

Your Sociometer Is Telling You Something: How the Self-Esteem System Functions to Resolve Important Interpersonal Dilemmas

Danu Anthony Stinson, Jessica J. Cameron
and Eric T. Huang

Human beings are the quintessential social animals. Through generations of evolution, this aspect of human nature has left an indelible impression on almost every aspect of human psychology, including *the self*: the collection of traits, qualities, schema, roles, beliefs, and attitudes that form the core of one's identity (e.g., Markus 1977). The link between the self and one's social world is fundamental. Cooley (1956) posited that people observe others' treatment of—and reactions to—oneself. The self is then formed through this social “looking glass.” Once formed, the self becomes an organizing structure that helps people to make sense of their past experiences, guide present behavior, and predict future experiences (Swann 1987, 2012). These functions are essential for social animals. Success in a social world relies upon one's ability to understand and anticipate others' behavior and reactions to oneself. Although people certainly look to their social worlds to form such vital perceptions, we argue that people also look to the internal world of the self for this social guid-

ance. Specifically, we suggest that humans have evolved a quick and readily available system for understanding and anticipating their social world: the self-esteem system.

Sociometer theory contends that the self-esteem system is an evolved regulatory system aimed at helping people form and maintain high-quality social bonds (e.g., Leary and Baumeister 2000); bonds that were and are essential for survival (Tooby and Cosmides 1996). As such, the motivational heart of the self-esteem system is the fundamental need to form lasting and satisfying interpersonal attachments. This *need to belong* is one of the most basic of human needs, and its satisfaction is essential for normal development (Bowlby 1973), continued well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and maintaining physical health (e.g., Stinson et al. 2008b). Thus, the self-esteem system evolved to help people gain acceptance from others and avoid social exclusion (e.g., Leary and Guadagno 2011). We suggest that the self-esteem system accomplishes these tasks, in part, by providing answers to four pressing interpersonal dilemmas concerning *relational value*, which is one's value as an interpersonal partner: (a) What is my relational value? (b) Should I believe social feedback about my relational value? (c) If my relational value is threatened, should I pursue connection or self-protection? (d) How can I judge the relational value of others before committing to a long-term bond? As we detail below, the self-esteem system helps to resolve these interpersonal dilemmas by monitoring the social world for cues that are relevant

D. A. Stinson (✉) · E. T. Huang
Department of Psychology, University of Victoria,
PO Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2, Canada
e-mail: dstinson@uvic.ca

E. T. Huang
e-mail: huange@uvic.ca

J. J. Cameron
Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba,
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2, Canada
e-mail: Jessica.Cameron@umanitoba.ca

to each question and then signaling a response. In turn, the signals produced by the self-esteem system in response to each dilemma provoke motivations and behaviors that service the need to belong. Thus, we suggest that the self-esteem system is a multifaceted drive system shaped by evolution to provide humans with the tools they need to successfully navigate their social worlds.

“What Is My Relational Value?”

The self-esteem system services the need to belong, in part, by maintaining an internal barometer of the quality of one’s social bonds. This *sociometer* indexes one’s *perceived relational value*, which is the degree to which one perceives that one is valued by others as a social partner (Leary and Baumeister 2000). Thus, the sociometer monitors the environment for cues regarding one’s relational value. Such cues may come from the external environment in the form of current social feedback from interpersonal experiences. For example, the aloof and rejecting behavior of a coworker during a conversation is real-time feedback suggesting that one has low relational value (e.g., Stinson et al. 2009). The self-esteem system responds to such relational-value cues and provides real-time feedback concerning the quality of one’s social bonds (e.g., Leary et al. 1998). The signal produced by the self-esteem system in response to higher or lower perceived relational value is referred to as *state self-esteem* (SSE), which is one’s in-the-moment feelings of self-worth or self-directed affect (i.e., feeling good or bad about oneself). If feedback suggests that one’s relational value is high, the sociometer signals this desirable state of affairs with positive affect and increases in SSE. In contrast, if feedback suggests that one’s relational value is low, the sociometer signals this threat to the need to belong with negative affect and decreases in SSE. There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that social feedback concerning one’s relational value prompts changes in SSE (e.g., Leary et al. 1998; Stinson et al. 2008b; Stinson et al. 2010). For example, when participants interacted socially

with a cold and rejecting confederate during an experimental session, they reported lower levels of SSE than did participants who had interacted with a warm and friendly confederate (Stinson et al. 2010). This example is consistent with a recent meta-analytic review; across 192 studies of social exclusion, accepted participants reported more positive affect, less negative affect,¹ and higher SSE than rejected participants (Blackhart et al. 2009).

