

The Sociometer, Self-Esteem, and the Regulation of Interpersonal Behavior

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Most discussions of self-regulation have focused on the generic psychological processes that allow people to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—processes that are nonspecific with regard to the action being regulated (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Mischel, 1996). For example, TOTE (test–operate–test–exit) and other cybernetic models of self-control (Carver & Scheier, 1981) can be applied to many domains, and the same basic processes are involved regardless of the nature of the self-control task at hand.

In addition to these general-purpose self-regulatory systems, people also possess mechanisms that are dedicated to particular functions. Such mechanisms operate in a circumscribed range of situations and handle only one kind of regulatory problem. This chapter examines one such mechanism—the *sociometer*—that appears to be involved in the control of interpersonal behavior. Most previous writing and research regarding the sociometer have emphasized its connection to self-esteem, but, as we will see, its functions go far beyond simply affecting how people feel about themselves (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

According to evolutionary psychologists, the human mind is composed of distinct, domain-specific modules that evolved because they solved recurrent problems involving survival and reproduction in the past (Samuels, 2000). Recurrent challenges in the ancestral environment led to the evolution of systems designed to meet those challenges. So, for example, theorists have posited regulatory modules that help people to avoid toxic substances, identify potential mates, detect group members who cheat, and ostracize those who may be infected with parasites.

Many of these systems—such as those involving fear and disgust—protect people from physical threats directly. Other systems, however, evolved to serve interpersonal functions by helping people behave toward others in ways that facilitated their own survival and reproduction. Such systems have clear adaptive benefits, but their effects on well-being are mediated by the responses of other people.

THE SOCIOMETER

The fundamental prerequisite of interpersonal life is that a person be minimally accepted by other people and avoid wholesale rejection. Virtually all social affordances—such as friendship, social support, group memberships, social influence, and pair-bonds—require the individual to be accepted by others. Furthermore, only those who have established supportive relationships can count on others' assistance in terms of food sharing, protection, and care when ill, injured, or old. Because of the adaptive advantages of being accepted by other people, human beings possess a strong need for acceptance and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Allen, in press). Furthermore, given the vital importance of social acceptance and the disastrous consequences of rejection throughout evolution, human beings have developed a psychological system that monitors and responds to events that are relevant to interpersonal acceptance and rejection.

Regulatory systems generally possess three features. They monitor the internal or external environments for cues that signal advantageous or disadvantageous circumstances, evoke positive or negative feelings when such cues are detected, and motivate behaviors that help the individual to capitalize on opportunity or avert threat. Thus, a module that evolved to facilitate acceptance and avoid rejection would be expected to respond to cues indicating real or potential rejection, evoke feelings that alert the individual to the threat, and motivate the person to behave in ways that minimize the probability of rejection and promote acceptance.

Detecting Threats to Relational Value

According to sociometer theory, people possess a sociometer that monitors the interpersonal environment for cues that are relevant to a person's *relational value* in the eyes of other people—the degree to which other people regard their relationships with the individual as valuable or important (Leary, 2002). What we colloquially call *rejection* and *acceptance* are the end points on a continuum of relational value.

People are exceptionally sensitive to events that have implications for their relational value and readily pick up on subtle cues related to their social standing (Weisbuch, Sinclair, Skorinko, & Eccleston, 2009). In fact, people monitor the environment for cues relevant to their relational value on a preattentive level. For example, the *cocktail party effect*, in which a person orients toward his or her name in the noisy hubbub of a party (Cherry, 1953), demonstrates nonconscious vigilance for indications of how one is regarded by others. In addition, people think a good deal about other people's perceptions and evaluations of them and try to anticipate how others will react to them in future situations. Some of these are idle imaginings, but others evoke deep concern when they suggest that one's past, present, or future relational value is lower than desired.

The Warning System

At least since Darwin, theorists have agreed that emotions serve to alert us to events with potential implications for our well-being. Emotions shift attention to critical features of the environment, motivate behaviors that respond to these events, and reinforce actions that deal effectively with them. So, for example, threatening stimuli evoke subjective fear and an action tendency to avoid or escape the feared stimulus, and such actions are reinforced by a decline in the aversive feelings. Of course, a functional analysis does not imply that all emotions are adaptive. People may react dysfunctionally when they misappraise a situation or misjudge the most effective response to it. Even so, emotions evolved because they help people regulate their behavior, and emotions are fundamentally involved in self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1981, Chapter 1, this volume).

