

Socio-cultural influences of identity constructive behaviors on self-esteem

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Abstract: The formation of a healthy self-esteem in early ages is of great significance for people's forthcoming social behaviors, as it paves the way for taking healthy risks, solving problems and trying new things in their future life. People, especially young individuals, with a healthy self-esteem, will conceivably demonstrate more positive behavioral characteristics in the future in context of a society. Although, the study of self-esteem as a concept has been widely investigated psychologically; it has been overlooked in the recent socio-cultural studies. Therefore, this paper aims at the study of the links between self-esteem and upcoming social behaviors from an interdisciplinary point of view trying to combine the specific value tendencies with social possibilities and contingencies of pursuing those desires. To achieve these goals, this paper firstly presents the challenges and demands facing the research on social-cultural perspective of self-esteem; then it talks about the relationship between the influence of self-esteem in a person's future life and identity constructive behaviors and also enquires the sort of identities that individuals will give worth and follow after their self-esteem is formed; finally the last part displays the way that the pursuits of self-esteem are mediated and intertwined with social occurrences.

Keywords: self-esteem, identity construction, social behavior, future studies, socio-cultural pursuits

Introduction

The concept of self-esteem has been studied psychologically for several decades. It is first introduced by William James (1890, 14), who basically considers "self-esteem to be the balance of one's success divided by one's pretensions." However, self-esteem, in recent researches, also embraces the social judgments and accomplishments in a person's future. "What makes self-esteem distinct from these

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sociological concepts is that self-esteem refers to and focuses on primarily mental processes, which in turn are intertwined with socio-cultural processes” (Strandell 2016, 16). Self-esteem “is commonly defined as an evaluative attitude toward the self” (Rosenberg 1965, 35). This definition psychologically underscores the emotional and cognitive perspectives of self-esteem under socio-cultural influences. Although, self-esteem can include an individual’s thoughts on other people’s evaluative outlooks toward his/her self or the outlooks that he/she does not essentially give out, the study of the social relationships are something psychological. “Self-esteem is treated as an abstract category, encompassing different self-conscious emotions such as pride and shame” (Scheff and Fearon 2004, 77), as well as “their associated cognitive evaluation processes” (Tracy and Robins 2004, 104). Nonetheless, these micro-foundations in emotion and cognition do not lead self-esteem to a socio-culturally less important notion in the fields of psychology and future studies. As a parallel relationship between self-esteem and future orientation, it is worth mentioning that a healthy self-esteem may serve as a protective factor against risky social behaviors: “Controlling for social desirability, self-esteem partially mediates the relation between future orientation and later risk orientation” (Jackman and MacPhee 2015, 341). Thus, this paper studies the plausible links between cognition and the constructionist idea of implemented identities in the pursuits of self-esteem and its influence on a person’s future social behaviors and the development of his/her future disposition. The reasons that we are conducting this research is firstly, to widen the prospects of sociology of cognition and culture to the future studies; secondly, to present how socio-cultural elements can involve in the forthcoming social behaviors and self-esteem relationship; and finally to demonstrate the way self-esteem may help to comprehend that cognition and emotion stimulate the track of particular identities. Therefore, in this research, we study self-esteem from a new psychological viewpoint, as well as a sociological aspect of cognition. To achieve the mentioned goals, this paper is presented in three sections including “the concerns on the study of self-esteem,” “identity-constructive pursuit of self-esteem” and “the self-esteem pursuits’ socio-cultural possibilities and contingencies.”

The concerns on the study of self-esteem

Self-esteem, or its absence, is assumed to be engaged in an individual's future problems including several "social problems including prejudice, crime, violence, educational performance, alcohol and drug use, adolescent drinking and smoking, and adolescent engagement in early sex" (O'Brien and Leitzel 2006, 17). In spite of the numerous researches, some studies, with few exceptions, cast doubts on the absent, unpredictable or weak relationships between behavior and self-esteem. "Taken at face value, the lack of [mentioned] results casts doubt on the causal capacity of self-esteem, which has led some authors to question the value of policy implementations and self-help literature intended to raise self-esteem" (Baumeister et al. 2003, 26). This idea proves that a regular and theoretical belief regarding the significance of self-esteem has been incorrect from the beginning. A dominant "sociometer theory has, for example, taken such a position and argues that people are not concerned with self-esteem but with 'relational value,' for which self-esteem is but a subjective gauge without consequences" (Leary 2005, 130). Contrary to this viewpoint, several scholars affirming that "self-esteem is of enormous importance in people's lives" (Crocker et al. 2004, 185) claim that "self-esteem is without consequence would be premature." Indeed, there is a purpose for the question that how convincing conclusion we may get from the existing empirical data. Another justification to the absence of the outcomes is the limited ways that self-esteem presents.

