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The Social Construction of Self-Esteem

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Abstract and Keywords

Self-esteem is examined here as an object of cultural discourse and as a socially constructed emotion grounded in mood. Scientific and popular conceptions of self-esteem share an emphasis on the person's acceptance by self and others, the evaluation of performance, social comparison, and the efficacy of individual action as the important roots of self-esteem. The present analysis deconstructs these elements, treating them not as psychological universals but rather as deeply rooted in the competing themes of American culture. The discourse of self-esteem translates these themes into personal terms, enabling the person's understanding of where he or she stands in relation to such contradictory emphases as individuality versus community, striving for success versus self-acceptance, or the quest for happiness as a future state versus contentment with one's present lot. The socially constructed, discursive nature of self-esteem does not preclude an examination of its underlying psychological reality, which is here conceived as mood. Self-esteem provides a way of experiencing and interpreting mood, which functions to encourage and inhibit conduct in various situations depending upon the individual's ongoing experiences. Mood is a universal response to positive and negative experiences; self-esteem is a particular construction of mood fitted to a culture and its dominant and competing themes. The analysis considers how self-esteem binds the person to particular cultural emphases and examines the limitations of the contemporary self-esteem movement.

Keywords: affect, culture, emotion, mood, self

From the psychology of William James to the contemporary industry dedicated to its study and promotion, self-esteem has held a central place in the scholarly and popular understanding of the person in the United States. In this chapter I will examine self-esteem as an element of a culture that emphasizes the importance of the individual self even while making the self problematic; suggest reasons why the experience and discourse of self-esteem have been socially constructed; and show how this approach to self-esteem adds to our understanding of the individual in contemporary society.

The study of self-esteem has spawned an enormous research literature (see, for example, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Gecas & Burke, 1995; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Owens, Stryker, &

Goodman, 2001). Here, rather than summarize its complex findings, I ask what the concept of self-esteem means in cultural terms. I take the position that psychological findings about self-esteem are not universal or essential facts but discoveries about the psychology of socially, culturally, and historically situated human beings. My first task is therefore one of deconstruction.

Deconstructing the Discourse of Self-Esteem

The contemporary understanding of self-esteem is rooted in four ideas—acceptance, evaluation, comparison, and efficacy—that show strong and historically persistent resonance in American culture. To the modern mind, self-esteem seems anchored in unqualified acceptance of the child early in life, the receipt of positive evaluations from (p. 218) relevant others, favorable comparisons with others and with ideal versions of the self, and the capacity for efficacious action. Self-esteem is thought to be dependent upon the child's acceptance within the social fold. It is built early on a foundation of security, trust, and unconditional love. Later, whatever standards of evaluation are employed, positive evaluations will enhance self-esteem and negative evaluations will damage it. Likewise, self-esteem is enhanced when the person is able to make favorable comparisons with other people or with an ideal self, and it is enhanced when the person acts effectively in his or her physical or social environment (Damon, 1995; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; Owens, 1995; Rosenberg, 1979; Swann, 1996; Wills, 1981).

These elements, thought by social scientists and lay persons alike to underlie self-esteem, are deeply embedded in contemporary American culture. This culture emphasizes the individual's responsibility to create a social world or to carve out a place in an existing one where he or she can be warmly embraced. It is the individual who must cultivate and make friends, establish occupational or professional ties, or find a mate. Likewise, American culture makes available numerous situations in which the individual is exposed to evaluation, imagines the evaluations others are making, or engages in self-evaluation. Children are graded in school, rated on their athletic or musical prowess and accomplishments, and assigned to “popular” or “unpopular” peer groups. Adults are evaluated for their appearance and work performance. There are numerous occasions on which individuals reflect on how well or ill they fare in comparison with relevant others or with possible or desirable versions of themselves. Parents compare their children with those of others, assess their own accomplishments relative to their aspirations, and strive to keep up with the social standing of their friends and neighbors. And it is the individual who possesses the capacity and responsibility to act independently and effectively (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Hewitt, 1998).