The sociometer view of SSE is unique, in that it not only proposes the specific experiences that will provoke fluctuations in state feelings of self-worth—specifically, experiences that yield social cues concerning one’s relational value—but also suggests an adaptive reason why SSE exists in the first place. In the sociometer view, decreases in SSE alert the individual that his or her social bonds are in jeopardy (e.g., Leary and Baumeister 2000; Stinson et al. 2010), a state of affairs that would have threatened ancestral human’s very survival. Reflecting the importance of maintaining social bonds, the response of the sociometer to relational-value feedback is biased: Once relational-value feedback becomes neutral or mildly negative, people’s SSE has already reached its lowest point and does not become more negative, even as feedback becomes increasingly unfavorable (Leary et al. 1998). Thus, it appears that the self-esteem system does not distinguish between a moderate threat to one’s belonging, such as a rebuke from a romantic partner for bad behavior, and outright rejection. For any social animal, both threats to belonging are equally perilous and worthy of attention.

The SSE signal produced in response to relational value prompts motivational and behavioral responses aimed at meeting the need to belong. In two experiments, Murray et al. (2008, Studies 1

¹ Variation in affect as a function of acceptance–rejection may also reflect changes in SSE as a function of acceptance–rejection, at least in part, because many affect measures include items tapping self-directed feelings (e.g., “proud,” “ashamed,” “nervous,” and “guilty,” are included in the widely used short-form PANAS (positive and negative affect schedule); Watson et al. 1988).

and 2) demonstrated this process experimentally.² Participants in the experimental threat condition recalled a time when their romantic partner had hurt their feelings or had let them down, a task that we suggest constitutes low-relational-value feedback (see also Leary et al. 1998, and Stinson et al. 2010, for similar experimental threats to belonging). Consistent with this interpretation, compared to the control condition, participants in the experimental threat condition reported more hurt feelings (i.e., an affective response consistent with the proposed sociometer response to low-relational-value feedback; MacDonald and Leary 2005). In turn, and again compared to participants in the control condition, participants whose belongingness was threatened were faster to name connection words on a lexical decision task and reported stronger connection goals, results that we believe are consistent with the activation of the need to belong. Hence, the sociometer model of self-esteem not only describes the nature of SSE but also proposes an evolutionarily adaptive function for feelings (i.e., signals) of high or low self-worth: To alert the individual to threats to the need to belong and prompt behaviors aimed at correcting that undesirable state of affairs (see Williams 2007). But what behaviors are prompted by a threatened need to belong? We will return to this question shortly. First, we discuss another pressing interpersonal dilemma: How do people determine whether or not they can trust the relational-value feedback they receive?

“Should I Believe Social Feedback About My Relational Value?”

Relational-value feedback prompts the affective SSE signal without the use of regulatory effort or conscious deliberation (Swann and Schroeder 1995). However, when people receive relational-value feedback, a second, independent, deliberative level of processing also occurs in parallel to the effortless, affective processing of the feed-

back (Stinson et al. 2010). This deliberation aims to determine whether the relational feedback is trustworthy and believable, and therefore worthy of action. This function of the self-esteem system relies not on the state component of self-esteem but on the trait component. Over time, specific experiences of acceptance and rejection are internalized to form a relatively stable, and global, view of one’s relational value, which sociometer theorists call *global self-esteem* (Stinson and Holmes 2010). Individuals with higher global self-esteem (HSEs) feel that they were, are, and will be valued by others, whereas individuals with lower global self-esteem (LSEs) doubt their value as relational partners and project these doubts onto future relationships (e.g., Murray et al. 2000). As with other central aspects of the self-concept (Swann 1987), people rely on their global self-esteem to make sense of their worlds, to explain past social experiences, and to predict the outcome of future social experiences (e.g., Stinson et al. 2010). Thus, not only does sociometer theory describe the nature of global self-esteem but it also implies an important function of global perceived relational value (i.e., to lend coherence and predictability to one’s world). One way that the self-esteem system accomplishes this goal is by helping people to evaluate the validity of incoming relational-value feedback.