Methodologically and conceptually talking, empirical research shows the drawback of correlation between particular behaviors with common levels of self-esteem. For instance, "high self-esteem has been correlated with both high and low levels of cheating on tests" (Lobel and Levanon 1988, 122), as well as "with both bullying and defending victims of bullies" (Salmivalli et al. 1999, 1270). However, "low self-esteem is related to future externalizing problems" (Donnellan et al., 329). These diverse results show the existence of important unnoticed mechanisms between various levels of self-esteem and actual behaviors. Thus, obvious gaps exist in our information of self-esteem being interpreted into the behavior of person in future life, and at present it seems unreasonable to think that self-esteem is not relevant.

In terms of monodisciplinary evolutionary approaches like "sociometer theory, which is the spearhead of a quest by some self-esteem theorists to find an evolutionary function for self-esteem, the

presumptions are based on the knowledge that concept of self-esteem is a universal entity that must have a reproductive advantage” (Leary and Downs 1995, 127). Uncertainties still remain about the idea that self-esteem includes “evolutionary advantageous cognitive functions, such as the need to belong, or the automatic monitoring of one’s future social standing and emotional distress in case of social threat” (Leary 2005, 94). Even so, “it may be unwarranted to expect to find a specific, delimited function which corresponds to a highly abstract and culturally specific construct such as self-esteem” (Strandell 2016, 19). Given that self-conscious emotions and self-esteem in the form of a concept are socio-culturally dependent, we may realize that an interdisciplinary methodology highlighting the interface of cognition and culture is essential to completely understand the future orientation of the concept of self-esteem; though, evolutionary tasks can have a significant position. Finally, it seems that “survival-oriented stimulus-appraisal-affect models are too simplistic for self-conscious emotions, which require relatively complex cognitive processes” (Tracy and Robins 2004, 111).

From a cultural perspective, regardless of the awareness that “cultures determine what it means to be a person of value, even from evolutionary theorists” (Leary and Downs 1995, 140), the usage of approaches and theories of culture to study self-esteem is almost overlooked. To elucidate the inevitability of integrating the concept of culture, which represents mixed cognitive content like values and ideas, with the study of self-esteem is not difficult. As an example, picture a male fashion model on a stage for a catwalk and a male athlete on a stage for a competition; both of them characterize a perfect male look; however, both ideals are considerably unlike and are followed in dissimilar ways. “If pursuing such ideals is motivated by a desire for self-esteem, it is of primary importance to understand how and why these specific ideals were pursued; it is also not difficult to see how cultural ideas of what makes an esteemed self may be more important than levels of self-esteem for the specific behavioral outcomes in the future” (Strandell 2016, 16). Along with describing ideals, the knowledge reproduced culturally and the notions about the world and self are remarkably engaged in philosophies about which pursuits are practical for appraisal of the self for development and emergence in the future in a social context. “The emotional significance of an event for the self depends on cognitive attributions of causation, beliefs about how the world works, of who or what

caused the event to happen, and whether it was due to some special circumstance, or due to a permanent trait of the self” (Tracy and Robins 2004, 112). These ascriptions take on the interconnection of cultural schemas.

Identity-constructive pursuit of self-esteem

According to the argued matters in the previous section, the connection between an individual’s future behavior in a society and self-esteem needs a change in viewpoint, from the present emphasis on the level of self-esteem to an emphasis on the tendency to self-esteem. “Instead of starting out with global levels of trait self-esteem as the main focus of interest in relation to behavior, it may be more productive to study how people pursue self-esteem, and what they seek to become by doing so” (Crocker et al. 2004, 135). In this section, away from the self-esteem motives, we claim that self-esteem is initially engaged with identity constructive behaviors; because the need for positive thoughts toward oneself demands an effective representation of an esteemed self. Hence, in the following three parts I claim that an approach with a performance-theoretical base to self-esteem pursuits can work beneficially, if only it can be settled with a concept of an inner-cognitive self.

