Self-Esteem Reflects Assessments of Valuation

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Synonyms
Self-esteem and perceived social value; Self-esteem as self-perceptions of social worth

Definition
The self-esteem system is a psychological adaptation that services the need to belong by regulating social thinking, feeling, and behavior. It functions in part by monitoring, and eventually internalizing, one’s perceived value as a relational partner, both globally and in specific social domains.

Introduction
Human beings rely on their social bonds to survive and to thrive. In the early ancestral environment, a lone individual would not have fared well against predators or the natural elements. To survive and successfully reproduce, people needed to establish strong bonds with others and then work to maintain those bonds over time. Thus, natural and sexual selection shaped humans into a uniquely social species, possessing psychobiological adaptations designed to help them navigate the complexities of social interaction. Such adaptations include a powerful need to belong, which functions in part by rewarding social need fulfillment and punishing those who fail to nurture their social bonds (Baumeister and Leary 1995). For example, over and above the effects of satisfying the basic physical needs for survival, forming and maintaining high-quality social bonds brings rewards like feelings of life satisfaction, security, and general well-being, whereas failing to form such bonds results in costs like depression, intense loneliness, poor physical health, and even premature death (e.g., Cohen 2004; Uchino 2006). To service the need to belong, humans developed additional adaptations aimed at helping them to form and maintain high-quality social bonds. One such adaptation is the self-esteem system, which functions in part by monitoring, and eventually internalizing, one’s perceived relational value.

Global Self-Esteem Reflects Perceived Global Relational Value
To understand how the self-esteem system services the need to belong, it is first necessary to
understand how social relationships shape the development of the self. Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) were among the early theorists to acknowledge and document the relational nature of the self. Cooley coined the phrase “the looking glass self” to refer to the process whereby people learn to see themselves as others do. From this perspective, people’s interactions with others and their perceptions of how others view the self play a significant role in shaping their sense of self and identity. For example, when a mother compliments her young daughter’s artistic efforts and proudly displays her daughter’s artwork on the fridge, the young girl may internalize that positive impression of her artistry, and, with time, she may come to identify as creative and artistic. As part of this broader process of self-concept development, self-esteem is also formed. Self-esteem is a core aspect of the self and reflects one’s feelings of worth or value as a person. Although self-esteem is influenced by genetics and temperament (Niess et al. 2002), it is also intimately tied to the quality of one’s social relationships. People infer their worth from the way they are treated by others. If they feel cared for and respected in their social relationships, they will develop the sense that they are a worthy and valued relational partner. In contrast, if they feel rejected and neglected or if they feel that others are simply unresponsive to their needs, they will develop the sense that they are not a worthy or valued relational partner. Over time, these social messages and experiences become internalized and manifest as one’s sense of global self-esteem. Thus, global self-esteem is intimately twined to one’s perceived relational value, which is one’s perceived worth and value as a social partner. Indeed, some theorists have even gone so far as to propose that the two constructs are virtually synonymous.

According to sociometer theory, global self-esteem is a person’s internalized sense of their perceived relational value (Leary 2004). Thus, self-esteem is proposed to be a sociometer, a barometer that indexes one’s perceived relational value. Over time, repeated experiences of being valued by others, being treated with respect and kindness, and enjoying responsive care from loved ones create feelings of high perceived relational value, which are then internalized into a feeling of high self-esteem. In essence, “other people value me,” becomes “I am valuable.” In contrast, repeated experiences of being devalued by others, being treated with disrespect and disregard, and experiencing unresponsive or neglectful care from loved ones create feelings of low perceived relational value, which are then internalized into a feeling of low self-esteem. In this situation, “other people do not value me,” becomes “I am not valuable.”

In turn, these self-views become an important compass for helping people to navigate their social worlds. People rely on their self-esteem to make sense of their past, present, and anticipated future social experiences. In short, higher self-esteem imbues a confidence in others’ regard and acceptance, whereas lower self-esteem does not. This confidence subsequently influences how individuals interpret their social world. For example, when people are asked to imagine interacting with a romantic partner whose negative mood has no obvious cause, lower self-esteem individuals (LSEs) and higher self-esteem individuals (HSEs) make very different attributions for their partner’s bad mood (Bellavia and Murray 2003). Because HSEs are confident about their partner’s positive regard, they are unlikely to blame themselves for their partner’s negative mood. In contrast, because LSEs are less confident about their partner’s positive regard, LSEs are more likely to feel responsible for their partners’ negative mood. Moreover, when individuals are uncertain of their likelihood of being accepted, LSEs’ social insecurity leads them to feel anxious and motivated to protect themselves from the rejection they anticipate (Stinson et al. 2009). Yet in the same ambiguous social situation, HSEs’ social confidence leads them to feel optimistic and motivated to pursue the acceptance they anticipate. In this way, self-esteem helps people make sense of, and learn from, what can often be ambiguous or confusing social experiences.