American culture does not, however, present a single face with respect to acceptance, evaluation, comparison, and efficacy (Erikson, 1976; Hewitt, 1989, 1998). Although the social world often is portrayed as an interpersonal oyster for the individual to crack and enjoy, Americans also look wistfully for places where acceptance is guaranteed and “everybody knows your name.” Schools do not apply evaluative criteria with equal rigor in all aspects of students' activities: Academic standards often are lax, whereas only those with talent and a capacity for hard work make the varsity football team or the school orchestra. Children are told to work hard and achieve but also that they have the right to feel good about themselves no matter how they do, that they should compete only with themselves, and that failure at a task does not mean they are not worthy human beings (Hewitt, 1998). Finally, there is a countervailing communitarian impulse in American culture that mitigates its intense individualism. For some people under some conditions, self-worth is established by membership in a group and association with its members, social comparisons are between groups, and individuals take pride from group accomplishments.

This ambivalence about acceptance, evaluation, comparison, and efficacy is linked to other ambiguities and strains in American culture. Americans are urged by their Declaration of Independence to feel entitled to the “pursuit of happiness” and by long tradition to believe each person deserves a chance at success. But the meanings of happiness and success have never been clear, and this ambiguity is a key to the psychology of Americans. Happiness is defined both as a future state of enjoyment dependent upon successful individual effort and as satisfaction with one's current place in life. Everyone deserves a chance at success, but for some it is the brass ring of social and financial advancement, while for others it is the contented application of effort to a vocation even without hope of fame or fortune (Hewitt, 1989).

Americans also show considerable ambivalence about equality, specifically whether to emphasize equality of opportunity or equality of condition. The former emphasizes a level playing field: Everybody should have a fair start at the game and play under the same rules. But the belief that Americans are entitled to equality of condition also has adherents, and the scope of conditions that fall under “equal rights” has expanded. Happiness and success have to some degree become defined as rights rather than as prizes to be sought and won.

Differing versions of self-esteem mirror these contrasting meanings of success, happiness, and equality. One cluster of meanings emphasizes that self-esteem is not a right but a privilege, to be achieved by individual effort and development of appropriate attitudes and behavior. The other cluster emphasizes that self-esteem is an entitlement, that its acquisition should require no behavioral changes, and that the individual can bootstrap himself or herself to self-affirming feelings. Long-standing (p. 219) cultural disputes are thus encoded in new terms, and so also reproduced, as people debate the real nature of self-esteem and wonder on what basis they can feel “right” about themselves.

The language of self-esteem translates deeply rooted cultural issues into personal terms: Have I found a place where I belong and others like or respect me? Am I as happy or as successful as I could be? Am I entitled to think better of myself than I do? How can I feel better about me? What must I do to feel better? How can I justify the way I feel about myself? For those who are engaged in the “pursuit” of happiness and success and who feel themselves well on the way, “self-esteem” is a way of characterizing—and experiencing—their positive feelings about their lives. A view of self-esteem as something earned by virtue of effort and accomplishment validates their way of pursuing happiness and success. For those who feel themselves not far enough along on the path, talk of earning self-esteem is a motivational spur to further effort. It provides a way of imagining a future self and, in doing so, focusing present efforts on its attainment.

By contrast, those who espouse communitarian rather than individualist definitions of self, as well as those who have tried but failed in a future-oriented quest for success and happiness, also can find in the discourse of self-esteem the basis for comforting and reassuring self-perceptions. I am entitled to feel good about myself, one might say, because friends and family value me for virtues that transcend financial success. I am good and virtuous in their world. I am happy with who I am, for even though I have not gone far professionally or financially, I am content with my life and with those among whom I live.

The discourse of self-esteem thus provides a common language that Americans use to discuss felt difficulties with self-validation and in the same breath address cultural contradictions. This language bridges competing definitions of success and happiness, providing for both competitive striving and self-acceptance, contentment in the present, and excitement about the future. Moreover, it bridges individualism and collectivism, providing a central concept—self-esteem—on whose attainment all can agree even as they disagree on the proper means of attaining it. In creating the concept of self-esteem and laying the basis for a popular discourse about it, social scientists thus

inadvertently contribute to what Michel Foucault called “technologies of the self,” creating the very terms and instruments whereby the self is experienced (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1998). Their professional work has in turn fueled the efforts of legions of “conceptual entrepreneurs” who market the idea of self-esteem as well as techniques for its improvement.

