A Relational Perspective on Self Esteem

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About the Author
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Abstract
A relational perspective on self-esteem suggests that it is our ability to connect in an authentic way, to bring ourselves fully into relationship where we are responded to with authenticity and respect, that most impacts our sense of personal well-being. Rather than emphasizing a sense of being special, unique, or “better than,” a relational model points to the basically contextual nature of our lives. In understanding a person’s feelings of confidence, strength, regard, and respect, we must be alert to the context in which the person is presently situated and also the context in which the person has grown up.

Abundant and distressing data suggests that women suffer from what is called poor self-esteem and that this lack of self-esteem profoundly affects their ability to function effectively in the world; specifically, this low self-esteem has been viewed as a powerful predisposing factor in the high incidence of depression in women. Research indicates that women suffer from major depression at twice the rate of men and that there are currently at least 7 million women in this country suffering with diagnosable depression (McGrath et al., 1990). A person’s sense of competence or self-efficacy has also been shown to influence how well she can overcome other clinical problems such as anxiety and fear (Lewinsohn et al., 1980). Furthermore, studies indicate that improved self-esteem in general may be psychotherapy’s most important outcome (Zilbergeld, 1983).

I would like to reexamine the concept of self-esteem from a relational point of view, but first let me review some of the existing ideas about self-esteem.

Traditional views of self-esteem
Traditional notions about self-esteem suggest that in addition to a self-concept which involves the images and beliefs we have about ourselves, we also evaluate ourselves; that is, we judge how well we meet certain ideals and standards we hold about ourselves. Self-esteem is often thought of as this evaluative component of the self. While much self evaluation is domain specific (e.g., I am good at biology, not physics; or I am a good tennis player, not a good skier), there is also a global sense of “I am a good/valuable person or not a valuable person.”

In our efforts to know our worth, we also compare ourselves to others, particularly in our highly competitive, individualistic society which encourages
such comparisons. For example, comparison with others is encouraged in families and school systems which emphasize competition and hierarchical evaluation of children. This path to achieving a sense of well-being is often distorted into feeling good only if one perceives oneself as “better than” someone else. It is as if feeling good about oneself in a competitively oriented, individualistic culture means “standing out” and being seen as superior to others.

Self-esteem as constructed in a “separate self” model thus represents the values of individualism: self versus other, self as safe in separation and superiority. A major imperative that shapes self-esteem in this culture is the effort to separate oneself from others and to see oneself as different and better than others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). As early as four years of age, American children reveal a clear tendency to underestimate the commonality of their desirable behavior; this has been called the “false uniqueness effect” and it is one way of enhancing self-esteem (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Pressure to be different, unique, special, “better than” may be more characteristic of male standards of worth but this approach is at the core of many definitions of self-esteem in this culture. In contrast to this, in a relational model, trying to feel good about oneself emphasizes a person’s capacity to form good connection and to be empathic, which involves a certain sense of commonality with the other person.

As Harter (1993) notes, “beginning in middle childhood, therefore, one adopts the cultural preoccupation with how individuals are different from one another—with competition, with who is the ‘best’, with who ascends to the top. Thus, how one measures up to one’s peers, to societal standards, becomes the filter through which judgments about the self pass” (p. 94). One of the tragedies of self-esteem is that it is built on hierarchical comparisons—feeling better than someone else often depends on making someone else feel inferior. It also often involves an emphasis on dominance of one individual or one group over another. Membership in a privileged, dominant group is based on comparison with another so-called inferior group; feeling better in one’s group is based on seeing the other group as “lesser than.” Thus people compare by skin color, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, education, and so forth.

In this kind of a system, for example, female subordination becomes essential to the maintenance of male dominance and hence of male well-being and masculine self-esteem. This occurs often at an unconscious, sometimes subtle level. The socialization away from mutuality or equality in primary heterosexual relationships and nuclear families likely contributes to the poor self-esteem of girls and women and to the inflated self-esteem and sense of entitlement of boys and men. Schools and work settings which render girls and women invisible and inaudible also perpetuate this tendency for males to feel confident, entitled, and empowered and for females to feel disempowered and disregarded. The heterosexist imperative is also important to maintaining this power imbalance in the culture. Lesbians and gays, in addition to honoring their sexual preferences, also make a powerful political statement in their challenge to this paired, heterosexual context for maintaining existing imbalances in power and self-esteem between men and women.

A relational model

Most approaches to understanding self-esteem are anchored in the model of “separate self” which informs Western psychology. This view of self emphasizes separation from others, boundedness, uniqueness, self definition, distinctness, and difference from others; control, mastery over nature, and power over others are highly prized. There is a premium not only on being unique but on freedom from being influenced by one’s environment or other people. This is a decidedly non-mutual pattern.

The values and ideals a culture sets forth for individuals greatly affect the way self-esteem is experienced. In many non-Western, Asian, and African cultures there is an imperative to fit in, to relate, to place relationships at the center of one’s definition and sense of goodness. Thus in Japanese society, self assertion is seen as immature (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Similarly within Western cultures, there are often double standards for ideals of personhood: the male, dominant ideal and the female or marginalized ideal.

Central to a sense of “well-being in connection” is the capacity to participate in the creation of a lively, mutual, and empowering relationship with another person. This does not eliminate the very real sense of accomplishment that also arises in doing a task successfully or creating something new. But if one’s sense of personhood is heavily invested in relationship and mutuality, then one’s sense of self-worth might also be seen as largely