People also use their self-esteem to regulate their social behavior. For example, when they interact with a new social partner for the first time, LSEs self-protectively engage in more inhibited behaviors such as closed posture and
averted gaze, whereas HSEs promote new relationships by decreasing their use of inhibited behaviors and increasing their use of warm behaviors such as smiling and eye contact (Stinson et al. 2015). As this example attests, LSEs’ and HSEs’ social behaviors can look quite different in the same social situation. Yet the underlying motivation remains constant: People are motivated to maximize their belongingness and minimize the risk of rejection. How to go about achieving that goal will necessarily depend on one’s relational value and, relatedly, on the perceived probability of acceptance or rejection in a given situation. Because this relational calculation will be different for people of varying levels of self-esteem, people of varying levels of self-esteem will often behave quite differently in the same social situation. Thus, although LSEs may typically focus on avoiding rejection and HSEs may typically focus on achieving belonging, both types of behavior ultimately service the paramount need to belong.

In all of these examples, self-esteem is able to perform these adaptive functions specifically because it reflects people’s assessment of their relational value. But these examples have focussed on global self-esteem and global perceptions of relational value. In fact, the self-esteem system also includes domain-specific components that also help service the need to belong as well as other closely related social goals. That is, in addition to internalizing a global perception of their relational value, people also internalize a sense of their relational value within specific social contexts, or domains, resulting in domain-specific self-esteem (sometimes also called self-evaluations; Brown & Marshall, 2006).

**Domain-Specific Self-Esteem Reflects Perceived Domain-Specific Relational Value**

Social relationships are complex and varied, and so it is improbable that people possess just one psychological adaptation to help them navigate the varied social dilemmas they will face (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). Romantic relationships, friendships, family relationships, and workplace relationships each pose their own unique set of demands, and the qualities and behaviors that make one a valuable relational partner in one type of relationship are not necessarily the same qualities and behaviors that make one a valuable relational partner in another type of relationship. For example, a man’s modest and sensitive nature may make him a valuable friend and confidant, but these same qualities may hinder his likelihood of advancing to a management position within a workplace that strongly values dominance in their employees (Moss-Racusin et al. 2010). Because people’s skills and talents vary widely and few people are likely to possess the myriad traits necessary to succeed in every social domain, it is possible that the same person can have relatively positive social experiences in one domain, but relatively negative social experiences in another domain. Because such experiences will be internalized over time, it is also possible that the same person can have relatively high self-esteem in one domain, but relatively low self-esteem in another domain.

In turn, just as global self-esteem helps people to navigate their social relationships in general, domain-specific self-esteem helps people to navigate their social relationships within the specific, relevant domain (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). So people rely on their domain-specific self-esteem to make sense of their past, present, and anticipated future social experiences in that specific domain. For example, if two women are decorated athletes on their university’s swim team and have similarly high levels of athletic self-esteem, then both women will expect to succeed at the upcoming swim meet and feel optimistic and energized about the challenge of competition. However, if one has low academic self-esteem whereas the other has high academic self-esteem, they will have very different feelings and motivations about their upcoming calculus exam. People will also use their domain-specific self-esteem to regulate their behavior in that specific domain (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). In general, the goal of such behavior is to meet the need to belong, but the behaviors that will best achieve that goal will vary by situation. For example, securing a stable and valued place in an organization may require
an employee to demonstrate competence and skill, whereas securing a stable and valued place in a romantic relationship may require a partner to demonstrate responsiveness and kindness. Different domains may also activate goals that are related to, but not the same as, the need to belong, including romantic and sexual goals and dominance goals, and the self-esteem system includes adaptations to facilitate the attainment of those goals as well.

**Domain-specific self-esteem reflects perceived romantic and sexual value.** Obtaining and maintaining high-quality romantic and sexual relationships is a fundamental part of human life and critical to the success of the human animal. Therefore, if the self-esteem system includes domain-specific adaptations, it is highly likely that one would be specialized for romantic and sexual relationships (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). So it is not surprising that people do internalize their perceived value to others in these domains, forming domain-specific self-esteem concerning their attractiveness and value as an intimate partner (Messer and Harter 1986).

