construct, and only the socially benign components of narcissism (e.g., vanity, authority) covary with self-esteem; the socially noxious aspects of self-esteem (e.g., entitlement, aggressiveness) are largely independent of self-esteem (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Given this, it is not surprising that just as narcissism predicts negative behaviors such as defensiveness, self-esteem predicts a wide array of happy, prosocial outcomes; see p. 87 of Swann et al. (2007) for citations to six papers that report evidence that supports this conclusion. We urge readers to examine these articles and reach their own judgment about the viability of Krueger et al.'s continued insistence that conflating self-esteem and narcissism represents a scientific advance.

Krueger et al. (2008) strove to buttress their conviction that self-esteem has deleterious consequences by pointing to a press release reporting the findings of Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell (Associated Press, 2007). The press release contended that these researchers found that narcissism has increased in recent years among young Americans. The researchers did not explain precisely why narcissism appears to have increased but instead implied that it is linked to self-enhancement, which is, in turn, related to high self-esteem. The wisdom of using data summarized in a press release to buttress a scientific argument aside, we find ourselves persuaded by a recent study that challenges the premise of this press release. On the basis of a careful