The Reality of Self-Esteem

How can we most usefully conceive the nature and experience of self-esteem? The approach I recommend here defines self-esteem as a socially constructed emotion. Not merely psychological states, socially constructed emotions are situated experiences. They arise at predictable times and places under the influence of role requirements as well as status relationships, success or failure in the attainment of socially prescribed goals, and the actual or imagined evaluative judgments of others. Self-esteem is a reflexive emotion that has developed over time in social processes of invention, that individuals learn to experience and to talk about, that arises in predictable social circumstances, and that is subject to social control (Smith-Lovin, 1995). Anchoring self-esteem within the realm of emotions gives a more precise theoretical formulation than its more common definition as the evaluative dimension of self-regard and better captures the reality of the experience from the individual's standpoint. Defining the emotion of self-esteem as a social construction permits consideration of cultural variations in self-esteem but at the same time allows one to examine its underlying visceral, physiological, and neurological correlates.

Affect is a central element of the experience of self. Moreover, the range of affect that may be directed toward the self is for all practical purposes the same as the range of affect of which humans are capable. Fear, anger, hatred, love, pride, satisfaction, anxiety, loathing, shame, guilt, embarrassment, and the like all figure in the experience of self in varying degrees and circumstances. None of these forms of self-directed affect is by itself the core of self-esteem. Yet what social scientists and lay people alike understand as self-esteem is in one way or another tied to these emotional experiences. When social scientists seek to develop items to measure self-attitudes, we readily turn to pride, shame, hatred, satisfaction, and other words in the cultural vocabulary of emotions as ways of communicating to subjects the kinds of self-reports we want from them.

The key term for grasping the socially constructed emotion of self-esteem is “mood,” a term that I employ in its conventional sense of a generalized aroused or subdued disposition. At one extreme lies euphoria—a pervasive good feeling that the individual might describe in a variety of culturally (p. 220) available terms: energized, happy, “psyched,” self-confident, elated. At the other extreme lies dysphoria—a similarly pervasive feeling described in culturally opposite terms such as listless, sad, fearful, anxious, or depressed. In a state of mood closer to euphoria, the individual is aroused, organized, ready to act; in a state closer to dysphoria, the individual is more reserved, fearful, and reluctant to act. I posit that mood is a crucial animal experience; that it lies close to neurological, physiological, and visceral reality; that variations in mood are universal and can be explained in general terms; and that culture provides the words used to label mood.

Self-esteem is not the only word attached to the universal human experience of mood. People tending toward euphoria may report that they are “happy,” “excited,” or “self-confident,” or that they “feel good” or are “in a good mood.” They may respond to self-esteem measures in ways that lead a social scientist to attribute high self-esteem to them. They may strike a clinician as healthy or, if too euphoric, as manic. And if they have access to the discourse of self-esteem, as nearly everyone nowadays does, they may say that they have high self-esteem.

Variations in mood are describable by a variety of culturally provided terms, none of which provides the basis for an analysis of the nature of mood, its level, or of fluctuations in it.

Labels for mood have social and cultural origins. The contemporary individual afflicted with a mood disorder, for example, has access to the social machinery of psychiatry and its array of diagnostic categories, therapies, and medicines. He or she will thus have the opportunity—and sometimes be under considerable social pressure—to accept a label of major depression and to take the steps recommended by psychologists, social workers, or psychiatrists. The seventeenth-century New England Puritan who had similar feelings of sadness, lack of self-worth, and morbid social sensitivity might well have been encouraged to look within. Believing in humankind's inherently sinful nature and uncertain of his or her own state of grace, such an individual would have found a different explanation for the same underlying feelings, and a program of self-scrutiny and repentance would have been recommended.

The interpretation of underlying affective states, perhaps especially ones so generalized as mood, thus depends upon the social processes that create and certify knowledge and assign its implementation to various experts. Interpretations also are shaped by the goals and values of particular cultures. Arguably the depressed Puritan found himself or herself culturally, if not personally, more at ease, for a dark mood could at least be assigned religious meaning and thus be accommodated by others. Contemporary Americans are enjoined to be happy and self-confident, and thus find in depression and low self-esteem painful personal experiences that their social world does not readily tolerate.

Mood, which has been extensively studied by psychologists, poses a complex challenge to social and psychological theory. Mood is both an unperceived background of everyday action and an object of attention in its own right; it influences thoughts and actions, but it is also something people think about and act toward (Morris, 1989). It is influenced by events in the person's world but also by endogenous factors of which the individual has no knowledge. Hence, a "good" or "bad" mood may result from the reality or appearance of positive or negative events, but also independently of events as a result of malfunctioning neurotransmission.

