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Moral Value, Agency, and the Measurement of Self-Esteem

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When we ask others how much they value themselves, we are hoping to share a gaze in their private mental mirrors—the contents and color of their self-consciousness. Inferences about a person's self-esteem are therefore inferences about an intentional stance, or inner experience, that is expressed to us in the form of publicly observable behavior. To the canny observer, one's demeanor, preferences, decisions, written and spoken words, and other actions all betray a particular valuation of the self, although the connection is never certain. Measurement, or formal and theoretically grounded observation of self-esteem is no less inferential and no less contestable. Seen in this light, all measurement of self-esteem is *implicit*: The hidden subjectivity of another person is merely indicated or implied in their voluntary and involuntary behavior, be it utterances, scale ratings, response times, skin conductance, or cerebral blood flow. This recognition contrasts with the current penchant for describing as "implicit" only those measures that do not involve the person's awareness of the relation of the behavior to the attitude being measured (see Fazio & Olson, 2003).

The most direct indicators of self-esteem are avowals about oneself. The predicates that are linked to the symbolic representation of self in speech and writing, if sincere, give others a nuanced understanding of how we feel about ourselves. For example, when grunge musician Kurt Cobain described himself as a "miserable, self-destructive, death rocker" in his suicide note of 1994, he gave unequivocal voice to the self-loathing that both fueled his career and ensured its brevity. Heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali's announcement to the world in 1962 of "I am the greatest!" left it equally clear how he felt about himself.

Measurement requires standardization, which is most easily accomplished in relation to avowals by relying on fixed questions rather than spontaneous statements. This has been the primary approach to self-esteem testing since the publication 58 years ago of the first self-esteem instrument (Raimy, 1948). Direct-question self-esteem measures require respondents to indicate the extent to which they agree with first- or second-person statements reflecting positive and negative valuative stances toward the self. Such statements may capture an overall stance (e.g., *I feel good about myself; You are unworthy*) or a more specific belief, attitude, or tendency assumed to be strongly associated with the overall stance (e.g., *You feel good about your appearance; I am an unworthy father; I really hate myself when I make mistakes at work*). Graded or categorical agreement is averaged across statements in a weighted or unweighted manner to form a single score or several domain-specific subscores (often hierarchically related). These scores are used as quantitative indices of self-esteem. Although scores created in this way are rarely if ever confirmed as anything more than ordinal in metric meaning, they are treated as interval scales for purposes of statistical analysis. Popular examples include Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (SES), Coopersmith's (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory, and Janis and Field's (1959) Feelings of Inadequacy Scale. Of these, the SES has been the most widely used in psychology and it continues to be the instrument preferred by most self-esteem researchers. The factor structure of the SES, however, alerts us that there are in fact two distinct forms of personal value that we all experience. These two forms are best understood as the fundamental axes or dimensions of self-esteem.

TWO-DIMENSIONAL SELF-ESTEEM

Morris Rosenberg designed the 10-item SES as a unidimensional Guttman scale with "contrived" or combined responses yielding a final 7-point scale. This economy fit with his view of the individual's "global self-esteem" as "a generally favorable or unfavorable, positive or negative, pro or con feeling toward himself as a whole" (1979, p. 21). However, when researchers switched to using the SES items with standard 5- or 7-point Likert rating scales and simply summing the 10 ratings, it became evident that at least two factors commingled within the ostensibly unidimensional measure. A review of these structural analyses, and their mixed results and interpretations, is beyond the scope of this brief chapter (see Tafarodi & Milne, 2002, for a detailed discussion). Our own interpretation of the findings, one supported by confirmatory factor analyses and tests of divergent predictive validity (e.g., Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995), is that SES items such as *I take a positive attitude toward myself* reflect a different type of valuation than do items such as *I am able to do things as well as most other people*. The first is founded on consideration of one's own moral significance, the second on the experience of personal power or efficacy. Both types of valuation are integral to global self-esteem, which consists of nothing more or less than their composite.

The two-dimensional approach to understanding and measuring self-esteem is premised on the duality of persons as social objects and agents. As social objects, we hold moral significance to ourselves and others; as agents, we exert influence upon the world according to our plans, and sometimes in spite of them. Moral consideration pertains to character or disposition and trades on discriminations of good and bad, credit and blame, virtue and vice, attraction and repulsion. When each of us look into the mirror, we see reflected back a *person*, not a thing. Only

persons can serve as proper moral objects. However much we may like or dislike a cat, dog, or horse, and feel satisfied or dissatisfied with it, we cannot exalt or condemn it in the way we do ourselves and others. In those instances where we appear to do so, we are merely engaging in anthropomorphic projection.

The ability to apprehend ourselves as moral objects follows from the internalization of the perspective of the other, a developmental transition that splits our consciousness and endows us with the reflexive awareness that is the signal feature of the human mind. This cognitive achievement provides the basis for pride and shame, righteousness and guilt, self-satisfaction and self-criticism—all these being expressions of a fully-fledged moral orientation toward oneself. To value ourselves means to take a moral stance toward ourselves and to see our attributes and actions as worthy or unworthy of the standards and ideals that we individually hold as good, right, and beautiful. What we are describing here is a thoroughly socialized conception of personal value. There is, however, more to self-esteem than that. We are more than mental microcosms of our societies. The difference lies in our agency, our capacity for willed action and the biologically-rooted satisfaction that derives from it.