In turn, romantic and sexual self-esteem may also help people to successfully navigate the rocky waters of intimate relationships. For example, romantic and sexual self-esteem may facilitate adaptive relationship choices by motivating individuals to form relationships with the highest-value romantic and sexual partners that they can attain, given the limitations imposed by their own romantic and sexual value and by the norms of the “mating marketplace” (Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). Consistent with this account, although everyone desires to obtain the most attractive mate possible, in reality, people target their romantic overtures toward potential partners who are “in their league” when it comes to physical attractiveness (e.g., Lee et al. 2008). Such targeted pursuit is thought to simultaneously maximize the rewards that one can obtain from a partner, while also minimizing the possibility of rejection by one’s love interest. Furthermore, experiencing rejection from a potential romantic or sexual partner lowers people’s romantic and sexual aspirations, but leaves their friendship aspirations unchanged (Kavanagh et al. 2010), further demonstrating the domain specificity of this adaptation.

Romantic and sexual self-esteem may also help people to calibrate their investment in ongoing relationships by monitoring both their own and their partner’s relative romantic and sexual value over time. For example, because weight affects people’s romantic and sexual value, and because women are expected to weigh less than men, newlywed heterosexual couples monitor their own and their partner’s weight, and couples are more satisfied when wives remain thinner than their husbands over time (Meltzer et al. 2011). More generally, when one partner perceives that they have higher romantic and sexual value than their partner, they will feel less satisfied with their relationship and reduce their efforts to maintain such a relationship (Hatfield et al. 1978). So husbands who perceive that they are more attractive than their wives behave more negatively toward their wives and report lower relationship satisfaction (McNulty et al. 2008). In these ways, romantic and sexual self-esteem may function to alert an individual to inequities in their relationships and motivate responses aimed at correcting that inequity, including reducing one’s investments or even ending the relationship.

**Domain-specific self-esteem reflects social dominance.** Another consequence of being a social animal is humans’ propensity for group living and the subsequent development of status hierarchies (Anderson et al. 2015). Individuals who are ranked highly on these social hierarchies, and thus enjoy social dominance, receive a wide range of social benefits. For example, socially dominant individuals have greater access to resources, greater influence within their social groups, and greater success in attracting desirable mates (Sadalla et al. 1987). So once again, it is not surprising that people internalize their perceived rank on various status hierarchies, forming domain-specific self-esteem concerning their social dominance (Leary et al. 2001).

Social dominance self-esteem may also help people regulate their social behavior and, in particular, their place within the group (Barkow 1975; Kirkpatrick and Ellis 2001). For example, when people believe that they are low in social
dominance, they are more willing to accept a position of lower status within their group, whereas people who believe they are high in social dominance are less willing to accept subordinate roles (Anderson et al. 2012). Indeed, men with high dominance self-esteem report that they would react to a threat to their dominance with direct aggression, including violence (Wyckoff and Kirkpatrick 2016). In contrast, men with low dominance self-esteem report that they would respond with indirect aggression, including talking behind the offender’s back. In these ways, individuals use their dominance self-esteem to guide their social decisions and behavior in an effort to optimize their inclusion and status within their social groups. Yet if an individual strives for a social rank that is higher than others believe they deserve, the group will react negatively and may even attempt to exclude that person (Anderson et al. 2006). Thus, to fulfill the higher-order need to belong or to benefit from one’s actual level of dominance, people need to develop a relatively accurate understanding of their social status and dominance within their groups.

Social dominance self-esteem may also help people to negotiate dominance and status hierarchies by assessing their status relative to others and then using that information to regulate their social behavior. Although men who are high in social dominance self-esteem generally prefer to use direct aggression tactics to preserve their social status, if their rank is threatened by a higher-ranked provocateur, such men will nevertheless adapt their response and retaliate with more submissive, indirect aggression tactics (Wyckoff and Kirkpatrick 2016). Thus, people will track the relative dominance of their interaction partners and use this information to make sense of their own place in the broader status hierarchy and to guide their dominant and submissive behavior toward others.