Although the word "mood" sometimes (Isen, 1984) is used synonymously with "affect," Batson's (1990) distinction between "affect," "mood," and "emotion" is more helpful. "Affect" is the most general and primitive of the terms, and following Zajonc (1980), Batson argues that it serves to inform the organism about the more and less valued "states of affairs" it experiences. Changes toward more valued states of affairs produce positive affect, whereas changes toward less valued states produce negative affect. "Mood" is a more complex affective state, because it entails more or less well-formed "expectations" about the future experience of positive or negative affect. Mood is constituted by a change in expectation (together with the affective state evoked by the change), and thus refers to "the fine-tuning of one's perception of the general affective tone of what lies ahead" (Batson, 1990, p. 103). "Emotions" are present-oriented, focused on the person's relationship to a specific goal. Whereas the experience of a positive mood implies the expectation of more positive affect in the future, the emotion of joy arises in the present as goals are attained or attained more fully than imagined.

These ideas suggest that affect, mood, and emotion powerfully shape the development and maintenance of ties between the individual and the social order. Culture supplements psychologically intrinsic satisfactions with its own menu of approved goals and definitions of positive affect. The social order governs access to the cognitive and material means of pursuing a socially approved goal—knowing what to do and how to do it, and having the resources needed (p. 221) to realize a desired end. Hence, the sources of positive affect, of changes in the expectation of positive affect, and of the person's capacity to act so as to create positive events lie in culture and

society. External events shape affect, mood, and emotion, resulting in a tendency for people to do what others require, encourage, or make possible. Following socially approved courses of action to approved goals produces positive affect, inclines individuals to anticipate more such affect in the future, and rewards them with positive emotions in each succeeding present.

This strong social determinism is in three ways defective. First, it does not take sufficient account of the need to interpret mood or of the potential for interpretive variability. Morris (1989) suggests that mood is figure as well as ground. As Batson (1990) defines it, mood is a more or less well-defined set of “expectations” about the future. And as a sociologist might put it, mood begins with an affective state but becomes mood only as the individual invokes a culturally supplied vocabulary and formulates those expectations in specific terms. Affective states demand interpretation, and it is in the process of interpretation that moods and emotions are created.

Interpretations vary, for there is no firm link between an affective state and the individual's perception of its origins or of the steps that might produce a more desired state. People make errors in attribution. Culture provides alternative goals and alternative vocabularies for experiencing mood and emotion. Hence, it is not necessarily obvious to the individual what actions will produce a more desirable affective result, and the link between social demands and individual lines of conduct is therefore sometimes problematic.

Second, the link between mood and events is complex. Events do produce positive and negative affect and so shape the expectation of future affective states. Thus, affective arousal influences mood, which in turn influences the person's approach to (or avoidance of) objects in the future. However, two psychological phenomena warn against excessive social determinism. The “positivity offset” helps explain people's willingness sometimes to depart from established, socially patterned forms of conduct. Even without positive affective arousal there is a bias toward approaching an object even at great distance from it. How else, as Cacioppo and Gardner (1999, p.191) point out, could we expect the organism “to approach novel objects, stimuli, or contexts.” Likewise, organisms react more strongly to negative stimuli than to positive ones. Presumably this negativity bias evolved to protect the organism against the untoward consequences of its own exploratory actions. Moreover, endogenous factors may govern mood on schedules independent of external events. Depression may arise spontaneously and for no reason apparent either to the observer or to the depressed person. We refer to depression as a “mood disorder” precisely because it subverts an orderly link between events and mood.

Third, mood shapes the person's perception of the social world and his or her experiences in it. The significance of events and of those who produce them is not given solely in the events themselves, for affect strongly influences what we see and how we make sense of it. Affect shapes attention and perception (Zajonc, 1998), memory (Phelps & Anderson, 1997), and altruism (Batson, 1990). Indeed, Isen (1984) argues that “affective states—even mild and even positive affective states—can influence thoughts, cognitive processing, and social behavior in some remarkable ways” (pp. 179–180). Thus, illustratively, people in a positive affective state seem to remember positive events better than negative ones (Isen, 1984). Positive moods increase helping behavior; more precisely, events that enhance mood make it more likely that those whose moods are enhanced will help others who were not responsible for the enhanced mood (Batson, 1990). And mood influences the way we think about other persons through a mood-congruent judgment effect. Improvements in mood are accompanied by more positive views of other people (Mayer & Hanson, 1995).

