

Empirical and Conceptual Application of Self-Esteem: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

For approximately a century, the topic of self-esteem has been an increasingly popular subject in academic writing and social work practice. This article discusses the findings from a review of 167 articles that either conceptually or empirically explored the topic of self-esteem. Findings indicated that self-esteem is not well operationalized, and its use in literature is inconsistent and ill-defined. A widely accepted definition and conceptualization of self-esteem has not been established; thus, corresponding measurement tools are varied in purpose and definition. Despite recognition of a poorly defined and measured concept, researchers have continued to measure self-esteem and have made causal inferences regarding assessment and intervention strategies. Consequently, this confusion leads to unreliable methods for assessment and intervention. Further research is needed to clarify the definition of self-esteem, create conceptual consensus amongst professionals, and determine more consistent implications for practice and future research.

The impact of self-esteem on human behavior has been discussed by social work practitioners and academicians for decades. Numerous studies have attributed varying levels of self-esteem to multiple social, behavioral, and interpersonal problems (Blaine, Rodman, & Newman, 2007; Cohane & Pope, 2001; Jumper 1995; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Bushwell, 1999; Taylor & Montgomery 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2001; Uziel, 2007), topics all of understandable concern to social workers. However, the dimensions of the term self-esteem, its operationalization, measurement, and applicability in health promotion and social work remain in question (Goodson, Buhi, & Dunsmore, 2006). The authors hypothesize that these discrepancies result in misleading measurement and interpretation, potentially leading to inaccurate clinical assessment and treatment approaches for clients. Therefore, this review examines the conceptual and empirical application of the term self-esteem and potential implications for its misuse in social work research and practice.

Background and Relevance of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has been examined and interpreted for over a century (Kling et al., 1999). It has been empirically connected to hundreds of variables that are of particular interest to social workers, written about in thousands of publications across a variety of fields (i.e., psychology, sociology, social work, education, medicine, and business), and has become a term heard in households, therapy sessions, business offices, probation departments, educational settings, athletic events, and a multitude of other environments (Alavi & Askaripur, 2003; Ando, Tsuda, & Moorey, 2006; Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Gotwals & Wayment, 2002; Valliant, Jensen, & Raven-Brook, 1995).

A simple search in PsycINFO for articles containing “self-esteem” produces more than 32,000 articles, revealing the first article including the topic of self-esteem was published in

1805. In the 1960s, however, discussions of self-esteem increased substantially in professional journals. It was during this time that the first and most widely utilized measure of self-esteem was developed by Morris Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 1965).

To illustrate the increasing importance of self-esteem in academic literature, a simple count of annually published articles was conducted. Between January 2000 and December 2004, 5,725 articles were published, and between January 2005 and December 2009, 6,645 articles were published. In total, 12,370 publications containing the topic of self-esteem have been published just in PsycINFO over the past decade, constituting over a third of all published articles from the initial search. Thus, the topic of self-esteem is clearly of increased relevance to researchers, educators, and practitioners.

While the topic of self-esteem has been predominately influenced by the field of psychology, social workers draw heavily from this work. Many of the theoretical frameworks to which social workers adhere involve the concept of self-esteem and its impact on behavior (Greene, 2008). Thus, given the relevance and utilization of the concept of self-esteem in the field of social work, the authors sought to understand the extent to which discord existed in the definition, conceptualization, and measurement of self-esteem in conceptual and empirical literature.

Methodology

For feasibility purposes, the rigor of a comprehensive systematic review was not employed; however, a systematic method was utilized in attempts to attain comprehensive results. To assist the operationalization process, a common dictionary definition was used. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2008), self-esteem is defined as “a confidence and satisfaction in oneself: self-respect.” Using this definition, the authors searched a common social service database, PsycINFO, with the following search terms: “self-esteem,” “self-confidence,” “self-satisfaction,” and “self-respect.” The search produced a sample of 33,981 articles. For feasibility purposes, inclusion and exclusion criteria (described below) were used to focus the analysis.

Conceptual Analysis

To meet inclusion criteria for the conceptual analysis of self-esteem, the articles had to have (a) been published in a peer-reviewed journal and (b) been a meta-analysis, systematic review, or literature review. One hundred-sixty-seven articles were available and met inclusion criteria for the conceptual sample. Each article was analyzed for three components: (a) definition, (b) conceptualization, and (c) measurement of self-esteem.

Empirical Analysis

To meet inclusion criteria related to the empirical application of self-esteem, articles had to have (a) been published in a peer-reviewed journal, (b) been a meta-analysis or systematic literature review, (c) empirically examined the relationship between self-esteem and at least one additional variable, (d) identified methodology, and (e) reported all included studies. Thirty-two (n=32) publications met the inclusion criteria and comprised the final empirical sample.

Once articles were separated, they were each assessed for five components: (a) number of included studies; (b) specificity of described relationship between variable(s) and self-esteem; (c) inferred findings from measurement tool utilized; (d) whether inconsistency in definition,

measurement, and/or conceptualization was noted in literature review; and (e) whether the study solely utilized self-esteem measurement tools to measure self-esteem.