Recent studies agree with the original statement of James (1890, 56) that “people are strongly motivated to pursue self-esteem”. For instance, Bushman, Crocker and Moeller (2011, 995) conclude that “American college students prefer self-esteem boosting activities over their favorite sexual activity, their favorite food, receiving a paycheck, or seeing a best friend.” The purpose of the self-esteem motive is a per-definition to attain or endorse a specific identity or esteemed self. “Establishing an esteemed self-representation in early ages is necessary for future positive self-conscious emotions” (Tracy and Robins 2004, 110), which appear as a robust motivation source, in turn. To know “what people believe they need to be or have value and worth as a person” (Crocker et al. 2004, 154) that inspires the self-esteem pursuit, we require an outline of concepts that underline the presentation of an identity in upcoming level of life by behavior; the awareness to become, instead of being esteemed; and the contingency of self-conscious emotions and self-esteem pursuits through specific socio-cultural well-defined norms. The concept of constructionism in performativity delivers a reliable kickoff as an outline for interpretation the pursuits of self-esteem. “Performance theory puts

emphasis on peoples' attempts at becoming someone; it asserts that identity (and thus, self-esteem) is not something which is expressed from inside, but enacted in behavior" (Butler 1990, 69). To claim that identities are performative for a person's future disposition "has two simultaneous meanings which are both highly relevant for understanding self-esteem pursuits: (1) identities are performed much in the same sense actors perform roles, and (2) this enactment can be ascribed a degree of performance (e.g. efficiency), in relation to certain socio-culturally defined criteria of identities and of success" (Strandell 2016, 21). The theory of performance, in turn, can take advantage of using the need for esteemed self as a motivation for a performance; even though, it is not clearly noticeable; because performativity normally denotes the social dealings and external physical actions but ignores the importance of cognition in the construction of self.

Moreover, a key obstacle of an identity-performance attitude to self-esteem is the obvious inharmoniousness of identities as endorsed by performative behaviors as well as the internal cognitive self. "The self, however, is a fundamental part of self-esteem, and cognition is necessarily involved in self-evaluation, especially in the absence of physical others, and both the self and self-esteem have some degree of stability over time" (Demo 1992, 308). It signifies that an individual, in his/her confirmed future position, conveys a sort of inclination with him/her from one performance to another. Furthermore, "it is long since established that cognitive schemas, such as knowledge and memories, are not entities that lie dormant in the mind, but are actively re-constructed every time they are recalled" (Bartlett 1938, 143). The models of "parallel distributed processing" or "connectionist" have indeed increased "our understanding of how specific schemata are constructed through the spread of activation across neural networks" (Smith 1996, 895). This cognition framework, in terms of future influences, is structured socio-culturally in several ways, containing the esthetics, tasks and structure of the institutionalized practices, social relationships networks, exterior environment, etc. As schemas are triggered at any time, and as present and past socio-cultural influences critically impress the form of schemas, it is challenging to overemphasize the significance of context and culture. While fundamental neurological operations like the mechanisms of associative learning can be widespread and global, the cognition mechanisms are formed by and endorsed in the framework of culture.

Finally, “observing one’s own behaviors and actions is a vital source of input for constructing self-schemas” (Apps and Tsakiris 2014, 88). This is actually coherent with the chief intention of the theory of performance saying “that identities are enacted by performative actions; however, by drawing on cognition research the notion of performativity can also be extended to view cognitive processes as performative since processes like expectations, attributions, and comparisons influence the forthcoming enacted self-schema” (Strandell 2016, 20). As it is clear, “in the case of race and gender, attributions of causation are crucial to self-understanding and evaluation” (Good and Sanchez 2010, 207), and need to be assumed as necessary pieces of self-construction. Once more, assume an athlete standing on a stage (as a performative act) who collects an undesirable score from the jury (as a co-performative act). It can exclaim a self-schema of an unsuccessful athlete. But, cognitive behaviors, like relating the undesirable scoring to the unfair jury or remembering former achievement may be interfered in order to retain a positive viewpoint to the self.

