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Sociometer Theory

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Definition

Sociometer theory, one of the prominent theories about the nature and function of self-esteem, argues that self-esteem monitors the degree of social acceptance that one enjoys from one's social circle and alerts the self to any threats to belonging that may arise.

Introduction

Mark Leary and colleagues developed sociometer theory to explain the nature and function of the self-esteem system. As outlined in Leary and colleagues' initial theoretical and empirical papers on the subject (Leary and Downs 1995; Leary et al. 1995), ancestral human beings faced an important adaptive dilemma: How to ensure that they attain and maintain the high-quality social bonds that are necessary for survival? According to sociometer theory, the answer to this evolutionary dilemma was the development of the self-esteem system. Self-esteem – or one's sense of worth or value as a person – monitors the degree of social acceptance that one enjoys from one's social circle and alerts the self to any threats to belonging that may arise. In the decades since its original publication, sociometer theory has emerged as one of the most well-known theories of self-esteem. In the passages to come, we will describe sociometer theory in detail, discuss the empirical support for the theory, and highlight the ways in which the theory has been refined since its original inception.

The Sociometer as an Adaptive Function

Belonging to social groups is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Indeed, as social animals, group membership was necessary for ancestral humans' very survival. People who were valued and accepted by others in their social group were more likely to be protected in times of danger and helped in times of distress. Moreover, those who were accepted by others would have been granted opportunities to mate and pass on their genes to the next generation. Given the importance of acceptance for survival and reproduction, it is highly probable that natural selection shaped human psychology to include a system to monitor the environment for cues concerning one's belonging and to alert the individual to any threats to that belonging. Such signals could then motivate the individual to engage in behavior aimed at achieving acceptance and avoiding rejection. According to sociometer theory, the self-esteem system serves exactly these

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functions (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary and Downs 1995; Leary et al. 1995).

The sociometer model of self-esteem includes both a state and a global component (Leary 2004). State self-esteem reflects one's in-the-moment feelings of belongingness, providing real-time feedback concerning the quality of one's social bonds in the form of increases or decreases in state self-esteem and self-directed affect (i.e., feeling good or bad *about oneself*). The sociometer definition of global self-esteem is similarly interpersonal, positing that over time, specific experiences of acceptance and rejection are internalized to form a relatively stable, and global, view of one's worth as a social partner. Individuals with higher self-esteem feel that they were, are, and will be valued by others, whereas individuals with lower self-esteem doubt their value as relational partners and project these doubts onto future relationships. Whereas state self-esteem is highly reactive to social experiences, global self-esteem is more stable. Although it can change in response to important interpersonal experiences, in general, global self-esteem is remarkably stable across the lifespan (Trzesniewski et al. 2003).

When sociometer theory emerged in the late 1990s, it reflected a strong departure from conceptions of self-esteem at the time (for a discussion, see Leary 2005). Then, dominant perspectives on self-esteem included models derived from self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1995), which proposed that high self-esteem should be intrinsic and independent of one's social experiences, and terror management theory (Pyszczynski et al. 1997), which proposed that people maintained high self-esteem in an attempt to stave off the fear of death. But perhaps the most dominant perspective presumed that people possessed a self-esteem motive that drove them to seek and maintain high self-esteem simply because having high self-esteem was an enjoyable experience see Blaine & Crocker, 1993. After all, it feels good to feel good about oneself. Sociometer theory, however, suggested that this conception of self-esteem mistakenly focussed on the affective signals generated by the self-esteem system, and by doing so, failed to ask why such affective signals existed in the first place. By asking this question, sociometer theory identified a new drive for the self-esteem system, specifically, the need to belong. The ultimate goal of the system, then, was not to maintain high self-esteem per se but to maintain high-quality social bonds. When the desired level of belonging was obtained, then self-esteem would remain comfortably high.

But what type of empirical evidence is needed to support the sociometer model of self-esteem? Sociometer theory generates three main hypotheses concerning the nature and function of self-esteem. First, if the self-esteem system is a sociometer, then state self-esteem should fluctuate in response to experiences of social acceptance and rejection, and global self-esteem should be responsive to repeated social experiences in the longer term. Second, if global self-esteem is a gauge reflecting an overall summary of one's social worth, then global self-esteem should be strongly correlated with people's perceptions of their social worth., Third, if the self-esteem system functions to help people maintain high-quality social bonds, then drops in state self-esteem should lead to behavior aimed at repairing a threatened social bond or avoiding the bond altogether if repair is impossible, and global self-esteem should regulate people's chronic social strategies. We describe the evidence supporting each of these hypotheses next.

