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**Self-Esteem: Evolutionary roots and historical cultivation**

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### **Self-Esteem: Evolutionary roots and historical cultivation**

Should self-esteem be thought of as an adaptive, evolutionary trait, or is it a more recent, perhaps Western, social creation? In this chapter, we argue that there is support for an evolutionary basis of self-esteem in a relatively unelaborated form. By this, we mean that our ancestors had positive feelings surrounding the self and that these were linked to positive outcomes on important tasks, such as mating success. However, these positive feelings were not conceptualized or expressed as “self-esteem” or any psychological or linguistic variant. We then argue that much of what we currently describe as self-esteem is a cultural, specifically recent and Western, elaboration and amplification of this “proto” self-esteem. Put another way, a social psychologist traveling back in time 50,000 years would not have received meaningful responses other than confusion to the question “Do you have high self-esteem?” With probing, however, this same psychologist would have found that the self was seen as positive and that the level of positivity was associated with success in various endeavors.

#### *Evolutionary Roots of Self-esteem*

Contemplation of an evolutionary basis for self-esteem results in several predictions. First, self-esteem should show variance. Second, it should be heritable. Third, it should in all likelihood confer some adaptive advantage on the possessor. The first two predictions have been supported empirically – there is clearly variance in self-esteem (e.g., Twenge & Crocker, 2002) and self-esteem is heritable (e.g., Neiss, Sedikides, & Stevenson, 2002). The third prediction is a little more problematic. In order to test it, one needs to establish how self-esteem *could* be advantageous. One possibility is that self-esteem could serve as a simple reward for adaptive behaviors. For example, success at a hunting task might be followed by a temporary boost of self-esteem. This would reinforce the hunting behavior making it more probable in the future.

This simple reinforcement model is unlikely, however, because self-esteem does not share the immediate impact and short duration of classic reinforcers (e.g., sugar pellets). Likewise, the outcome of the hunting task (i.e., attainment of food) would serve as a primary reinforcer in and of itself.

Self-esteem could also directly facilitate adaptive behaviors. It is possible that individuals with high self-esteem were more successful at important life tasks than those with low self-esteem, and that this differential success was caused by self-esteem. This fitness model of self-esteem is reasonable, but the data from modern samples generally do not bear it out. Men with high self-esteem report having more sexual partners (for a review, see Baumeister & Tice, 2000), for example, but this likely reflects contingencies of self-worth rather than self-esteem facilitating mating. Likewise, the association between socioeconomic status and self-esteem is small and the causal chain likely extends from success to self-esteem (Twenge & W. K. Campbell, 2002). Finally, in a large review of the self-esteem literature, there was minimal evidence found that self-esteem caused much beyond positive affect and activity initiation (Baumeister, J. D. Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Of course, a core level of self-enhancement (e.g., positive affect associated with the self, optimism, confidence) may be related to success, both now and in our adaptive environment (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2002, 2003). This self-enhancement, however, is not the same as an elaborated sense of self-esteem.

Finally, self-esteem could serve to convey information to the organism. There are several examples of such informational models in contemporary social psychology, several of which are explicitly grounded in evolutionary theory. The sociometer model (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), for example, suggests that self-esteem is a marker of belongingness (a recent revision of the sociometer model links self-esteem directly to mate value; Brase & Guy, *in press*). Likewise, the

self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988) and recent extensions of social comparison models (e.g., the evolutionary approach of Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995), as well as the contingencies of self-worth model (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003), argue that self-esteem can be viewed as an outcome of success, social standing, physical appearance, etc. – all of which are predictors of reproductive fitness. Finally, Kirkpatrick’s (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001) evolutionary model of self-esteem is a complex example of an information model, with different forms of self-esteem indicating performance at and activating responses to important tasks such as maintaining social inclusion, mating, and competition. Taken together, these information models make theoretical sense, have good empirical support in contemporary samples, and suggest a highly plausible evolutionary function of self-esteem – specifically, that self-esteem serves to inform us about our social standing and our general movement towards or away from desirable evolutionary outcomes.

In sum, the evolutionary function of self-esteem was most likely to be informational. Nevertheless, we propose that self-esteem did not exist in our ancestral past in the elaborated form that it does in the contemporary U. S. The social environment in which we evolved was not highly supportive of self-esteem in the form of public displays of success or superiority. Instead, it took a brief (in evolutionary time) cultural chain of events to shape proto self-esteem into what we think of today as self-esteem.