When feedback concerning one’s relational value is detected, the self-esteem system compares the feedback to one’s global self-esteem to determine if the feedback is consistent or inconsistent with existing self-views (Stinson et al. 2010). If the social feedback in question is consistent with one’s global self-esteem, then, for better or worse, this causes people to conclude that the feedback is accurate and valid. In contrast, if feedback is inconsistent with self-esteem, then this causes people to conclude that the feedback is inaccurate and possibly invalid. For example, in one study, Stinson et al. (2010) provided participants with false feedback from their romantic partner, indicating that their romantic partner either agreed with the participants’ own self-views of a particular socially valued trait or viewed the participant much more positively than the participants’ rated themselves (i.e., the partner held

² The authors offered a different, but related, risk-regulation interpretation of their results, but we think that a belongingness account also fits their data.

positive illusions about the participant; Murray et al. 2001). This feedback constituted relational-value feedback, and thus was either self-esteem consistent or self-esteem inconsistent. Conceptually replicating past research (e.g., Swann 1997), participants rated the self-esteem-consistent feedback as more accurate than the self-esteem-inconsistent feedback. Thus, the self-esteem system helped people to evaluate whether or not they should believe the relational-value feedback by providing a benchmark against which the relational-value feedback was compared (i.e., feedback that deviated from participants' global self-esteem benchmark was deemed inaccurate).

Rejecting self-esteem-inconsistent relational-value feedback is a safe response. Existing self-views reflect years of experience, so one should not change them to reflect new relational-value feedback precipitously. Therefore, although SSE is influenced by any social experience that connotes acceptance or rejection, global self-esteem is more selective. Once solidified around age 12 (Harter 2003), global self-esteem is quite stable during adulthood (Trzesniewski et al. 2003).

However, maintaining one's self-esteem in the face of self-esteem-inconsistent relational-value feedback could have a maladaptive downside. Recall that people rely on their global self-esteem to make sense of their worlds, explain past social experiences, predict the outcome of future social experiences, and even judge the validity of incoming relational-value feedback. Therefore, miscalibrated self-esteem that is grossly out of touch with one's true relational value can have negative social repercussions (Leary and Guadagno 2011; Murray et al. 2003; see Sedikides 1993, for related arguments). For example, incorrectly overestimating one's social value could cause one to attempt to initiate relationships with people who are not interested or trust people who do not have one's best interests at heart. Either one of these possibilities could lead to humiliation, embarrassment, and social pain. In contrast, incorrectly underestimating one's social value is painful by its very nature and could cause one to overlook social opportunities with interested others, initiate or maintain poor-quality relationships, or feel unwarranted insecurities within

one's close relationships. Any of these possibilities could lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. Thus, both overestimating and underestimating one's relational value could lead to negative interpersonal consequences.

Therefore, it is essential that one's chronic global self-esteem is in touch with social reality. So at the same time that the self-esteem system was leading participants in Stinson et al. (2010) study to conclude that self-esteem-inconsistent feedback was inaccurate, another deliberative process was evident in the participants' spontaneous thoughts about the feedback. After receiving the self-esteem-consistent or -inconsistent feedback, participants freely listed their thoughts about the feedback and coders rated the thought lists for epistemic (i.e., knowledge) uncertainty (e.g., "Doesn't make sense?!", "Maybe there is something I never saw?;" Stinson et al. 2010, p. 1006) or epistemic certainty (e.g., "Typical," "I expected it;" p. 1006). Compared to the self-esteem-consistent condition, the self-esteem-inconsistent relational-value feedback caused participants to experience feelings of epistemic confusion and uncertainty. Although participants explicitly declared that the self-esteem-inconsistent feedback was inaccurate, on another, perhaps implicit level, the feedback shook participants' confidence in their self-views. Stinson and colleagues replicated this effect in a number of experiments. Across studies, if the relational-value feedback was consistent with participants' global self-esteem, it provoked comfortable and safe feelings of epistemic certainty and confidence. In contrast, if feedback was inconsistent with participants' self-esteem, then it provoked aversive and uncomfortable feelings of epistemic confusion and uncertainty.