Evidence Supporting Sociometer Theory

Self-esteem is responsive to social acceptance and rejection. The most well-validated sociometer hypothesis concerns the responsiveness of state self-esteem to social experiences of acceptance and rejection. Research using a wide range of methods has consistently demonstrated that acceptance causes increases in state self-esteem whereas rejection causes decreases in self-esteem. These effects emerge when the cues concerning acceptance or rejection are received in the lab in the form of false feedback, when participants imagine being accepted or rejected, and when participants recall a past experience of acceptance or rejection (e.g., Leary et al. 1995; Stinson et al.

2010). The functioning of this signaling component of the self-esteem system appears to operate largely outside of conscious awareness or control. For example, explicit rejection feedback causes decreased state self-esteem even for participants who claim that their self-esteem is not influenced by the acceptance of others, (Leary et al. 2003). One criticism of this body of evidence argues that these effects will not generalize beyond the lab. In much of the existing research, participants receive explicit acceptance and rejection feedback in an artificial laboratory setting, a context that is quite different from the relatively ambiguous and often nonverbal cues that people receive concerning their social worth in daily life. However, recent research utilizing more naturalistic methods demonstrates that even when feedback is less explicit, nonverbal, or takes place in the real-world, social inclusion affects state self-esteem. For example, Lamer et al. (2015) observed that viewing angry expressions directed towards oneself (a nonverbal indicator of rejection) caused reductions in state self-esteem. Moreover, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that daily fluctuations in social acceptance and rejection predict corresponding daily changes in state self-esteem (Denissen et al. 2008). Furthermore, although most evidence to support the responsiveness of the self-esteem system to social acceptance and rejection concerns state self-esteem, numerous longitudinal studies have shown that global self-esteem also changes over time in response to repeated experiences of acceptance and rejection (Denissen et al. 2008; Stinson et al. 2008).

Another interesting insight into the functioning of the self-esteem system that emerged from this empirical literature concerns the differential responsiveness of the system to acceptance and rejection. In general, the self-esteem system is more responsive to rejection than acceptance (Leary 2005). In other words, rejection decreases self-esteem more than acceptance increases self-esteem. Leary reasoned that this seems sensible on two fronts. First, most social norms dictate acceptance, and thus the relative frequency of acceptance feedback may desensitize the self-esteem system to such cues. Second, most monitoring systems, like the pain and hunger systems, are designed to signal when a problem occurs. Similarly, the self-esteem system is highly reactive to rejection because it is rejection, not acceptance, that endangers the individual. Moreover, global self-esteem appears to moderate the sensitivity of the self-esteem system to detecting, and reacting to, threats to belonging (Leary 2004). People with chronically lower global self-esteem are especially hypervigilant in detecting rejection and more reactive when rejection occurs, whereas people with higher self-esteem are relatively immune to all but the most obvious signs of rejection.

Overall, the body of evidence supports sociometer theory by demonstrating that self-esteem is responsive to acceptance and rejection experiences in the moment and over time and across a variety of laboratory and naturalistic settings.

Global self-esteem is associated with perceptions of social worth. If it is true that self-esteem is a sociometer indexing people's social worth, then self-esteem should be correlated with people's perceptions of their social worth. Once again, ample evidence supports this hypothesis. For example, Anthony et al. (2007a) demonstrated that self-esteem is most closely related to self-perceptions of traits that people believe will garner acceptance from others, like attractiveness and popularity, but is less strongly related to traits that are more socially neutral, like tidiness and creativity. This association is thought to exist because global self-esteem influences self-views in a top-down manner, exerting its strongest influence on traits that are most closely aligned with the belongingness motive that drives the self-esteem system. The attunement of self-esteem to socially valued traits is so specific that self-esteem even tracks which traits are most important to social success in a given social role (Anthony et al. 2007a). For example, women are most socially valued when they possess communal qualities like warmth and kindness, whereas such traits are more socially neutral for men. Reflecting these gender roles, women's self-esteem is moderately correlated with self-views of communal qualities, whereas men's self-esteem is unrelated to self-views of such traits. Similarly, MacDonald et al. (2003) asked participants to

report their self-evaluations for several traits and also to report whether people generally accepted others who possessed those same traits. They found that possessing traits believed to be valuable for social acceptance was also linked to having higher self-esteem. Taken together, this evidence supports the sociometer hypothesis that the self-esteem system tracks social worth.

