

## 6. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IV

### 6.1 Measurement

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Self-esteem is typically assessed using a self-report inventory yielding a score on a continuous scale from low to high self-esteem.

Among the most widely used instruments, the Rosenberg (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale scores each item on a four-point response system that requires participants to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about themselves. An alternative measure, The Coopersmith Inventory uses a 50-question battery over a variety of topics and asks subjects whether they rate someone as similar or dissimilar to themselves.

If a subject's answers demonstrate solid self-regard, the scale regards them as well adjusted. If those answers reveal some inner shame, it considers them to be prone to social deviance.

More recently, implicit measures of self-esteem have begun to be used. These rely on indirect measures of cognitive processing thought to be linked to implicit self-esteem, including the Name Letter Task. Such indirect measures are designed to reduce awareness of, or control of, the process of assessment. When used to assess implicit self-esteem, they feature stimuli designed to represent the self, such as personal pronouns (e.g., "I") or characters in one's name.

### Importance

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Abraham Maslow states that psychological health is not possible unless the essential core of the person is fundamentally accepted, loved and respected by others and by her or his self. Self-esteem allows people to face life with more confidence, benevolence and optimism, and thus easily reach their goals and self-actualize. It allows a person to be more ambitious, but not with respect to possessions or success, but with respect to what they can experience emotionally, creatively and spiritually.

To develop self-esteem is to increase the capacity to be happy; self-esteem may make people convinced they deserve happiness. Understanding this is fundamental, and universally beneficial, since the development of positive self-esteem increases the capacity to treat other people with respect, benevolence and goodwill, thus favoring rich interpersonal relationships and avoiding destructive ones. For Erich Fromm, love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love toward themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. Self-esteem allows creativity at the workplace, and is a specially critical condition for teaching professions.

José-Vicente Bonet claims that the importance of self-esteem is obvious as a lack of self-esteem is, he says, not a loss of esteem from others, but self-rejection. Bonet claims that this corresponds to Major depressive disorder. Freud also claimed that the depressive has suffered "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale....He has lost his self-respect".

The Yogyakarta Principles, a document on international human rights law addresses the discriminatory attitude toward LGBT peoples that makes their self-esteem low to be subject to human rights violation including human trafficking and World Health Organization recommends in "Preventing Suicide" published in 2000 that strengthening students' self-esteem is important to protect children and adolescents against mental distress and despondency, enabling them to cope adequately with difficult and stressful life situations. How this might be done, and whether it would be effective is unclear.

Other than increased happiness, higher self-esteem is also known to be correlated with a better ability to cope with stress and a higher likelihood that the individual takes on difficult tasks relative to those with low self-esteem.

## **5.2 Correlates**

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s many Americans assumed as a matter of course that students' self-esteem acted as a critical factor in the grades that they earn in school, in their relationships with their peers, and in their later success in life. Under this assumption, some American groups created programs which aimed to increase the self-esteem of students. Until the 1990s little peer-reviewed and controlled research took place on this topic.

Peer-reviewed research undertaken since then has not validated previous assumptions. Recent research indicates that inflating students' self-esteem in and of itself has no positive effect on grades. One study has shown that inflating self-esteem by itself can actually decrease grades. The relationship involving self-esteem and academic results does not signify that high self-esteem contributes to high academic results. It simply means that high self-esteem may be accomplished due to high academic performance due to the other variables of social interactions and life events affecting this performance.

"Attempts by pro-esteem advocates to encourage self-pride in students solely by reason of their uniqueness as human beings will fail if feelings of well-being are not accompanied by well-doing. It is only when students engage in personally meaningful endeavors for which they can be justifiably proud that self-confidence grows, and it is this growing self-assurance that in turn triggers further achievement."

High self-esteem correlates highly with self-reported happiness; whether this is a causal relationship has not been established. The relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction is stronger in individualistic cultures.

Additionally, self-esteem has been found to be related to forgiveness in close relationships, in that people with high self-esteem will be more forgiving than people with low self-esteem.

People with high self-esteem are more likely to minimize the consequences of risky behavior rationalizing risky behavior convincing them that the behavior will not cause harm to themselves or others. This may contribute to behaviors like drinking, taking drugs and engaging in early sexual intercourse as well as other risk taking behaviors.

### **5.3 Criticism and controversy**

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The American psychologist Albert Ellis criticized on numerous occasions the concept of self-esteem as essentially self-defeating and ultimately destructive. Although acknowledging the human propensity and tendency to ego rating as innate, he has critiqued the philosophy of self-esteem as unrealistic, illogical and self- and socially destructive – often doing more harm than good. Questioning the foundations and usefulness of generalized ego strength, he has claimed that self-esteem is based on arbitrary definitional premises, and over-generalized, perfectionistic and grandiose thinking. Acknowledging that rating and valuing behaviors and characteristics is functional and even necessary, he sees rating and valuing human beings' totality and total selves as irrational and unethical. The healthier alternative to self-esteem according to him is unconditional self-acceptance and unconditional other-acceptance. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is a psychotherapy based on this approach.

Psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and journalist John Tierney argue that the benefits of self-esteem can be significantly counter-productive, and that parental guidance towards self-esteem may thwart actual practices of self-control.

"There seem to be only two clearly demonstrated benefits of high self-esteem....First, it increases initiative, probably because it lends confidence. People with high self-esteem are more willing to act on their beliefs, to stand up for what they believe in, to approach others, to risk new undertakings. (This unfortunately includes being extra willing to do stupid or destructive things, even when everyone else advises against them.)...It can also lead people to ignore sensible advice as they stubbornly keep wasting time and money on hopeless causes"

## **False stereotypes**

For a person with low self-esteem any positive stimulus or incentive will make him feel comfortable, or, at most, better with respect to himself/herself for just some time. Therefore, possessions, sex, success, or physical appearance, by themselves, will produce comfort, or a false and ephemeral development of self-esteem, but they will not really strengthen confidence and respect to oneself.

## **As narcissism**

Life satisfaction, happiness, healthy behavioral practices, perceived efficacy, and academic success and adjustment have been associated with having high levels of self-esteem (Harter, 1987; Huebner, 1991; Lipschitz-Elhawi & Itzhaky, 2005; Rumberger 1995; Swenson & Prelow, 2005; Yarcheski & Mahon, 1989). However, a common mistake is to think that loving oneself is necessarily equivalent to narcissism, as opposed for example to what Erik Erikson speaks of as "a post-narcissistic love of the ego". A person with a healthy self-esteem accepts and loves himself/herself unconditionally, acknowledging both virtues and faults in the self, and yet, in spite of everything, is able to continue to love her/himself.

In Narcissists, by contrast, an "innate uncertainty about their own worth gives rise to...a self-protective, but often totally spurious, aura of grandiosity"—producing the class "of narcissists, or people with very high, but insecure, self-esteem... fluctuating with each new episode of social praise or rejection."

Narcissism can thus be seen as a symptom of fundamentally low self-esteem, that is, lack of love towards oneself, but often accompanied by "an immense increase in self-esteem" based on "the defense mechanism of denial by overcompensation." "idealized love of self...rejected the part of him" that he denigrates – "this destructive little child" within. Instead, the narcissist emphasizes his virtues in the presence of others, just to try to convince himself that he is a valuable person and to try to stop feeling ashamed for his faults; unfortunately such "people with unrealistically inflated self-views, which may be especially unstable and highly vulnerable to negative information,...tend to have poor social skills."

## **5.4 History**

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The construct of self-esteem (or self-concept) dates back to William James, in the late 19th century. In his work *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James studied the splitting of our "global self" into "knower self" and "known self."

According to James, from this splitting, which we all are more or less aware of, self-esteem is born.

In the 20th century, the initial influence of Behaviorism minimized introspective study of mental processes, emotions and feelings, which was replaced by objective study through experiments on behaviors observed in relation with environment. Behaviorism placed the human being as an animal subject to reinforcements, and suggested placing psychology as an experimental science, similar to chemistry or biology. As a consequence, clinical trials on self-esteem were overlooked, since behaviorists considered the idea less liable to rigorous measure and hypothesis.

In the mid-20th century, Phenomenology and humanistic psychotherapy made self-esteem gain prominence again, and it took a central role in personal self-actualization and in the treatment of psychic disorders. Psychologists started to consider personal satisfaction and psychotherapy, and new elements were introduced, which helped to understand the reasons why people tend to feel less worthy, discouraged and unable to understand challenges by themselves.

Carl Rogers (1902–1987), the greatest exponent of humanistic psychology, exposed his theory about unconditional acceptance and self-acceptance as the best way to improve self-esteem. Robert B. Burns regards self-esteem as a collection of an individual's attitudes toward himself. The human being perceives itself at a sensory level; thinks about itself and about its behavior, and evaluates both its behavior and itself. Consequently, humans feel emotions related to themselves.

These emotions prompt behavioral tendencies aimed at oneself, at one's behavior, and at the features of one's body and character. These tendencies effect the attitudes which, globally, we call self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem, for Burns, is the evaluative perception of oneself. In his own words, an "individual's behavior is the result of his environment's particular interpretation, whose focus is himself".

The core self-evaluations approach includes self-esteem as one of four dimensions that comprise one's fundamental appraisal of oneself, along with locus of control, neuroticism, and self-efficacy. The concept of core self-evaluations as first examined by Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997), has since proven to have the ability to predict several work outcomes, specifically, job satisfaction and job performance. Self-esteem may, in fact, be one of the most essential core self-evaluation dimensions because it is the overall value one feels about oneself as a person.

The idea of the importance of self-esteem—especially in education—has gained endorsement from some government and non-government groups, such that one can speak of a self-esteem movement.