Stinson et al. (2010) suggested that such feelings of epistemic confusion may reflect the first step on the road towards self-esteem change aimed at keeping global self-esteem in touch with social reality. Epistemic confusion feels uncomfortable, and people are motivated to alleviate such discomfort. In a sense, self-verification is the "easy way out" of epistemic confusion, providing a safe and quick way to reestablish epistemic confidence (e.g., Sedikides 1993).

However, what happens when feedback that is inconsistent with one's self-esteem becomes more frequent, especially over a long period of time? For example, if a woman with low self-esteem forms a romantic bond with a partner who has positive illusions about her relational value, then over time, frequent self-esteem-inconsistent feedback from her partner would cause the woman to experience chronic epistemic confusion concerning her relational value. In such a state, the benchmark against which novel relational-value feedback is compared becomes unstable and unreliable. Moreover, one's ability to determine the validity of incoming relational-value feedback becomes compromised, as does one's ability to benefit from the social-predictive function of global self-esteem. The "easy way out" of such epistemic uncertainty is also untenable: What type of relational-value feedback will verify unstable and uncertain global self-esteem?

In such a state of chronic epistemic confusion, individuals may experience self-evaluative motivations that prompt them to seek any and all feedback about the self, regardless of whether it verifies or contradicts existing self-views (Sedikides 1993). In turn, they may relieve the chronic psychological discomfort caused by epistemic confusion by changing their self-views to be more consistent with the feedback they obtain from the social environment. Thus, a woman's low self-esteem might begin to change (i.e., increase) to bring it into alignment with the positive feedback she constantly receives from her adoring romantic partner. By changing her global self-esteem, her epistemic certainty will increase because now the positive relational-value feedback she receives from her romantic partner is self-concept consistent, rather than inconsistent. In line with these predictions, Stinson et al. (2010) observed that participants who received self-esteem-inconsistent relational-value feedback from their romantic partner shifted their self-views to become more positive. Furthermore, Murray et al. (1996) demonstrated that lower self-esteem individuals who are loved by a partner who sees more virtue in them than they see in themselves experienced increases in self-esteem over the course of a year. Thus, the self-esteem system not only includes a

mechanism to maintain much needed stability by urging people to reject self-esteem-inconsistent feedback but also includes a mechanism to facilitate change by generating feelings of epistemic confusion. In this way, the self-esteem system maintains its ability to perform important social-regulatory functions, such as determining one's behavioral response to self-threats.

"When My Relational Value Is Threatened, Should I Pursue Connection or Self-Protection?"

Responses to relational threats are not straightforward. As implied by previous sociometer theorists (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary and Guadagno 2011; MacDonald and Leary 2005), belongingness is a two-sided coin comprising both the desires to attain acceptance and avoid rejection. These relational *connection* and *self-protection* goals (Murray et al. 2006) exert opposing pressures. Connection goals push people to pursue social rewards, like commitment (e.g., Rusbult 1980), relatedness (Reis et al. 2000), and sex (Muisse et al. 2013), that will satisfy their need to belong, whereas self-protection goals pull people to distance themselves from negative emotions (Lemay et al. 2012), real or anticipated rejection (Stinson et al. 2009), and social pain (e.g., MacDonald and Leary 2005). Although connection and self-protection goals are conceptually independent (Murray et al. 2008), they are often linked in everyday life. That is, securing social connections that satisfy the need to belong and yield rewards—such as acceptance, love, and positive regard—usually means exposing oneself to the possibility of rejection and social costs, including humiliation, exclusion, and negative evaluation (e.g., Kelley and Thibault 1978; Murray et al. 2006). For example, self-disclosure increases intimacy between social partners, but it simultaneously leaves one vulnerable to rejection by exposing one's inner thoughts, feelings, or dreams, which can be exploited by an untrustworthy partner (Gaucher et al. 2012). Thus, when both motivations are activated, as they are when one's relational value is threatened (Murray et al.