The self-esteem system regulates responses to acceptance and rejection. According to sociometer theory, experiencing a drop in self-esteem should motivate the individual to engage in behavior that will reestablish acceptance or otherwise minimize the threat to belonging. Generally speaking, research supports the claim that people do indeed alter their social motivation and behavior in response to threats to acceptance. However, their behavioral response depends on whether they are responding to the person who rejected them or to a potentially new social partner. For example, threats to belonging lead individuals to report a greater desire to interact with novel others by making new friends and also motivates them to form more positive impressions of novel interaction partners (Maner et al. 2007). Importantly, this heightened prosocial motivation is not directed towards the social partners who were the source of the original belongingness threat, but rather, it is directed towards novel social partners who could potentially salve the threatened need to belong. So how do people react to social partners who have rejected or ostracized them? Typically, people react with aggression (e.g., Twenge et al. 2001). Such a reaction may reflect an attempt to distance from a threatening social bond and thereby minimize additional distress. Thus, people appear to self-protectively redirect their affiliation motives away from hurtful bonds and towards novel bonds when they experience a threat to belonging.

People's responses to rejection also appear to be domain-specific, such that they do not necessarily generalize beyond the social context in which the initial rejection occurred. For example, people who have been romantically rejected experience a decrease in their state self-esteem, which in turn dampens their mating aspirations (Kavanagh et al. 2010). However, such effects did not generalize to their other self-evaluations or their friendship aspirations, suggesting that the regulatory function of the self-esteem system is finely tuned and discriminating.

Global self-esteem also directs motivational and behavioral reactions to social situations that involve the possibility of rejection, as when meeting new people or asking a friend to help you move. In these risky situations, people who have had relatively consistent histories of rejection – and thus have lower global self-esteem – often respond with a self-protective motivational strategy aimed at minimizing the pain they would feel should rejection occur (Murray et al. 2006). People who have had relatively consistent histories of acceptance – and thus have higher trait self-esteem – approach such risky situations with a promotive motivational strategy aimed at connecting with others. For example, in a risky relationship-initiation context, lower self-esteem people engage in cautious underdetection of acceptance whereas those with higher self-esteem engage in optimistic overdetection of acceptance (Cameron et al. 2010). Moreover, these strategies influence social decision-making (Anthony et al. 2007b). People with lower self-esteem are only willing to join new groups when acceptance is guaranteed, whereas the likelihood of acceptance does not influence higher self-esteem people's decision-making. Additionally, the differential approaches of those lower and higher in self-esteem in response to social risk influence actual behavior. In risky and threatening social contexts, people with lower self-esteem exhibit fewer warm behaviors and more cold and rejecting behaviors towards others whereas those with higher self-esteem engage in warmer behaviors more likely to achieve acceptance (Cameron et al. 2010; Stinson et al. 2015). Even in ongoing romantic relationships, the risk of rejection induces lower self-esteem individuals to self-protectively view their partners more negatively than higher self-esteem individuals (e.g., Murray et al. 2002). These motivational strategies also reach beyond the interpersonal domain. For example, after being reminded of social risk, lower self-esteem individuals are less likely than those with higher

self-esteem to make riskier decisions in non-romantic domains, such as financial investments (Cavallo et al. 2009). In sum, the regulatory function of self-esteem is far reaching, influencing not only interactions with novel others but also with committed relationship partners, and influencing a wide range of perceptions, decisions, and interpersonal behavior.

Conclusion

Over the last 20 years, sociometer theory has become a widely known and important theory of self-esteem, in part because of its theoretical parsimony and utility, but also because of the large body of literature supporting its fundamental tenets: (1) Self-esteem is responsive to social acceptance and rejection; (2) self-esteem is linked to perceptions of social worth; and (3) the self-esteem system regulates responses to social acceptance and rejection.

Cross-References

- ▶ Contingent Self-Esteem
- ▶ Need to Belong
- ▶ Self-Esteem
- ▶ Self-Esteem and Belongingness
- ▶ Self-Esteem and Security
- ▶ Self-Esteem and Social Status

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