The affective output of the sociometer serves precisely these functions. Indications that one is approved of or accepted—that one's relational value is high—lead to positive affect. Indications that one is disapproved of or rejected—that one's relational value is low (or declining)—lead to negative affect. Studies have shown that perceived rejection (i.e., low relational value) is associated with negative emotions such as hurt feelings, jealousy, and sadness, and with increased attention to the problematic interpersonal situation (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

Typically, whenever people experience acceptance and rejection, they also feel good or bad *about themselves*. Sociometer theory suggests that these self-relevant feelings—state self-esteem—are part of this regulatory system (Leary, 2006). When the sociometer detects cues that connote unacceptably low relational value, it not only triggers negative affect but also instigates a process to assess whether one's low relational value is due to some personal action, shortcoming, or deficiency. In most cases, people entertain the possibility that their low relational value is at least partly their own fault, which leads them to feel bad about themselves, that is, to experience lowered state self-esteem. However, when people are certain that their exclusion by other people does not reflect on them personally, their state self-esteem is unaffected (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). These effects on self-esteem have even been demonstrated on an international level. Countries in which people have frequent interactions with friends have higher nationwide self-esteem than countries without strong social practices, even when researchers control for happiness, individualism, neuroticism, and economic factors (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008).

Some critics have correctly observed that a regulatory system with the properties of a sociometer need not involve any connection to the self. After all, other species of animals possess systems that regulate interactions with conspecifics, but we would not invoke the concept of self-esteem in accounting for their reactions. This objection is partially correct. An animal does not need self-esteem to regulate its social behavior. Prior to the evolution of self-awareness, our hominid ancestors presumably interacted effectively even though they lacked the capacity for conscious self-reflection. In the absence of self-awareness, however, this system could respond only to social cues in the immediate environment. The detection of certain "rejection" cues (e.g., frowns, disinterest, or angry gestures) would likely have elicited negative affect and motivated efforts to appease, ingratiate, or withdraw, all of which could have happened without a self.

With the appearance of self-awareness, however, people's reactions to rejection-relevant cues became more complex. Although early human beings would still have responded to immediate cues relevant to acceptance, changes in the self would have added a new layer of cognitive processing. Improvements in the extended self, which processes information about the individual over time, would have allowed people to ponder past rejections and anticipate possible rejections in the future (Leary & Buttermore, 2003). The ability to feel good or bad about future events would have been an important development in self-regulation, allowing people to anticipate others' reactions and thereby deterring actions that might result in rejection.

In brief, prior to the time that human beings became fully capable of self-related thought, people would have had a sociometer of sorts, but it would have responded only to concrete social cues in the immediate situation and its operation would have been based exclusively on affect. Once people could think about themselves over time, adopt others' perspectives of them, and conceptualize themselves symbolically, they would have had a modern sociometer that led them to feel good and bad *about themselves* as a result of the real or imagined evaluations of other people. Furthermore, with a modern conceptual self, they could consciously think about and evaluate themselves, use other people's reactions to them to assess their abilities and worth, and judge themselves according to other people's standards. As a result, merely thinking about other people's evaluations of them could evoke feelings about symbolic aspects of the self.

The (So-Called) Self-Esteem Motive

Most conceptualizations of self-esteem have not explained precisely what self-esteem does or why it is important (Leary, 1999). The assumption has been that people's feelings about themselves are related to important outcomes such as achievement, positive interpersonal relations, and psychological well-being (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989), but few efforts have been made to explain what functions people's feelings about themselves might serve. To complicate matters, most psychologists have assumed that people have a *need* for self-esteem, without asking why people should need to feel good about themselves.

Sociometer theory answers this question by proposing that, contrary to how it may appear, people do not have a need for self-esteem (Leary, 2006; Leary & Downs, 1995). Rather, people only appear to seek self-esteem because they often behave in ways that maintain or increase their relational value. The behaviors that have been attributed to efforts to maintain self-esteem reflect people's efforts to maintain relational value in other people's eyes. They appear to be seeking self-esteem because self-esteem is an output of the gauge that monitors their success in promoting relational value (Leary, 2006). This is not to say that people do not occasionally cognitively override the sociometer to avoid negative feelings, but these intrapsychic, self-serving reactions reflect a hedonistic effort to avoid negative affect rather than a need for self-esteem per se.

Do All Changes in Self-Esteem Involve Acceptance and Rejection?