When we act upon the world with purpose, we do so out of desire. The ends of our desires are our goals, mundane and grandiose. At times, actions are their own goals, as is true for the child who idly flings stones into the sea with no target or particular consequence in mind. In such cases, the normal execution of the action carries its own reward—it is inherently gratifying. More typically, however, it is fulfillment of the intended goal that satisfies the desire and provides us with pleasure. Whether our intention was to scale Mount Everest, conquer the armies of a continent, or simply cross the street or stay awake at the wheel, the recognition that we did so is immediately satisfying. Of course, the pleasure may be too subtle and habitual to capture our attention in the case of especially mundane goals. The unmistakable joy of the youngster after her first bicycle ride without training wheels is as unmistakably absent in the 30-year-old bicycle courier who crisscrosses the city each day. This does not mean, however, that basic riding ability plays no role in sustaining the courier's normal sense of efficacy and competence. Take away these unremarkable and uncelebrated skills—through illness, accident, or old age—and the connection becomes painfully clear. How, then, does the subjective experience of agency relate to self-esteem?

Successful action or efficacy leaves a double imprint on self-consciousness. First, the primitive, visceral satisfaction of affecting the world according to one's intentions imbues our situational self-awareness with a positive tone that can be described variously as feeling strong, healthy, robust, effective, powerful, capable, and competent. The result is an immediate and relatively nonreflective inflation of the self. This initial inflation requires only a casual level of self-awareness, not a deeper consideration of the symbolic meaning of the action for one's identity. Upon further reflection, however, the moral significance of the action is taken into account, leaving a second, distinct imprint on self-consciousness in terms of the "goodness" or "badness" of the action and, by extension, the goodness or badness of oneself. This secondary elaboration, the moralization of the action, explains how the outcomes of our efforts come to directly influence that part of personal value that is rooted in consideration of our character and social significance.

The initial imprint, involving the reflexive gratification of what White (1959) called "effectance" and its diffusion into self-awareness, qualifies as a separate source and form of self-esteem. This is the valuative representation of one's own agency, which exists alongside the representation of one's own moral quality. Elsewhere, one of us has referred to the first as *self-competence* and the second as *self-liking*. Together, they constitute what it typically understood as global or general self-esteem. Each dimension, considered as a personality trait, represents the synthetic abstraction of a lifetime of experience and action. In this sense, self-competence and self-liking are the twin valuative themes in our ongoing personal narrative. They reflect how strong and able we believe we are and where we think we stand in relation to the good. Clearly, the two themes are highly interdependent and therefore highly correlated. Competence easily takes on moral significance and accepting oneself as a good and worthy person has profound consequences for one's engagement with the world and the development of abilities and skills. Even so, it is important to recognize and appreciate the essential duality of self-esteem. There are many instances of dissociation between the efficacy and moral significance of an act or a person. For example, the thrill of power that comes from successful wrongdoing is often followed by crushing regret and guilt, just as the inability to overcome a moral scruple when it is adaptive to do so may leave one feeling weak and inept yet pure of character. Similarly, we all know those who are conspicuous for their ability to adore themselves in spite of obvious and admitted incompetence, and those who despise themselves in spite of marvelous talents and achievements (Tafarodi, 1998; Tafarodi, Tam, & Milne, 2001).

MEASURING SELF-COMPETENCE AND SELF-LIKING

If we are to take seriously the above phenomenal analysis of personal value, we need to ensure that our instruments capture the duality of what we are aiming to measure. It is somewhat ironic that the most popular measure of global self-esteem, Rosenberg's SES, appears to betray the intentions of its author by pointing to this very duality. This highlights the need to formally and explicitly distinguish between self-competence and self-liking in our measures. The separation will allow us to examine the unique and interactive associations of the two dimensions with variables of interest. This strategy will lead to more refined models of how self-esteem emerges and develops as an aspect of self-consciousness and how it influences our behavior. A decade ago, one of us and Bill Swann published the 20-item Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) as an alternative to unidimensional measures such as the SES. Now available as a revised, 16-item version with improved psychometric properties (SLCS-R; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), this instrument consists of simple first-person statements reflecting high and low self-competence (e.g., *I am highly effective at the things I do; I wish I were more skillful in my activities*)

and self-liking (e.g., *I am secure in my sense of self-worth; I do not have enough respect for myself*). Respondents indicate their agreement with the statements using a 5-point Likert rating scale. Ratings are then summed to produce separate self-competence and self-liking scores. The scores are moderately correlated ($r = .58$), consistent with the theoretical interdependence of the two dimensions. Despite this overlap, divergent patterns of *unique* relations have been found for the two dimensions in relation to memory (Tafarodi, Marshall, & Milne, 2003), negative life events (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002), word recognition (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002), and cultural comparisons (Tafarodi, Lang, & Smith, 1999; Tafarodi & Swann, 1996; Tafarodi & Walters, 1999). These findings illustrate the heuristic advantage of distinguishing self-competence and self-liking in theory and measurement. Notably, the two dimensions account for virtually all the true-score variance of the SES ($R^2 = .83$, uncorrected for reliability), *with each dimension independently accounting for a sizable share* (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002). This pattern reinforces our claim that the SES is measuring two different aspects of self-esteem.