Conceptual Article Results

Definition of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem and self-concept. Of the articles reviewed, the term “self-concept” appeared more often than any other self-descriptive term in relation to self-esteem. Several authors used the two terms interchangeably with little to no differentiation between the two (Haney & Durlak, 1998; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2007; Lee, 2006). Some authors rationalized that the two terms distinctly complemented each other (Blyth & Traeger, 1983; Butler & Gasson, 2005; Davis-Kean & Sandler, 2001). Of the authors who did offer a rationale, explanations were inconsistent. Most frequently, researchers considered self-esteem to be a domain within self-concept (Garaigordobil, Perez, & Mozaz, 2008; Perry, Silvera, Neilands, Rosenvinge, & Hanssen, 2008). Other researchers, however, described just the opposite: self-concept as a domain of self-esteem (Miyahara & Piek, 2006). A high level of variance existed in how the two terms were used and resulted in confusing language and application to the professional setting.

Other self-descriptive terms. A number of discrepancies in the literature were also related to alternative self-descriptive terms, which authors often used interchangeably with self-esteem. Terms such as self-evaluation, self-respect, self-regard, self-worth, self-acceptance, self-approval, self-attitude, self-satisfaction, self-feeling, self-efficacy, self-schema, self-view, and self-image were all noted as interchangeable terms in the literature (Goodson, et al. 2005; Miyahara & Piek, 2006). In one example, the author listed the terms “self-concept, self-confidence, self-worth, self-image, and self-assurance” and noted “hereafter called ‘self-esteem’” (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2007, p.1070). In this article, the authors gave no explanation regarding how the five self-descriptive terms shared the same definition with self-esteem. It appeared as though it was enticing for researchers to rely on a “common sense” understanding of self-esteem, and therefore they believed interchanging terms did not warrant explanation.

Conceptualization of Self-Esteem

Global and domain specific self-esteem. Perhaps the most frequently accepted conceptualization of self-esteem was the recognition of two types of self-esteem: global and domain specific. Many researchers described global self-esteem as a person’s overall self-esteem, while domain specific self-esteem referred to a changing self-esteem given the specific environments (Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Some examples of specific environments studied included school/academic settings, home environment, and peer/social life (Coopersmith, 1981). When self-esteem measures were first identified and tested, they were primarily global (Winters, Myers, & Proud, 2002). However, Winters et al., (2002) further noted that recent evidence has suggested that the need for domain specific self-esteem measurement has called into question the validity and use of global scales.

Implicit and explicit self-esteem. Krizan and Suls (2008) noted that explicit self-esteem is “conventionally thought to reflect the operation of the rational, reflective system,” while implicit self-esteem was thought to “reflect the operation of the experiential, impulsive system” (p. 522). Some researchers suggested that in order to fully capture an individual’s self-esteem, both implicit and explicit measures must be examined. In the past decade, several measurement tools have been developed in attempts to measure implicit self-esteem by observing the automatic responses individuals have in reacting to different stimuli (Krizan & Suls, 2008).

Fazio and Olson (2003), however, questioned the reliability and validity of implicit measures, noting surprisingly low correlations among implicit measures. In reviewing the literature on the most commonly used scales to measure self-esteem, no implicit measures were listed.

Trait and state self-esteem. Rubin and Hewstone (1998) defined trait self-esteem as “the product of self-evaluations made over a relatively long period of time”, whereas state self-esteem was defined as “the product of self-evaluations carried out in the immediate present” (p.42). Some researchers believed that these two types of self-esteem coexisted and, similar to explicit and implicit, both must be measured to define a person’s self-esteem (Mruk, 2006). It is difficult, however, to determine where a conceptual line or connection may be drawn to ascertain how trait, state, implicit, explicit, global, and domain specific self-esteem might work together to provide a framework upon which researchers may build. There seemed to be a great amount of both overlap and discord between the six terms as they were utilized in the literature.

Measurement of Self-Esteem

Blascovich and Tomaka (1991) noted that over 200 measurements have been developed to measure self-esteem. Most were considered to be of questionable quality and were short-lived (Butler & Gasson, 2005). The five most utilized self-esteem measurement tools were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI; Coopersmith, 1981), Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS; Fitts & Warren, 1996), Peirs-Harris Self Concept Scale (PHSCS; Piers & Harris, 1969), Harter Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985), and Harter Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA; Harter, 1988). By far, the RSES and the SEI were cited most frequently. While each of these measures has gained recognition and popularity, each was considerably different from the other due to the interpretation in definition. This is a finding that is similar to that of Winters and colleagues’ review of self-esteem measurements (2002).