The traditional conceptualization views *self-esteem* as an individual's personal self-evaluation—an assessment of whether one has achieved one's personal goals or lived up to

personal standards. Conceptualizing self-esteem as a person's private self-evaluation has had important, and perhaps unfortunate, consequences for understanding self-esteem. If we start with the assumption that self-esteem is a person's private self-evaluation, it is but a short step to conclude that healthy self-esteem ought not to be affected by other people's evaluations. Several theorists have taken this step by suggesting self-esteem that is affected by other people is not "true" or "healthy" self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Furthermore, many people insist that how they feel about themselves is not affected by other people's reactions to them.

The data tell a different story, however, suggesting that events with implications for acceptance and rejection affect self-esteem in most individuals. In two studies (Leary et al., 2003), we selected groups of participants who either believed that their self-esteem was affected by acceptance and approval or strongly denied that acceptance and approval had any effect whatsoever on how they felt about themselves. Then, we gave both groups feedback indicating a low or high degree of approval/acceptance from other participants and measured their state self-esteem. The results of both studies unequivocally showed that the two groups did not respond differently to the social acceptance and rejection manipulation. Similar results from Lemay and Ashmore (2006) showed that trait self-esteem was related to perceived regard from others, even for people who believed that their self-esteem was not contingent on others' beliefs about them. The fact that the sociometer responds to rejection even among people who deny it (and may be unaware of it) suggests that contingent self-esteem is an inherent and normal feature of human nature that often works outside of people's conscious awareness.

However, even if we accept the claim that self-esteem naturally responds to cues regarding one's relational value, we may ask whether self-esteem is ever affected by events that have no implications for acceptance and rejection. One possibility involves situations in which people feel good about themselves when they achieve or do good deeds even though no one else is privy to their behavior or, conversely, feel bad about themselves when they do (or even contemplate) some reprehensible thing that no one else will ever know. Where are the implications for acceptance and rejection of private behaviors such as these? The answer is that, as a regulatory mechanism, the sociometer cannot afford to wait until one is already rejected to respond. Just as the mechanism that elicits fear and avoidance cannot wait until a threat is immediately present, the sociometer must warn people *in advance* about the possibility of low relational value. Thus, the sociometer should warn us that our relational value is in potential jeopardy even when we contemplate performing some dark act or receive feedback that only we know about (Guay, Delisle, Fernet, Julien, & Sénécal, 2008). Only then can it deter us from engaging in behaviors that might jeopardize our relational value. Furthermore, people may experience lowered self-esteem when they think that their actions may lead them to be rejected in the near future, and those who believe that they are more likely to be devalued, such as people who are low in trait self-esteem, are more likely to show this effect (Haupt & Leary, 1997).

In brief, people appear to possess a sociometer that monitors their interpersonal worlds for information relevant to relational value, alerts them through unpleasant emotions and lowered state self-esteem when their relational value is lower than desired or declining, and motivates behavior that helps to enhance relational value. This system is essential for helping people to regulate their interpersonal behavior in ways that minimize the potential for rejection.

THE CALIBRATION OF THE SOCIOMETER AND INTERPERSONAL SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulatory systems function optimally when they accurately monitor relevant aspects of the world, thus reflecting the true state of the environment in which the organism is operating. Unfortunately, like many meters and gauges, the sociometer may be miscalibrated such that it does not accurately reflect the person's relational value to others. Miscalibration undermines the sociometer's ability to regulate behavior in ways that maintain an acceptable level of interpersonal acceptance, and as we will see, many interpersonal and psychological difficulties can be conceptualized as miscalibrations of the sociometer.

One might expect that a properly calibrated sociometer would respond to relational evaluation in a linear fashion, with equal increments or decrements in relational value resulting in equal changes in emotion and state self-esteem. However, Leary, Haupt, Strausser, and Chokel (1998) showed that this is not the case. In four experiments, participants imagined or received one of several levels of feedback, ranging from extreme rejection to extreme acceptance. Although state self-esteem increased with relational value, the function was curvilinear. Figure 18.1 shows the general form of the relationship between relational value (i.e., acceptance–rejection) and state self-esteem. As can be seen, the sociometer is more sensitive to small changes in relational value in the neutral to moderately positive range of relational value than in the rejecting and highly accepting ranges. With declining relational value, state self-esteem hits its lowest point long before feedback is maximally rejecting, so that people's response to feedback that reflects slightly negative relational value is similar to that reflecting maximally negative value. One explanation for this pattern is that once relational value drops just below neutral, further decrements have few, if any, tangible consequences. Generally, people simply ignore or ostracize individuals whose relationships they do not value, no matter how strongly they devalue those individuals. As a result, being greatly devalued is not much