From the standpoint of a psychologically informed social theory, positive mood is most usefully seen as encouraging the perception of the social world in relatively benign and nonthreatening terms. It fosters the perception of a self at ease with its others, one capable of taking actions they will find acceptable or at least

understandable. It furthers the perception of a self that is accepted by friends and available for role-based interaction with strangers. By contrast, negative mood encourages the perception of a hostile social world and a self at risk in it. The dysphoric self is not a self at ease but an anxious self—anxious about what to do, about how others will respond, about the likelihood of taking successful action. It is a self located in a social world that may turn hostile at any moment, that may conceal its true attitudes, that may erect obstacles in the person's path. A euphoric person imagines a social world where it is easy to perceive opportunities, friendly and receptive others, and successful lines of conduct. A dysphoric person imagines a (p. 222) social world filled with obstacles, resistant or unfriendly others, and limited chances for success.

Mood, Self-Esteem, and Discourse

Self-esteem has been constructed in an American cultural context that enjoins the pursuit of happiness and success. Although subject to conflicting definitions, these are nonetheless culturally important goals. When culture sets goals, people respond in two ways that are key to the analysis. First, they respond affectively to their pursuit and attainment of these goals. Success and failure generate positive and negative “affect” and produce changes in “mood,” that is, in expectations of future affect. Mood is in part a product of how successfully the person has formed attachments to the social world and of how well he or she has achieved its culturally enjoined goals. A sense of membership in the social world and of proper attainment of cultural ideals engenders elevated mood; failure in these respects engenders depressed mood.

Second, people respond to mood by interpreting it. Individuals interpret their mood experiences by utilizing a language that is available to them as members of a social world and participants in its culture. They engage in discourse that explores cultural goals, their success or failure in attaining them, and the resulting affective experiences. To understand mood and its relationship to self-esteem, then, we must examine the linguistic opportunities that are available to individuals and the forces that constrain their selection.

Self-esteem is a recent linguistic opportunity for Americans. Although psychologists and sociologists have used the word for over 100 years, it gained popular currency only in the last third of the twentieth century. The construction of the language and emotion of self-esteem has come about in response to the American cultural polarities discussed previously. The polarities themselves are long-standing ones and they have been dealt with culturally in a variety of ways. It is the vocabulary of self-esteem that is relatively new.

The historically dominant pole of American culture emphasizes success as a result of individual achievement, happiness as a future state to be sought by individual effort, and equality of opportunity to seek success and happiness. The individual is a voluntary member of a social world and either succeeds or fails as an individual. Such cultural circumstances engender individual mood responses, for some will fail badly, others will succeed greatly, and most will fall somewhere in the middle. The interpretation of mood in this cultural moment, however, is unlikely to involve self-esteem. For even where the term and the experience of self-esteem exist, classic instrumental individualism (Bellah et al., 1985) has its own linguistic convention for interpreting the individual's experiences of success and failure, and its prominent terms are “pride” and “shame.”

It is difficult to imagine enterprising nineteenth-century American farmers and mechanics feeling or speaking of their “self-esteem” as enhanced by their success in wresting a living from the earth or creating new machines and industries. Rather, we today think of them—as they thought of themselves—as “proud” of their accomplishments

and “ashamed” when they fell short. Much the same was true of the industrialists of the late nineteenth century, and it remains true of individuals who subscribe to contemporary versions of instrumental individualism. They are proud when they succeed and ashamed when they fail. Pride is grounded in mood in much the same way as self-esteem is so anchored. But it is not the same emotion, for pride conveys images of self-respect and dignity, and the proud individual imagines an audience that applauds effort, hard work, achievement against the odds, and self-regard that is deserved because it has been earned.

Similarly, to fall short of one's own goals or the expectations of one's fellows engenders the emotion of shame. One who accepts an ethic of achievement is disappointed, downcast, depressed, and most of all ashamed when he or she fails. Like pride, shame interprets mood by emphasizing the individual's responsibility for a course of action and its outcome. The individual feels that he or she has failed and must therefore present a shameful face to the judging, evaluating world.

Self-esteem, in contrast, answers to the opposing pole of American culture, which emphasizes “expressive” individualism. Here, success and happiness are more likely to be viewed as entitlements, or at least to be subject to relaxed standards of evaluation. Thus, one is entitled to feel happy and successful regardless of one's station in life, or at the very least one can find validation of the right to feel contentment in lesser accomplishments. The social world, in this view, owes the individual both a respectable place and respect for occupying it. The watchword is equality of condition, not of opportunity.

