

## **Self-esteem from a Developmental Perspective**

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Self-esteem is among one of the most well understood components of identity development. It refers to a person's overall positive or negative assessment of their worth. It's needs to be noted that self-esteem is not to be confused with self-concept which encompasses the characteristics that a person ascribes to themselves [see self-concept, same volume]. Specifically, self-esteem reflects the degree to which a person feels competent and of worth. Self-esteem has been of interest to psychologists and other social scientists because it is often related to other measures positive development such as satisfaction with life and academic engagement.

The concept of self-esteem can be traced back to the writings of William James (1892). His conceptualization of identity was inherently multi-faceted comprising of the lived experiential sense of self (I-self) and the theoretical sense of one's self (me-self). According to James, the I-self is shaped by how a person is seen by others in different contexts (social self), their physical appearance/possessions (material self) and their overall core assessment of themselves (spiritual self). These nuanced distinctions in how self-esteem is compartmentalized has varied based on how it's since been measured between people over time.

Research on the development of self-esteem across the lifespan shows more qualitative differences than quantitative. For example, for children in early childhood (2- to 6-year-olds), self-esteem is more idealistic than realistic and has only one emotional dimension, being good or bad at an activity, but not both. Otherwise, self-esteem tends to modestly increase with age well into late adulthood. It's worth noting that self-esteem values tend to plateau or even dip during

puberty, most studies show that self-esteem continues to steadily increase from the middle adolescence to early adulthood.

One nuance to this general trend is the distinction between baseline compared to barometric self-esteem. Baseline self-esteem reflects a person's overall assessment of themselves whereas barometric self-esteem is based on a person's assessment of themselves in the moment. Although some studies suggest that adolescence is a period of increased risk to self-esteem, closer inspection demonstrates that this age group may suffer from a more mercurial barometric self-esteem (largely due to more flux in their day-to-day lives) whereas adolescents' baseline self-esteem remains as stable as among older samples.

Contemporary research on self-esteem has broken down this notion even further into separate components. Namely, self-esteem is now often measured in a manner that reflects a person's overall sense of self-worth and their appraisal of themselves in various sub-dimensions of esteem (academic competence, social competence and physical competence as examples). Moreover, these various competencies may be hierarchically below general self-esteem such that they serve to inform people's overall sense of self. The only additional consideration is that how a person feels about themselves in a certain context (say academically) is only going to impact their overall self-worth inasmuch as they strive to do well in that specific area.

No description of self-esteem would be complete without briefly covering the influence of Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory of psychiatry (1953). Although Sullivan's theory primarily focuses on the development of intimacy in childhood, adolescents and adulthood, there is an important application to the understanding of self-esteem. Specifically, Sullivan argued that close and intimate relationships with peers were crucial to identity development. We would recognize these as friendships though he used the term chumships. In Sullivan's model, children

and adolescents develop a positive (or negative) view of themselves based on what information is reflected back to them from their close friends.

A range of studies have also explored differences between groups on their measure of self-esteem. For example, people from higher socio-economic groups tend to also report higher self-esteem. There are also a number of studies that have tested for gender differences in self-esteem. In general, boys tend to report higher scores in self-esteem although there's evidence that this trend may be changing. Meanwhile, in both childhood and adolescence, boys report higher levels of physical appearance and athletic competence compared to girls who tend to report higher values with respect to social competence (Harter, 2006). The differences may be explained in how girls are *expected* to be socially skilled whereas boys physically and athletically skilled.

Research in the area of ethnic differences in self-esteem are more difficult to disentangle. For one, there's also an argument to be made that self-esteem as a construct, may be a Western invention. This idea stems from studies demonstrating that self-esteem is higher among individualistic nations which place more importance on the individual overall. Meanwhile, in collectivistic countries, self-esteem is inherently more socially constructed as therefore less individual.

The study of self-esteem is a challenging endeavor but rewarding due to the nuanced manner that people rate themselves overall positively or negatively. For one, self-esteem is associated with a number of other indicators of healthy development including, academic ability, social skills and life satisfaction. Alternatively, people who report lower self-esteem relative to their peers are at heightened risk for depression, anxiety and externalizing symptoms (such as aggression).

The other advantage of studying self-esteem is that it has a long-standing history of interest within the field of psychology. Formalized over 100 years ago in the writings of William James, it has since undergone a number of theoretical evolutions. Compared to other psychological measures, self-esteem is relatively stable but does notably increase over time making it a good candidate for longitudinal research. Given that it also shows robust differences between groups, it's interesting to study in different samples as well making self-esteem a critical factor in the understanding of identity overall.

#### References

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