2008), people experience a motivational conflict between wanting to approach connectedness and wanting to avoid rejection. How people typically resolve this conflict is largely determined by the self-esteem system.

A large body of research suggests that global self-esteem is a key determinant of people's chronic patterns of responding to real, imagined, past, or future threats to their relational value (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1989; Cavallo et al. 2009; Lemay and Clark 2009; Murray et al. 2006; Murray et al. 2008; Wood and Forest 2011). In general, LSEs adopt a self-protective style, whereas HSEs adopt a connection-promoting style of responding to social threats. Therefore, when they experience a motivational approach-avoid conflict, LSEs suppress the goal of pursuing connection in favor of the goal of protecting the self from rejection (Murray et al. 2008). In contrast, the same motivational conflict prompts HSEs to suppress the goal of protecting the self from rejection in favor of the goal of pursuing connection with others. For example, Cavallo et al. (2012; Study 1) threatened participants' confidence in their perceived regard from their romantic partner, and then measured participants' connection motivations. When threatened, HSEs reported greater connection motivations than LSEs. Similarly, Cameron et al. (2010) made salient the possibility of rejection (a threat to relational value), and then measured participants' recall of words related to self-protection. Compared to a no-threat control condition, LSEs recalled more protection words when threatened. In contrast, HSEs appeared to suppress self-protection goals when threatened (see also Murray et al. 2008, Study 7). Thus, global self-esteem plays a social-regulatory role by determining whether people respond to belonging threats with connection or self-protection.

Just as global self-esteem determines signature social motivations, it also determines signature social behavior. Across a wide range of social contexts and for a wide range of behaviors, when relational value is threatened (in either a real or imagined way), HSEs behave in ways that increase closeness to their interaction partner, whereas LSEs behave in ways that protect the self

from the rejection that they seem to anticipate. Such self-esteem differences in social behavior are evident in romantic relationships (Murray et al. 2006), platonic friendships (Gaucher et al. 2012), and during relationship initiation (Cameron et al. 2010). Self-esteem differences are also evident for a wide range of behaviors, including communicating with friends (Gaucher et al. 2012), romantic-partner reports of people's critical behavior (e.g., Marigold et al. 2010), group-joining decisions (Anthony et al. 2007a), likeable behavior (Cameron et al. 2010), warm or agentic behavior (Stinson et al. 2012), and directness of initiation behavior (Cameron et al. 2013a). For example, on the day following a conflict in their romantic relationships (a threat to one's relational value), HSEs attempt to repair their relationship by seeking closeness with their romantic partner, whereas LSEs attempt to limit their risk of rejection by emotionally distancing themselves from their partner (Murray et al. 2002). In addition, when the possibility of rejection by one's partner is present during romantic relationship initiation, HSEs use very direct and obvious methods of relationship initiation, whereas LSEs remain cautious and circumspect in their initiation behaviors (Cameron et al. 2013a).

The preceding discussion may lead readers to question the evolutionary adaptiveness of global self-esteem: If global self-esteem is adaptive, how can one explain LSEs' seemingly chronic use of maladaptive, self-protective social strategies (i.e., strategies that likely hurt their social bonds and well-being; Stinson et al. 2008b)? First, we concede that LSEs' self-protective responses to social threats are probably maladaptive if one's goal is to repair a damaged social bond and maximize one's relational value. These are goals that HSEs are likely to espouse. However, if one's goal is to avoid additional damage to one's social bonds and protect oneself from further hurt and social pain—goals that are typically at the forefront of LSEs' minds (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1989)—then LSEs' self-protective response to social threats is indeed adaptive. In fact, given LSEs' diminished resources for coping (Baumeister et al. 2003) and their typically pessimistic expectations concerning the likeli-