The Attunement of Global Self-Esteem to Domain-Specific Self-Esteem

Although global self-esteem and domain-specific self-esteem are theoretically and empirically distinguishable, they are not completely independent. This is because both types of self-esteem are internalized from the same life experiences. Perceived relational value within specific domains is internalized to form self-esteem that is specific to those domains, but perceived relational value across domains is internalized to form global self-esteem. However, the association between global and domain-specific self-esteem can vary quite widely across domains. For example, physical appearance self-esteem is very strongly related to global self-esteem, whereas friendship self-esteem is only moderately associated with global self-esteem (von Soest et al. 2016). Thus, the degree to which global self-esteem is attuned to domain-specific self-esteem—that is, the degree to which global self-esteem overlaps with domain-specific self-esteem—varies widely across domains (Anthony et al. 2007). But this variation is not random. A person’s relational value in some domains is more consequential to their overall social value than is their relational value in other domains. Thus, a person’s perceived relational value in some domains is more likely to be internalized and generalized to form global self-esteem than is their perceived relational value in other domains. As a result, global self-esteem is more attuned to specific self-esteem in some domains than to other domains.

Domain-specific self-esteem is often assessed by asking people to evaluate their possession of various skills, talents, and abilities in various domains (see Brown 2006). Therefore, the clearest way to observe the differential attunement of self-esteem to various domains is to observe the association between global self-esteem and specific self-evaluations, either for specific traits or for specific domains of traits (Anthony et al. 2007). For global self-esteem to be evolutionarily adaptive, it should be most strongly attuned to traits that are the most universally valued across social contexts, such as likeability, competence, social influence, attractiveness, and morality (Baumeister 2012). Both throughout our ancestral history and today, these traits were and are indicative of an individual’s genetic fitness, ability to bear and raise offspring, and status within social groups. Sure enough, global self-
Self-Esteem Reflects Assessments of Valuation

Esteem is most strongly attuned to traits and qualities that are most highly prized in relational partners and less strongly attuned to traits and qualities that are less highly prized in relational partners. The attunement of self-esteem to highly valued qualities is evident in the correlation between self-esteem and specific self-views, in self-esteem differences, in self-concept clarity, and in the impact of social feedback on social decision-making (Anthony et al. 2007; Stinson et al. 2008).

Moreover, global self-esteem will attune itself to the traits that are most essential for acceptance within a particular social environment (Anthony et al. 2007). Although some traits seem to be universally valued in relational partners, the value of other traits is much more context dependent. In particular, the attunement of self-esteem to specific traits appears to depend on cultural norms and expectations. For example, for people who have an independent cultural identity (e.g., people raised in the United States or Canada), self-esteem is most strongly attuned to easy-to-observe social commodities like popularity, social skills, and physical attractiveness that quickly and easily distinguish among individuals (Anthony et al. 2007). In contrast, for people who have an interdependent cultural identity (e.g., people raised in Japan or Korea), self-esteem is most strongly attuned to difficult-to-assess communal qualities like kindness, warmth, and responsiveness that facilitate harmonious long-term relationships. Self-esteem will also attune itself to the demands of the particular social roles that people occupy. For example, in Western societies, women’s social role demands that they are warm and nurturing of their social bonds, whereas men’s social role demands that they cater to their individuality. Consistent with these roles, Western women’s self-esteem is more strongly attuned to communal qualities than to individualistic social commodities, whereas men’s self-esteem is more attuned to social commodities than to communal qualities. Such sensitive attunement of global self-esteem to cultural and social demands suggests that the self-esteem system may fine-tune itself to the requirements of the individual’s specific social milieu. Ultimately, possessing such a responsive system should benefit survival and reproductive goals by allowing individuals to effectively minimize the risk of exclusion across a variety of situations and roles.

**Conclusion**

The self-esteem system evolved to facilitate the acquisition and maintenance of high-quality social bonds. To fulfill these belongingness needs, the self-esteem system monitors and internalizes one’s perceived relational value, forming global self-esteem. In turn, global self-esteem helps people to make sense of their past, present, and future social experiences and regulates social behavior aimed at maximizing belongingness. However, social relationships are complex and varied, and so too are people’s social goals. As a result, domain-specific self-esteem also evolved to help people navigate their social relationships within specific domains, most notably, within their romantic and sexual relationships and within status hierarchies. In this way, global and domain-specific self-esteem function as a system to enable people to successfully navigate the full breadth of interpersonal relationships and social environments that they may encounter.

**Cross-References**

- Self-Esteem Tracks Mate Value
- Self-Esteem Tracks Social Evaluation
- Sex-Specific Link Between Self-Esteem and Mate Value
- Sociometer Theory
- Self-Evaluations Track Perceived Mate Value

**References**


