

Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations

Sociometer Model

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Despite widespread public interest in the topic, many people do not realize that there are numerous definitions of self-esteem. Some psychologists conceptualize self-esteem as a fundamental human need to feel good about oneself, some conceptualize self-esteem as a reasoned tally of one's positive attributes, and still others conceptualize self-esteem as an emotional state. The *sociometer model of self-esteem* proposes that self-esteem is an interpersonal monitora *sociometer* that provides real-time feedback about the quality of one's social bonds and provokes behaviors aimed at maintaining positive social relationships with one's ingroup members. Hence, this theory, proposed by Mark Leary and his colleagues, is a distinctly social-psychological theory of self-esteem because it proposes that the self-esteem system plays an important role in helping people navigate their social worlds.

How exactly does self-esteem perform this important interpersonal function? Leary suggests that to answer this question, one must first understand the general nature of *regulatory systems*. According to evolutionary psychologists, the human mind is composed of a number of distinct regulatory modules that evolved to solve unique psychological, physical, or social problems that influenced survival or reproduction in the prehistoric past. For example, the pain regulatory system evolved to help people avoid hurt and injury. Like all regulatory modules, the pain system comprises monitoring, signaling, and behavioral components: The pain system monitors the body for signs of injury, then signals a potential injury with feelings of pain; these feelings of pain motivate behaviors aimed at avoiding further physical damage.

Just as avoiding injury was essential for survival and reproduction in humans' evolutionary past, so too was maintaining acceptance by one's group. People depended on their group for protection from predators, for help gathering food and caring for young, and for care and protection during bouts of illness or physical incapacitation. Without such support, an individual would have been at a severe disadvantage in the biological race to produce healthy offspring and raise them to adulthood. Because of the importance of social bonds for survival and reproduction, sociometer theory proposes that people possess a regulatory module that evolved to ensure that people are at least minimally accepted by their group while also avoiding outright rejection. Specifically,

the self-esteem system is proposed to be an interpersonal monitora sociometer that performs exactly this function.

First, one's sociometer regularly, effortlessly, and often automatically monitors the environment for cues regarding one's *relational value*, which is the degree to which one is valued by others. Such cues may come from the external environment in the form of social feedback or from interpersonal experiences, but people may also glean information about their relational value from their memories of past social experiences or from their anticipation of future social events. In response to such social cues concerning one's relational value, the sociometer produces a signal that indicates [p. 830 ↓] whether acceptance or rejection is imminent. If social feedback suggests that a person's relational value is high, the person experiences increases in *state self-esteem* (i.e., transitory increases in feelings of self-worth). In contrast, if feedback suggests that a person's relational value is low, then the person experiences decreases in state self-esteem (i.e., transitory decreases in feelings of self-worth).

In turn, such changes in state self-esteem are thought to motivate social behaviors. If relational value is high, the positive affective signal motivates people to approach a desired social situation or target, whereas if relational value is low, the aversive affective signal motivates people either to work to repair the damaged relationship or, if repair is not possible or is too risky, to avoid the relationship and thus avoid the hurt feelings that it prompts. In this latter instance, people would then be motivated to find substitute sources of acceptance through building new relationships in the group, thereby replenishing their depleted sociometer.

The preceding discussion has focused on the role played by state self-esteem in regulating social relationships. However, *global self-esteem* (a person's overall sense of self-worth) plays an equally important regulatory role. Research suggests that people rely on their global self-esteem to predict future interpersonal outcomes: Individuals with higher self-esteem (HSEs) anticipate acceptance from future relational partners, whereas individuals with lower self-esteem (LSEs) anticipate a more chilly interpersonal reception. These differing social expectations seem to have a marked influence on people's behavioral response to social cues concerning their relational value.

For example, HSEs eagerly seek new social opportunities whereas LSEs remain hesitant to enter novel social situations unless acceptance is virtually guaranteed. In addition, LSEs tend to respond to hurt feelings by avoiding the person who caused them pain, whereas HSEs respond with efforts to repair the relationship. For example, in romantic relationships, on the day after a conflict, 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 from their partner.

In summary, sociometer theory proposes that both state and global self-esteem play important roles in helping people regulate their interpersonal relationships. Transitory increases or decreases in state self-esteem provide real-time feedback about the quality of people's social bonds, whereas people rely on their global self-esteem to predict future social outcomes and choose interpersonal behaviors that will minimize the risk of rejection and optimize the probability of acceptance.

Implications for Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

An important implication of the sociometer model of self-esteem is that one's feelings of self-worth are ultimately determined by the group to which one belongs. If the group is generally accepting, then an individual will have higher self-esteem; if the group is ambivalent about one's value or is outright rejecting, then an individual will have lower self-esteem. But what factors determine an individual's value as a relational partner?

An individual's social value will be determined in large part by the individual's *social role*. Social roles are positions that one can hold either within a larger social structure or within a particular relationship. Other people will expect and desire occupants of a given social role to possess the traits that allow occupants of that role to successfully fulfill role requirements. Typically, such role requirements constitute behaviors that will benefit the other members of one's ingroup. For example, the female gender role fundamentally involves the adoption of a relational self-construal, wherein one's primary motivation is to maintain harmonious relationships. In reflection of this, girls are encouraged to develop other-oriented, communal traits, and grown women who

possess traits such as warmth, kindness, and responsiveness are highly valued as relationship partners.

Because an individual's social value is ultimately determined by the social roles he or she occupies, research suggests that the monitoring component of the self-esteem system is also affected by one's social role. For example, consider the role of an opera singer. The best opera singers possess musicality, emotional expressiveness, and perfect pitch. More important, opera singers who possess those qualities are generally admired by their peer group. This association with actual acceptance leads opera singers' self-esteem system to become particularly sensitive to feedback about such traits, [p. 831 ↓] such that positive feedback leads to increases in state self-esteem, and negative feedback leads to decreases in state self-esteem. In contrast, mathematical abilities are not predictive of acceptance for opera singers, presumably because mathematical abilities will not benefit an opera singer's ingroup, so opera singers' state self-esteem is not sensitive to feedback about mathematical abilities. Conversely, in the social role of a physicist, mathematical skills *do* predict one's relational value and offer potential benefits to ingroup members, whereas singing abilities fade in importance. Hence, a physicist's state self-esteem is sensitive to feedback about his or her math skills but not about his or her singing abilities. It is important to remember that the opera singer and the physicist did not choose to have sociometers that monitor social feedback about singing abilities or mathematical skills. Their ingroup members made this choice for them by accepting or rejecting occupants of those social roles who possessed, or lacked, singing ability and mathematical abilities, respectively.

This suggests that the sociometer is able to attend selectively to certain types of social feedback. This may explain why members of stigmatized social groups do not necessarily have lower self-esteem. Research suggests that members of stigmatized groups have a number of protective strategies that allow them to maintain relatively high self-esteem in the face of negative social feedback. They may attribute negative social feedback to prejudice; they may compare their social outcomes to those of other ingroup members rather than to those of outgroup members; and they may devalue traits or attributes on which their group fares poorly. By using these techniques, members of stigmatized groups may be directing their sociometers to focus on feedback

from the people whose opinions matter most for survival and reproduction: one's ingroup members.

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See also

Further Readings

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