To conclude, it is likely to blend self-esteem and constructionist researches to find out more about self in the context of future, providing that cognitive schemas are assumed formed, and a cognitive self, is well-matched with the theories of constructionist performance. This procedure-evolving self demonstrates the desire for constant inclinations of enacting because of the “experience-formed neurological mediation of activation” and constancy of the framework. It is probable to claim that “the self,” as a decisive, discreet and singular entity, appears merely at the time of interpellation; this is established through a neurologically patterned activation, which is a task of input from the social and physical frameworks and from self-performative cognition and behaviors, intervened by “experience-primed neurocognitive” moods.

Socio-cultural possibilities and contingencies of self-esteem pursuits

In this section we study that how the pursuits of self-esteem are mediated and intertwined with social occurrences in demonstrating and arguing some socio-cultural outputs and possibilities in an individual’s future life in a society. Therefore, we are able to differentiate three methodically-separate sides essentially engaged in the self-esteem pursuit, namely “self-performances,” “identity investments,” and “the

reproduction of cultural schemas.” It is noteworthy that this is a methodical discrepancy among the three sides that intersect practically; people will usually present a specific self concurrently as they strengthen their identities and recreate cultural schemas.

Self-performances, as the first aspect of self-esteem in this section, denote any cognitive or behavioral performances that cause a self-schema in the very instant and framework, with or without aim, viewers or winning performance of a preferred identity. “The relevance of specific performative acts for self-esteem varies between individuals and cultures” (Crocker et al. 2004, 897); however, “any self-esteem contingent action is likely to be strongly motivated by a desire to achieve or avoid self-conscious emotions” (Heine et al. 1999, 780). A self-performance is usually part of social interactions, and self-esteem appears to be intensely impressed by social exclusions, for instance. It is “closely connected with a desire to be positively judged by others, even for individuals who claim that this is not the case” (Leary 2005, 135). “Beyond conveying direct judgment of others’ performances, people will actively co-perform each other’s identities (again, compare with actors on a stage) by supporting or preventing performances” (Strandell 2016, 22). Moreover, social interactions are significant for self-esteem since social recognition of performances will offer authentication of their victory, regardless of the value decisions of the viewers. The difference between how other individuals assess and what they identify is important to comprehend self-esteem. Misrecognition researches on self-performance show the significance of recognition and its function in a person’s future self-esteem related behaviors. Separated “self-esteem contingencies into internal and external sources of esteem, such as virtue contra others’ approval” (Crocker et al. 2004, 157). Merely exterior sources of esteem can trust the value judgment of other people, while we believe that both interior and exterior self-esteem sources will trust other people’s performance recognition. “From a performance perspective, where the self is not given prior to performances, recognition may serve as a source of external, ‘mind-independent’ feedback or verification of one’s performances” (Burke and Cast 2002, 1045). Therefore, a person might still need the feedbacks of other people’s recognition to be certain about being an individual who adapts with assumed value; though, others do not reveal the individual’s specific virtue’s esteem. Accordingly, “because of the importance of recognition the possibility of pursuing self-esteem will depend on the relationship and interaction

between performer and observer” (Weisbuch et al. 2009, 144). To see how a well-liked school student looks for attainment of recognition for a specific performance easily than a bullied student does is not a challenging task.

As another aspect in the pursuit of self-esteem, an identity investment is what a person will do to have a specific performance easier or promising. Indeed there are some performances (like becoming a physician with a proper education) that cannot go on or may go difficultly without identity investments. Rawls (1971, 18) claims that “self-esteem is one of the foremost goods that a just society should distribute equally, but in practice there will be possibilities to pursue self-esteem unequally distributed throughout societies”. This does not mean that self-esteem levels are allocated unfairly in expectable ways; it means that “the specific ways in which one may become a person-of-value are significantly influenced by one’s social position” (Crocker and Blanton 1999, 34). This is not merely an instant self-performance issue while it is mostly a question about existing chances and sources. Enacting a specific self in the future careers of life, mainly, depends on former investments, which allow or reinforce specific self-performances. Be’ nabou and Tirole (2011) use the concept of identity investment to label the performances with durable identity-construction. “People build their identities over time, which is to say that they prepare for certain performances in the future,” (Be’ nabou and Tirole 2011, 816) for instance, by educational fulfillment or through showing what might seem to be unreasonable behaviors to uphold or support an identity, like reliability, which requires regular demonstration of faithfulness even at a person’s cost. “Pursuing an alternative identity could devalue the current, old or future self enough to trigger anxiety or at least diffuse demotivation; such a shift of ideals may also require learning new skills and lifestyles, which may appear risky or difficult and thus threaten one’s self-esteem with the risk of failure and shame” (Strandell 2016, 23) in the future. The tendency to self-esteem might, therefore, be an encouraging instrument engaged in production or reproduction of underprivileged identities, which individuals do not intend to experience for change, particularly with uncertain, challenging, or restricted chances. It does not mean that it is not possible to change, while it means that it will need more inspiration and adequate handling tactics to manage the insecurity and discouragement of preliminary undesirable self-value. “Fragile self-esteem has been empirically