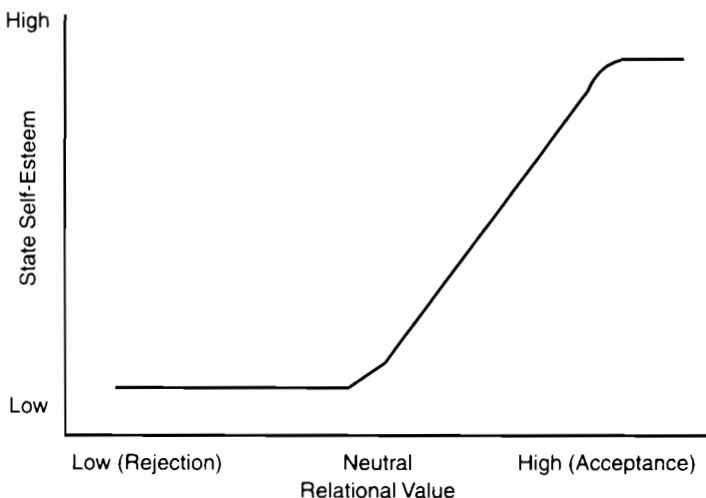


FIGURE 18.1. The relationship between relational value and state self-esteem.

more troubling than being moderately devalued. Similarly, once relational value reaches a moderately high level, further increases in relational value do not affect state self-esteem, probably for the same reason. Once people value and accept us moderately, increases in our relational value rarely have additional benefits. Thus, beyond a certain point, there is little reason for the system to respond to increasing acceptance.

Between neutral and high relational value, however, small changes in relational value have notable consequences. Being relationally valued just a little is certainly more advantageous than being viewed neutrally, and being valued moderately is better than being valued just a little. As a result, people are sensitive to gradations in relational value in this range.

Trait Self-Esteem

Trait self-esteem—a person’s typical or average level of self-esteem—is also relevant to interpersonal self-regulation. If we view the sociometer as a gauge that assesses relational value, then trait self-esteem is the resting position of the sociometer in the absence of incoming interpersonal feedback. It is where the indicator on the gauge rests when explicit cues relevant to one’s relational value are not present.

The sociometer of a person with high trait self-esteem rests at a relatively high position, indicating a high degree of relational value when it is in “standby mode” (Figure 18.2A). Because of past experiences, such individuals implicitly assume that they are generally acceptable people with whom others value having relationships. Trait self-esteem correlates highly with the degree to which people believe that they are acceptable individuals who possess attributes that other people value (see Denissen et al., 2008; Leary & MacDonald, 2003; Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995; Lemay & Ashmore, 2006; MacDonald, Saltzman, & Leary, 2003).

In contrast, the sociometer of a person with low trait self-esteem rests at a point indicating a low to moderate degree of relational value (Figure 18.2B). Theorists have noted that people who score “low” on measures of trait self-esteem rarely possess truly low self-esteem. Rather, their feelings about themselves are neutral or mixed, often with some combination of positive and negative judgments (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989).

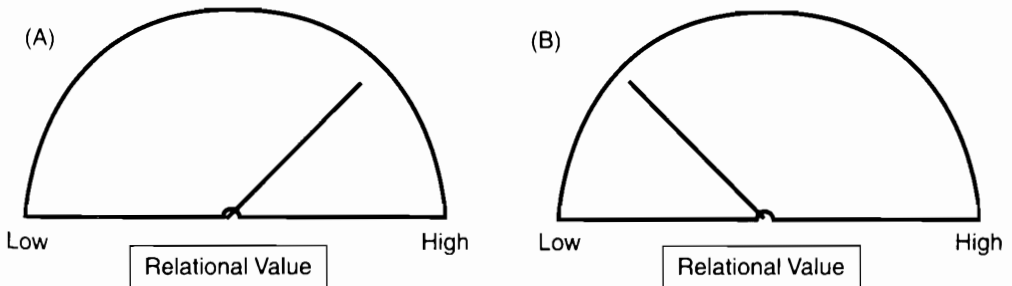


FIGURE 18.2. (A) The sociometer of a person with high trait self-esteem rests in a position that indicates relatively high relational value in the absence of incoming interpersonal feedback. (B) The sociometer of a person with low trait self-esteem rests in a relatively low position in the absence of incoming interpersonal feedback.

This suggests that few people's sociometers chronically register no relational value, probably because most people have at least a few people who value relationships with them.