### *The Cultivation of Self-Esteem*

If self-esteem has deep and strong evolutionary roots, then there should be evidence that it was possessed by our hunter-gatherer (HG) forbearers. Unfortunately, we do not have direct evolutionary data on self-esteem, nor even self-esteem data from modern HG groups (who may

serve as a proxy for our historical forbearers). Therefore, much of the argument made below will be by necessity speculative.

*Prehistoric society and self-esteem.* It is likely that early human HG groups had the ingredients for self-esteem. They likely had a self-concept, a concept of social standing (e.g., esteem), and an attitudinal system with likes and dislikes (Sedikides & Skowronski, 2002, 2003). However, the nature of early HG groups, based on archeological data and studies of modern, immediate return HG groups such as the Hadza of Tanzania, suggests that the importance of a linguistically and conceptually elaborate sense of self-esteem was minimal. We make this statement based on the several pieces of evidence derived from analyses by Boehm (1999) and Martin (1999): 1. Early HG groups were egalitarian in nature. There was little in the way of social hierarchy and there was broad sharing of resources (e.g., meat). 2. The basic self-concept in HG groups was not elaborated. One was either a male/hunter or a female/gatherer. One could also be younger or older. There was not the proliferation of identities that was observed with the dawning of culture. Certainly, one could be better or worse at these limited social roles, but because of the egalitarian system, one would be taunted, ridiculed, pressured or even killed if he or she bragged excessively or became dominant, aggressive or possessive. 3. These HG groups generally had a fission-fusion social model. Basically, if one group did not like me, I could leave (i.e., fission). I could then survive on my own, or join another group without difficulty (i.e., fusion). Thus, group belongingness would be less important than in later societies. 4. Inflated self-enhancement emerges in the context of ambiguity (e.g., Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) and in non-close relationships (e.g., Sedikides, W. K. Campbell, Reeder & Elliot, 1998). There was little room for either in HG groups. The success of a hunter or gatherer was objectively apparent to all in the group. There was little illusion or strategic self-definition (e.g., I

am a “people person”). Likewise, small HG groups were close knit with most members being related by blood and history. This minimizes self-enhancement publicly as well as privately.

*Historic culture and self-esteem.* If self-esteem has been strongly cultivated by modern societies, levels of self-esteem should vary cross-culturally and cross-temporally. The data are consistent with this position. We start with a quick detour into a speculative cultural history of the self.

In the earliest civilizations of Sumeria and later in the more advanced civilizations of Egypt, social roles were highly structured. There was a social hierarchy with slaves on the bottom, and warriors, priests and kings on the top. This structure was seen as invariant and cosmically ordained – specifically, social positions were associated with astrological bodies and patterns (e.g., Pharaoh associated with the sun) (J. Campbell, 1972). There was little room for individualism and self-esteem. Such as it was, self-esteem would be more evident in royal or priestly castes.

The evolution of civilization brought us Eastern (India and the Far East) and Western (Europe and the Levant) cultural centers. Eastern cultures placed less emphasis on individuality, with strong caste systems in India, and the Confucian system in the Far East. Western cultures placed more emphasis on the individual, notably in Ancient Greece and, more prominently, in enlightenment Europe (i.e., mid-17<sup>th</sup> to mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries) (J. Campbell, 1972). It is precisely the emergence of this enlightened individualism that would be predicted to spawn self-esteem as a conceptually elaborate trait. Of course, it is difficult to report hard empirical data for the historical difference between East and West. However, there is a wealth of data suggesting that self-esteem and self-enhancement are currently more pronounced in the West, so much so that some researchers have questioned whether individuals in the East are at all motivated to enhance

self-esteem (Heine, Lehman, Markus & Kitayama, 1999). We do not take this extreme stance; nevertheless, there is reliable cross-sectional meta-analytic evidence that white samples have roughly one third of a standard deviation higher self-esteem than do Asian samples (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), consistent with a stronger Western tendency towards self-enhancement and individualism. This same cross-cultural pattern is also observed with narcissism (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). Likewise, a striking ethnographic study of childrearing in the U.S. and Taiwan reports evidence that this difference is not a matter of degree, but rather a qualitative difference in the meaning of and importance placed on self-esteem (Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002). Indeed, these authors argued that for many in rural China, self-esteem has no real meaning.