linked to defensiveness and may, in combination with high explicit self-esteem, lead to aggression and even violence as a response to identity threats” (Sandstrom and Jordan 2008, 508). Thus, it is significant for scholars in the field of aggressive sub-cultures to deliberate the function of contingent identities of self-esteem in the framework of futures studies. It is also significant to deliberate the function of recognition and the norms of self-performances among violent groups or individuals.

The third aspect involved in the pursuit of self-esteem is the reproduction of cultural schemas. Numerous scholars on the concept of self-esteem are currently researching on contingencies of self-esteem that “vary between individuals and may better account for behavior than global self-esteem” (Crocker et al. 2003, 165). The pursuing of self-esteem not only depends on the prior investment, accessible sources, recognition and the ability of personal performances, but on the reproducing and recognized acceptability of cultural schemas. These schemas assign some identities more value than others, outline their norms, and make conceivable identities. Cultural schemas, like identity investments, play an important role in pursuing self-esteem in the future position of an individual, because they specify feasible self-performances and their evaluations. Nevertheless, “contrary to investments or performances, cultural schemas are not individually achieved or maintained; while these schemas are essential for the possibilities of individual self-esteem pursuits, their power is collectively reproduced” (Strandell 2016, 23). For “the tendency of identity investments to develop into escalating commitments, people may become highly dependent on the reproduction and recognition of very specific cultural schemas” (Be’nabou and Tirole 2011, 831). Accordingly, similar responses (strong emotive uneasiness), without clear self-related cognitions, will be expectable from well-invested people in reaction to social changes as with other forms of self-esteem dangers. In terms of sociology, this is applicable as the merely way to attack such dangers, afar from violence or denial toward enactments of changes, is to involve in group political actions. It is possible to say “self-esteem motives are important in the development of a person’s future reactionary political attitudes, especially against progressive liberal politics which threaten to erode traditional societal values, as the emotional component develops into a political rationale such as racist or anti-feminist discourse” (Kimmel 2013, 53).

Conclusion

The notion of self-esteem is of remarkable significance in both social occurrences and a person's future behaviors and reactions; though, the link between behavior and self-esteem can be better comprehended via inter-disciplinary attempts aiming at pursuing self-esteem. "The ways in which people pursue self-esteem appear to be highly influenced by socio-cultural factors—perhaps more than by global levels of self-esteem—which are as of yet largely unexplored" (Strandell 2016, 19). In terms of strategy consequences, this paper approves Baumeister et al. (2003, 29) believing that "the widespread efforts to boost self-esteem levels through self-help, therapy, or policy are not scientifically well supported by theory or data; not because self-esteem is unimportant, but because global levels of self-esteem appear to be of limited importance to specific behavioral outcomes". Imagining that everybody is deeply encouraged to follow self-esteem, we can control this desire in constructive manners. At the end, for additional future studies, we recommend theoretical and empirical researches on the future position of self-esteem in a person's life, especially on the affiliation between cognitive and cultural schemas, self-esteem and the assumptions of scholars, and the cultural and social possibilities and results receiving from self-esteem pursuits, like investigation on the various types of sources presented to various people and the ways these sources will be utilized. Though the scholars studying the concept of self-esteem should obtain and take advantage of sociological and cultural studies, the opposite is similarly right; because, a healthy self-esteem will offer a strong motivation for people's behaviors in their future career with social concerns. In this paper we conclude that it is feasible to make links between several practices like poststructuralism and neurocognition or between political views and self-esteem. An optimistic future with unlimited developments can be reachable if social science in our current time can become essentially cross-disciplinary, collaborative and accumulative.

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