Viewed from the sociometer perspective, what are typically regarded as effects of trait self-esteem are more accurately conceptualized as the effects of a sociometer that tends to operate in a particular range of relational value. Because of the set points of their sociometers, people with low versus high self-esteem react to acceptance and rejection differently (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997). For example, people with low trait self-esteem are not anxious, depressed, jealous, lonely, or rejection-sensitive *because* they have low self-esteem (as others have suggested) but because they go through life detecting a relatively low degree of relational value. Likewise, people with low self-esteem do not engage in the array of dysfunctional behaviors attributed to them *because* they have low self-esteem (Heaven, 1986; Kaplan, 1980; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989) but because they regularly detect inadequate acceptance in their interpersonal environments and, thus, resort to extreme measures to boost their relational value (Leary, 1999; Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995).

It may be tempting to conclude that people who score low in trait self-esteem suffer from poorly calibrated sociometers, but that is not necessarily the case. Many people with low trait self-esteem have well-calibrated sociometers that accurately detect their relatively low degree of relational value. However, some people with low self-esteem probably detect lower relational evaluation from others than actually exists, and their sociometers can be viewed as miscalibrated. In the following sections, we examine ways in which a miscalibrated sociometer may lead to emotional distress and problems with self-regulation.

When the Sociometer Is Set Too Low

One type of miscalibration occurs when the sociometer is set "too low"—that is, when it detects less relational value in the interpersonal environment than actually exists. This situation, which is shown in Figure 18.3, is comparable to a fuel gauge that indicates less gas in the tank than there really is (causing the driver to be more anxious about running out of gas than is warranted).

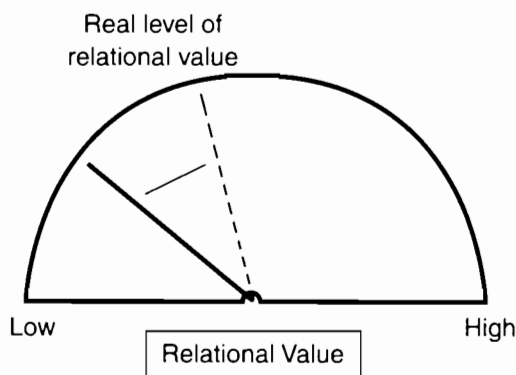


FIGURE 18.3. A person with a sociometer that is calibrated low chronically experiences less relational value (and, thus, lower self-esteem) than is warranted by the situation.

One consequence of this kind of miscalibration is an oversensitivity to cues that connote relational devaluation. The system will register a high proportion of false positives, interpreting benign (or even mildly favorable) interpersonal events as potential threats to acceptance. Because this miscalibrated sociometer responds as if relational value is unacceptably low, the person experiences frequent episodes of low state self-esteem, along with rejection-related emotions, such as social anxiety, jealousy, guilt, and embarrassment (Leary et al., 2001; Leary & MacDonald, 2003) and interpersonal defensiveness (Wood, Heimpel, Manwell, & Whittington, 2009).

Of course, people who have low trait self-esteem do not necessarily have miscalibrated sociometers; many people with low self-esteem accurately perceive that they have low relational value to others; thus, their sociometers are working properly. However, some people who have low trait self-esteem may be biased to perceive less acceptance than actually exists. Koch (2002) found that people who scored low in trait self-esteem tend to respond to evaluatively ambiguous primes as though they were negative. Similarly, people who feel less valued by their spouses are more likely to perceive benign or ambiguous spousal behavior (e.g., partner being in a bad mood) as rejecting and consequently feel worse about themselves the next day (Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003).

Having such an improperly calibrated sociometer compromises the person's ability to self-regulate optimally. By responding to interpersonal events as though they connote lower relational value than is the case, people overreact, both emotionally and behaviorally. Such reactions can become self-fulfilling prophecy because people who often feel devalued often pull back from or attack relational partners, leading those individuals to withdraw (DeHart, Pelham, & Murray, 2004; Downey, Freitas, Michealis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998). Not surprisingly, then, the degree to which people's self-esteem was influenced by their partners' actions on a day-to-day basis predicted relationship decline over the course of a year for both partners (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). People with low self-esteem are also more likely to base their social decisions on the likelihood of being accepted by their peers (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007), and their unwillingness to take social risks limits the number of new people and groups with which they become acquainted, lowering their opportunities of being accepted, thus maintaining their level of low self-esteem.