It is this cultural configuration that fosters a language and emotion of self-esteem. Present from the beginning, this opposing moment of the culture recently has found its voice in the language of (p. 223) self-esteem, as well as more broadly in humanistic psychology, in both secular and religious “positive thinking,” and in assorted other popular psychologies and therapies that have proliferated in American life. Self-esteem has not driven out other words, nor has it trumped pride/shame as a principle motivating social emotion. Instrumental individualism is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

Self-esteem does, however, support a different relationship between the individual and the social order. Pride and shame presume a relationship in which culture and society set goals for individuals and provide means for attaining them, and in which individuals readily accept cultural guidance. People feel proud and speak of pride when they achieve cultural ideals to which they feel positively attached. Self-esteem, in contrast, presumes a relatively more problematic, often oppositional relationship between the individual and the social world, one in which the individual feels at risk (cf. Turner, 1976). It is no accident that the self-esteem movement perceives, albeit mistakenly (Baumeister et al., 2003), an epidemic of low self-esteem and mounts a campaign to remedy the situation. In its frame of reference, self-esteem is an entitlement always at risk in a hostile, denigrating, judgmental social world.

What is the gain in transforming our view of self-esteem from a universal psychological trait and motivating force to a socially constructed emotion grounded in mood? It lies mainly in a more precise understanding of the challenge to the self posed by the social and cultural world in which we live, and of the ways human beings cope. To grasp how individuals function in that world, we must understand the emotional economy it creates for them and examine how they respond to it.

The emotion of self-esteem, the study of self-esteem, and a social movement that proposes to promote individual well-being and solve social problems by fostering self-esteem have arisen in a culture that puts the individual self on a shaky center stage. The discourse of self-esteem attempts to respond by articulating a cultural vision of a

satisfying personal life that runs explicitly counter to the dominant competitive, instrumental individualism. It proposes an alternative world in which the individual has a right to an assured place, evaluations are not the sole basis of positive self-feeling, social comparison is subdued, and all have the capacity for efficacious action and the right to positive self-regard. Where modern life often depresses and enervates, those who emphasize self-esteem argue, they wish to elevate and energize.

The discourse of self-esteem mounts a decidedly weak critique of American culture and a program of action unlikely to change it appreciably. Programs that seek to elevate individual self-esteem through positive thinking and other forms of psychological bootstrapping merely pose a weaker expressive individualism against a dominant instrumental individualism. Such programs thus reproduce an existing set of cultural definitions rather than challenging them. They convey the illusion of action to solve personal and social problems, but in doing so accept the terms of the debate as it has been constructed by the dominant individualism.

More crucially for the present analysis, the discourse of self-esteem is apt to confuse a sign of well-being with its essence. This is so in two senses. First, “reasonably” good self-esteem provides an indication that mood is working within optimal limits to motivate and caution human action. Self-esteem is a measure of the person's expectation of positive events and, accordingly, her or his willingness to approach objects and others. Second, and more broadly, good self-esteem is indicative of a positive and integral personal and social identity (cf. Hewitt, 1989)—that is, a sense that one is located securely in the social world, competent to meet its challenges, ready to participate in life with others, and able to balance social demands and personal desires (cf. Scheff, 1990).

Although self-esteem is a desirable state (or trait) because of what it signifies about personal well-being, it has become reasonably clear that the most effective way to achieve good self-esteem is not by implementing programs in schools and other locations to improve it (Baumeister et al., 2003). The fundamental mistake of the self-esteem movement is not to emphasize its importance but to imagine that self-esteem is itself the goal to be pursued. Conditions that promote optimal human functioning also promote self-esteem, and these fundamental conditions are the ones worth pursuing: acceptance within a social fold, a sense of security, cultural competence, and the capacity to reconcile personal goals and social expectations.

Questions

1. How will the emotional economy in which self-esteem has been socially constructed be transformed in the future and how will these changes shape the experience and discourse of self-esteem?
2. Will the increasingly sophisticated psychological and social psychological understanding of self-esteem, which emphasizes self-esteem as an outcome (p. 224) of other experiences, shape the popular self-esteem movement, which emphasizes self-esteem as an important goal in itself?
3. Can the analysis of self-esteem as a socially constructed emotion grounded in mood form a basis for researches that examine, in situ, how the experience and discourse of self-esteem function in everyday life?

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