One apparent drawback of the SLCS-R is its reliance on direct statements about competence and efficacy to index self-competence. Admittedly, the belief in one's ability to exercise control over the environment, referred to by Bandura (1989, 1992) as *self-efficacy*, is not itself an experience of personal value or self-esteem. In its generalized form, self-efficacy refers to "what we can do" on the whole, whereas self-esteem refers to "what we are" on the whole. However, the same successful efforts and outcomes that increase self-efficacy over time also amplify our sense of personal value by causing us to experience ourselves as strong and capable agents. Thus, self-efficacy and self-competence are best understood as psychologically distinct concomitants of willfully engaging with the world. That said, it is clear that many of the SLCS-R self-competence items refer to what one can do rather than what one is. The justifying assumption is that the correlation of generalized self-efficacy and self-competence is high enough to allow test indicators of the former to serve as indicators of the latter. This assumption is consistent with demonstrations of the high redundancy of the two types of indicators in the context of measurement (Bernard, Hutchison, Lavin, & Pennington, 1996; Stanley & Murphy, 1997).

We began by recognizing that all measures of self-esteem are at most implicit of the individual's private symbolic experience, which can only be inferred from observed behavior. Nonetheless, disenchantment with self-report methods has given sway over the past decade to both measures of self-esteem identified as "implicit" because they circumvent awareness of what is being measured and a new *construct* of personal value referred to as "implicit self-esteem." The latter was defined by Greenwald and Banaji (1995) as "the introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) effect of the self-attitude on evaluation of self-associated and self-dissociated objects" (p. 11). Elsewhere, it is defined with greater economy as "the association of the concept of self with a valence attribute" (Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek, & Mellott, 2002, p. 5). These definitions are notable in that they divest self-esteem of its experiential content, reducing it to a semantic association or theoretical relation in a process

model. To distinguish self-esteem as a conscious, reflexive stance from its implicit counterpart, Farnham, Greenwald, and Banaji (1999) describe the latter as a "construct of self-regard" that is "unavailable to introspection" (p. 244). Consistent with this separation, Greenwald and Farnham (2000) claim that measures of implicit self-esteem "define constructs that are distinct from, although correlated with, nominally the same constructs measured by self-report" (p. 1034). A fair discussion of the interpretive difficulties presented by these claims would lead us off the main path of this chapter. It is enough for the present purposes to point out that any argument for "implicit" self-competence or self-liking as holistic abstractions formed outside of conscious experience or sequestered beyond the reach of awareness is implausible in light of their theoretical origins. Both dimensions of self-esteem are the result of ongoing synthetic interpretation that renders complex configurations of evaluative thought and feeling meaningful within a unified narrative identity. Integrative self-symbolic activity of this sort can occur only within the field of self-consciousness. If we doubt the validity of people's responses to our questioning of what they see in the mirrors of their own minds, we should try convincing them to look closer and answer with greater care and honesty. Reinventing self-esteem as an alienated and unrecognizable ghost of the mind is not the solution.

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Question 5

How best to characterize optimal self-esteem?
Of what relevance are components other than self-esteem level (e.g., contingencies, stability)?
What are some ways that people can orient toward developing optimal self-esteem without being trapped into endorsing self-esteem development as the prime directive?

*T*he essays in this section focus on the nature and determinants of optimal self-esteem. It is noteworthy that a great deal of convergence exists among them.

In her essay, Crocker suggests that self-esteem is optimal when it is not a concern and people are striving toward goals that are not only good for themselves, but that benefit others as well. She describes "optimal" features of academically related goals that foster learning over the appearance of being smart. Crocker notes that highly contingent self-esteem can undermine health and well-being, particularly when the domains of contingency are external (e.g., appearance) rather than internal (e.g., virtue). She concludes that not pursuing self-esteem, then, may be the clearest route to optimal self-esteem.

In their essay, Ryan and Brown, who open by distinguishing contingent from true self-esteem, echo this same theme of not pursuing self-esteem as a route to optimal self-esteem. In true self-esteem, one's sense of self-worth is taken as a given and is not beholden to specific accomplishments or accolades. Ryan and Brown suggest that a key to developing optimal self-esteem is to develop one's awareness, which they define as an authentic appraisal of one's inner experience and social context. The authors end with suggestions of ways to develop this awareness.

In his essay, Goldman begins by distinguishing fragile from secure forms of high self-esteem. As he notes, fragile high self-esteem is unstable, contingent, and discrepant with implicit self-esteem, whereas secure high self-esteem is stable, true, and congruent with implicit self-esteem. Goldman suggests that optimal self-esteem