hood of acceptance in a given situation (Stinson et al. 2009), self-protection seems especially adaptive. Second, LSEs' signature self-protective behavior is not immutable. Across a variety of social contexts and for a variety of behaviors, when the threat of rejection is absent, and instead the security of acceptance is guaranteed, LSEs will behave in connection-promoting ways (e.g., Anthony et al. 2007a; Cameron et al. 2010; Cameron et al. 2013). For example, when people are induced to think about compliments from a friend in an abstract manner, a technique that bypasses LSEs' typical defenses and allows them to accurately perceive the high relational value conveyed by the compliment (Marigold et al. 2007), LSEs are just as open and self-disclosing as HSEs (a connection-promoting behavior; Gaucher et al. 2012). When the specter of possible rejection is eliminated, LSEs seem to seize the opportunity to safely satisfy their connection motives by engaging in connecting behaviors like self-disclosure (Gaucher et al. 2012), direct relationship initiation behaviors (Cameron et al. 2013), or the pursuit of novel social opportunities (Anthony et al. 2007a). Thus, for LSEs, connection behaviors are most likely to occur in response to strongly positive relational-value feedback and assured belonging, whereas for HSEs, connection behaviors are most likely to occur in response to negative relational-value feedback and threats to belonging.

“How Can I Judge the Relational Value of Others Before Committing to A Long-Term Bond?”

Thus far, we have described how the self-esteem system monitors cues and provides intrapersonal signals concerning one's relational value, how the system determines whether relational-value feedback is valid and thus actionable, and how the system determines motivational and behavioral responses to threats to relational value. Each of these functions relies on *one's own* self-esteem (either state or trait) to resolve important interpersonal dilemmas. However, we suggest that people also rely on *their interaction partners'*

self-esteem to resolve yet another important interpersonal dilemma: “How can I judge the relational value of others?”

Determining the relational value of potential interpersonal partners is a crucial social task. Forming a social bond with another person, be it a romantic, platonic, or workplace bond, requires that one invest in that bond. If one chooses well, then one's investment will be returned in benefits afforded by that bond. However, if one chooses poorly, then one's investments into the bond may not be returned, and one's relational outcomes will suffer (e.g., Thibaut and Kelley 1959). Thus, the ability to form an impression of potential partners' relational value early in a relationship would be highly adaptive. Indeed, the earlier such an evaluation can occur, the better. The economics of human relationships dictate that as time passes, investments increase, and increasing investments result in increasing commitment (Rusbult et al. 1994). Hence, the longer one spends in a relationship with a poorly chosen partner, the harder it is to end that relationship, and the greater costs one will incur as a result of the original poor choice.

Sadly, assessing a potential interaction partners' relational value is easier said than done. With the exception of easily observable traits, like physical attractiveness and social skills, evaluating the many traits, skills, and abilities that comprise relational value takes time and a depth of person knowledge that is simply not possible during relationship formation (e.g., Anthony et al. 2007a). For example, the traits most desired in a romantic partner include loyalty and kindness (e.g., Fletcher et al. 2000), yet those same traits take about 9 months to assess accurately (Stinson et al. 2008a). This unfortunate reality creates a “catch-22” situation: People should not commit to a relationship until they can assess a potential partners' relational value, but people cannot assess relational value until they are in a long-term (and presumably committed) relationship.

Humans have developed a few solutions to this dilemma. One solution is that people tend to rely on easily observable traits like physical attractiveness to judge others' relational value

(Anthony et al. 2007b). However, we suggest that humans have evolved yet another solution to the “catch-22” situation of judging others’ relational value. To determine the relational value of a potential interaction partner, an observer will rely on the opinion of the person who knows that potential partner better than anyone else: The potential partner him or herself. Thus, an observer will use a *sociometer proxy* to judge the relational value of the potential partner, relying on the partner’s own chronic perceived relational value (i.e., global self-esteem) to judge the potential interaction partner’s relational value (Cameron et al. 2013). Knowing a potential interaction partner’s self-esteem would convey meaningful information about their relational value. People with lower self-esteem are more depressed, neurotic, less satisfied with life (see Baumeister et al. 2003), less healthy (e.g., Stinson et al. 2008b), and more likely to engage in delinquent, anti-social (Donnellan et al. 2005) activities. All of those traits and behaviors are undesirable, suggesting that a sociometer proxy would be adaptive, allowing individuals to avoid undesirable relational partners.