Cultural sensitivity. Of particular interest to social workers, there has been an increasing concern that self-esteem measures have not been sensitive to cultural differences and have been primarily designed for Western society (Butler & Gasson, 2005; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Recent researchers have discussed the differences of cultural values in Eastern and Western civilization and corresponding effects on self-esteem. For example, a prevalent norm of Western culture is individualism, while Eastern culture strongly emphasizes responsibility to the group. This fundamental distinction between cultures has offered a vastly different lens through which ideas about the role of self have been viewed. Several researchers have questioned the lack of cultural sensitivity in existing self-esteem measurements.

Faulty self-assessment. One of the articles that met conceptual inclusion devoted significant attention to the issue of faulty assessment. Due to the important findings and substantial implications this article offered regarding self-esteem, it was deemed relevant to devote a small section to highlight their review. Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004) conducted a systematic review examining the use of self-report across several different disciplines. Findings suggested that people have often over or underestimated themselves and did not accurately account for the influence of fear and anxiety. In addition, those that were considered to be highly “self-aware” have often reported something different than what the reality has been or will be. In an example, the authors discussed a study of assistant professors who were denied tenure. They found that the amount of time professors reported was needed to overcome the shock, versus the actual amount of time it took to recover, were vastly different. Assistant professors were, in fact, much more resilient than they had initially reported (Dunning et al., 2004). Taking

this study into account, self-esteem measures may be facing an additional problem. Almost all of the measurements utilized have been self-report and, further, all of the more valid and most widely used measures have been *solely* based on self-report.

Empirical Article Results

Measurement Tools

In line with previous research, results indicated that the RSES was the most commonly utilized measurement tool across studies. While there were nine scales used most frequently, over 31 different scales were identified. Of the thirty-one identified, however, only three of the scales used to measure self-esteem were actually labeled as “self-esteem” measurement scales. Furthermore, only 9% (n=3) of the studies solely utilized “self-esteem” scales. Most of the other tools were identified as self-concept, self-perception, or self-worth scales. In each of the articles (n=32), the results from the measurements were used to infer causality – or lack thereof – regarding a relationship with self-esteem.

Relationship with Self-Esteem

Each article concluded that there was either 1) a relationship, 2) no relationship, or 3) a mixed relationship reflecting results between self-esteem and the observed variable(s). Sixty-three percent (n=20) concluded that there was a relationship, 9% (n=3) concluded no relationship, while 28% (n=9) concluded that the results were too varied to report one way or another. Interestingly, of the reported results in the individual articles that stated there was a relationship between self-esteem and the observed variable(s), seven of the 20 (35%) articles had, in fact, mixed results. It appeared that the researchers of the seven articles had a sufficient number of studies to calculate a weak effect size and, thus, concluded that the relationship was present but weak.

Inconsistency Discussed

Although existing literature has clearly recognized the inconsistency in the definition and conceptualization of self-esteem, only 22% (n=7) noted this issue in their literature review section. Furthermore, three out of the seven that did mention the inconsistency of self-esteem reported mixed results. The remaining 78% (n=25) described the relationship between self-esteem and the observed variable(s) without alluding to the discrepancies in definition, conceptualization, or measurement. Therefore, the vast majority of articles reviewed made causal inferences regarding the relationship, or lack thereof, between the concept of self-esteem and the observed variable(s) without regard for the instability of the definition of self-esteem.

Discussion

The findings from this review are of great concern and suggest a need for further research on the definition, conceptualization, and measurement of self-esteem. After a century of research, this review reveals that there is no common agreement on the definition and conceptualization of self-esteem among researchers from multiple fields. Further, scientists have developed hundreds of measurement tools to measure a phenomenon that cannot be accurately defined. More than three-fourths of the articles studied in this review made no reference to the discrepancy in defining and conceptualizing self-esteem. Without greater attention to these

issues, researchers will continue to measure the effects of self-esteem incorrectly and conclude potentially spurious and false results.

Practice Implications

Social work clinicians often implement services targeted to assess and/or change a client's self-esteem (Gleason, 2008; Turner, 2011). These findings illustrate, though, the importance of a cautious interpretation when including the concept of self-esteem in assessment or treatment planning. Currently, there is little certainty in truly knowing if there is any relationship between self-esteem and behavior. Thus, social work clinicians should view self-esteem assessments and interventions through a skeptical lens until further consensus has been developed.

Research Implications

As social workers, one of our greatest challenges is to bridge the gap between research and practice. While it may be argued that self-esteem is too complex to define and measure, if we continue to use self-esteem as a theoretical foundation in working with clients, it is important that a measure be developed. Bridging the gap between research and practice can be difficult; however, the use of a word so commonly accepted in practice warrants more precise, explicit, scientific definition and study. As social workers, we operate from a theoretical lens that would support this endeavor. From a generalist and systems perspective (Hutchinson, 2010), social workers advocate for interdisciplinary collaboration. Experts in self-esteem research must come together and develop an agreed upon definition and conceptual framework from which future research may be built. It is only then that we can begin to understand how the widely studied phenomenon of self-esteem actually impacts human behavior and social science.

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