Although tales of hubris and of men standing up to the gods are prevalent in Greek mythology, from Odysseus and Icarus to Prometheus and Narcissus, it is difficult to make a clear case for Ancient Greek self-esteem (cf. Baumeister, 1987). There is, however, clear etymological evidence that self-esteem was a concept that emerged during the European enlightenment. Specifically, a search of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) reveals that the word “self-esteem” first occurs in writing at the beginning of the enlightenment (1657, in Baker’s *Sancta Sophia*). This was part of a larger linguistic trend of using “self-“ as a prefix. According to the OED, this trend started in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> and flourished in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The emergence of self-esteem can be compared to related words. For example, “esteem” was first used in the 1450’s – two-hundred years before “self-esteem.” Likewise, “pride” first appeared in English c. 1000, “power” in 1297, “satisfaction” in 1400, and “happiness” in 1591. This etymological evidence corresponds to a wealth of evidence from literary and other historical accounts that portray the emergence of the self during this period (Baumeister, 1987). Of course, one could

argue that self-esteem has always existed but was called by another name, such as pride or honor. We would argue that pride and honor likely correlate with self-esteem, but that they reflect different cultural systems. Honor, for example, emerges in a distinct cultural system that is heavily influenced by martial values (for an excellent discussion, see Nisbett & Cohen, 1999). A culture of honor is different from a culture of self-esteem, and likely has different and more ancient cultural roots.

After the emergence of self-esteem as a concept in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of self-esteem took a small place in the psychological lexicon thanks to the writings of William James (1890). James, however, like many of those writing before him, had an ambivalent view of self-esteem. Equating self-esteem with success/prestensions, James noted (p. 311):

“Everything added to the Self is a burden as well as a pride. A certain man who lost every penny during our civil war went and actually rolled in the dust, saying he had not felt so free and happy since he was born.”

Certainly, this was not a terrific sales-pitch for self-esteem as a universal need. The pushing of self-esteem on American culture did not occur until the 1960's and 1970's (for a review, see Twenge & W. K. Campbell, 2001). During this time, self-esteem changed from a largely technical term that was hedonically ambiguous, to a common self-description that was seen as positive, desirable, and often necessary. This push was derived largely from the work of Maslow (e.g., 1970) and others, but was taken in a direction not necessarily intended by these originators. In particular, the *California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility* argued that self-esteem could play an important role in mitigating a range of societal ills such as poverty, drug use and premarital sex (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). This “self-esteem movement” led to an explosion of public interest in self-esteem and a perception that self-esteem is a necessary component to basic human functioning. Indeed, the

concept of self-esteem has now become so prevalent that to measure self-esteem effectively, all one needs to do is have participants rate the statement: “I have high self-esteem” (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Whereas the enlightenment period introduced the world to the concept of self-esteem, the self-esteem movement made it a part of our everyday lexicon. It also made the possession of high self-esteem not just desirable but an apparent cure-all to many of society’s problems.

What success has the self-esteem movement had in increasing the self-esteem of Americans? There is cross-temporal meta-analytic data beginning in the mid-1960’s. From 1968 to 1994 self-esteem has increased over one half of a standard deviation in mixed-gender samples, and over a full standard deviation in male samples (Twenge & W. K. Campbell, 2001). These data clearly demonstrate a cultural underpinning of self-esteem. What is especially powerful is that these cultural effects emerged over a relatively short period of time, roughly one generation. In evolutionary time, this represents the blink of eye.

### *Summary*

We argue that self-esteem is an evolved trait that conveyed some advantage to early humans. In particular, self-esteem likely provided information about social standing and performance in other areas of life. We also argue that self-esteem as we know it in the contemporary West is largely a cultural amplification of this “proto” self-esteem. Self-esteem emerged in the early enlightenment as an hedonically ambiguous trait, and became a central element of identity starting in the 1960’s in the U.S. Cultural shifts, such as the self-esteem movement in the U.S., served to shape modern Westernized conceptualizations of self-esteem into what they are today – far removed from our evolutionary past.

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