Growing evidence suggests that observers do rely on others’ self-esteem to judge others’ relational value. For example, observers led to believe that an preferred-sex target has lower self-esteem will conclude that the target is lower in mate value (i.e., sex-specific, consensually desired traits) than an ostensibly higher-self-esteem, preferred-sex target (Zeigler-Hill and Myers 2011). More generally, when explicitly labeled as possessing lower self-esteem, targets are evaluated more negatively on socially valued traits like warmth and competence, compared to their ostensibly higher self-esteem counterparts (Cameron et al. 2013). For example, Cameron et al. (2013) asked observers to rate male and female targets’ warmth based on short 1-min videos of very warm and friendly, or cold and aloof, behavior. Importantly, participants were told that the targets had either lower or higher self-esteem. Results revealed a main effect of target behavior, such that targets exhibiting warmer behavior were perceived to be warmer than targets exhibiting colder behavior. But participants also

applied the sociometer proxy, rating the lower self-esteem targets as lower in warmth than the higher self-esteem targets, even though the actual behavior of the lower and higher self-esteem targets was identical (indeed, it was the same target in both self-esteem conditions). Thus, observers apply the sociometer proxy even when diagnostic information about particular traits is readily available. People also use the sociometer proxy to make important social decisions. For example, people are more likely to vote for political candidates said to possess higher self-esteem than candidates said to possess lower self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill and Myers 2009), and people anticipate that they will like higher self-esteem-interaction partners more than lower self-esteem-interaction partners (Cameron et al. 2013).

The adaptiveness of the sociometer proxy rests on two assumptions. First, people must possess lay theories of self-esteem that generally map onto the sociometer model; that is, people must be aware that self-esteem reflects one’s worth as a person. This appears to be the case. Wikipedia defines self-esteem as an individual’s “evaluation of his or her own worth” (“Self-Esteem,” 2013), and individuals raised within North American culture can readily relay a similar definition when asked (Cameron and Allary 2013). Second, people must be able to observe and judge others’ self-esteem. This also appears to be true. People use a variety of social cues to infer others’ self-esteem, including appearance (Naumann et al. 2009), and the possession of socially valued traits (Zeigler-Hill et al. 2013). However, the accuracy of these observations may be questionable. The cues that people utilize to judge self-esteem are not ideal indicators (Naumann et al. 2009). Thus, in both brief interactions (e.g., a three-minute video; Zeigler-Hill et al. 2013) and in long-term relationships (e.g., Lemay and Dudley 2011), observer impressions of self-esteem are only modestly correlated with the actual self-esteem of targets (i.e., correlations around 0.30). However, the sociometer proxy may be calibrated to err on the side of false alarms when detecting low self-esteem, because incorrectly rejecting a higher-self-esteem partner may be less costly than incorrectly accepting a lower-self-esteem partner.

Simple correlations between observer ratings and actual self-esteem cannot detect such a complex model. So, although it is clear that people's absolute judgments of others' self-esteem contain only a kernel of truth, it is still possible that people's judgments of others' self-esteem are adaptive and perform an important social-regulatory function.

Summary

We suggest that the self-esteem system helps people optimize their interactions with others in part by providing answers to four pressing interpersonal dilemmas concerning relational value. First, the self-esteem system assesses one's own relational value by monitoring the environment for cues concerning one's relational value, and signaling high relational value with increases in SSE and low relational value with decreases in SSE. Second, the self-esteem system provides a stable benchmark—in the form of global self-esteem—against which incoming relational-value feedback can be compared, deeming inconsistent feedback to be unbelievable. Yet, self-esteem-inconsistent feedback also causes feelings of uncertainty that may prompt changes in self-esteem if such inconsistent feedback is encountered repeatedly over time, thus keeping global self-esteem in touch with social reality. Third, global self-esteem provides guidance for action, with higher self-esteem pushing individuals to pursue connection and lower self-esteem pulling individuals to pursue self-protection; or the reverse pattern of action when social risk is very low. Fourth, people use a sociometer proxy to judge the relational value of potential interaction partners, relying on a potential partner's own global self-esteem to judge his or her value. These functions of the self-esteem system reveal that self-esteem is not merely an epiphenomenon. Instead, the self-esteem system can be conceptualized as a multifaceted drive system shaped by evolution to provide humans with the tools they need to successfully navigate their social worlds.

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