When the Sociometer Is Set Too High

The sociometer may also be set "too high"—like a fuel gauge that indicates more gas than is actually in the tank (see Figure 18.4). In this case, people chronically detect that others value them more as social interactants and relational partners than they actually do. Subjectively, such an optimistic miscalibration may seem beneficial because the person has high self-esteem and rarely experiences the aversive emotions associated with feeling devalued or rejected. Indeed, the prevailing view has been that positive illusions regarding one's acceptability and worth are psychologically beneficial (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

However, if we think of self-esteem and affect as the output of a sociometer designed for interpersonal self-regulation, the fallacy of this view becomes apparent. A sociometer that is calibrated too high (as in Figure 18.4) leads people to overestimate their relational value and, thus, show inadequate concern for how others perceive and evaluate them. Such a miscalibrated sociometer will fail to warn them when their acceptance by other people

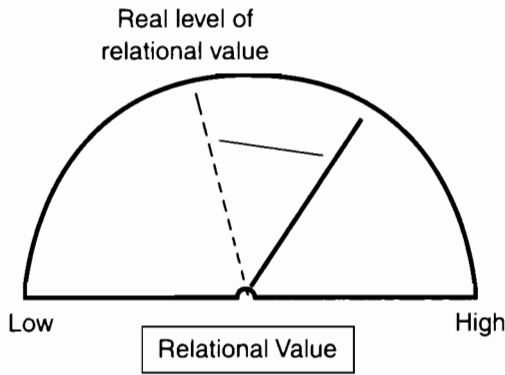


FIGURE 18.4. A person with a sociometer that is calibrated high chronically experiences greater relational value (thus, higher self-esteem) than is warranted by the situation.

is in jeopardy. Although a driver on a lonely stretch of highway may take great comfort in seeing that the fuel gauge is well above “Empty,” this consolation is badly misplaced if the gas tank is actually running dry. Social life requires that people understand how they are perceived, evaluated, and accepted by others. Although it is sometimes wise to disregard others’ evaluations, effective behavior cannot be predicated on erroneous perceptions of other people’s reactions. Believing that one’s relational value is higher than it is results in negative consequences for both the individual and those with whom he or she interacts.

At minimum, the person whose sociometer is calibrated too high will be disliked, if not rejected, for being haughty, conceited, or snobbish (Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997). Worse, people who overestimate their relational value (and have undeservedly high self-esteem) tend to influence, dominate, and exploit other people (Emmons, 1984). They also tend to respond defensively and aggressively to suggestions that they are not as wonderful as their sociometers suggest (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Emmons, 1984). Furthermore, people who believe they have generally high relational value may be insufficiently restrained in mistreating or hurting other people because they assume they are so highly valued. In part, a well-placed concern for potential rejection helps to keep behavior within socially acceptable bounds.

The extreme case of this miscalibration is narcissism, in which people feel more special, important, and self-satisfied than objective feedback warrants (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Conceptualizing narcissism as arising from a sociometer that is calibrated too high helps to explain the paradox of why narcissists have grandiose self-views yet react strongly to criticism. With a sociometer that is set too high, narcissists feel better about themselves than they objectively ought to feel. Thus, when they receive clear-cut feedback indicating that other people do not value and accept them, a discrepancy arises between how they feel about themselves and how other people feel about them. Because the powerful, subjective reality of their miscalibrated sociometer convinces them that they are important or valuable, they conclude that other people’s negative evaluations are biased and unfair, and this sense of being devalued unfairly produces their defensiveness and anger. On occasion, unable to discount negative feedback and rejection, a narcissist may realize that his or her relational value is not as high as assumed, resulting in a devastating crash in self-esteem.

The problems that arise for people whose sociometers are calibrated too high highlight the risks of raising people's self-esteem artificially. Although psychologists, educators, and politicians have advocated raising self-esteem as a way to improve mental health, decrease maladaptive behavior, and eliminate social problems (Mecca et al., 1989), raising self-esteem in a manner that is not commensurate with people's true relational value is a recipe for disaster. Convincing people that they are acceptable, worthy, and lovable individuals despite the fact that they regularly treat others in unacceptable ways is analogous to adjusting one's fuel gauge so that it shows more gas in the tank than there is. The person may feel temporarily good about circumstances but suffer negative consequences in the long run (Robins & Beer, 2001).

When the Sociometer Is Excessively or Insufficiently Sensitive

Some people's sociometers underreact or overreact to cues that are relevant to relational value. Having a sociometer that is either excessively or insufficiently sensitive to interpersonal appraisals creates yet other problems with interpersonal self-regulation.

Hypersensitivity

An overactive sociometer leads people to experience extreme swings in affect and state self-esteem on the basis of minor changes in the interpersonal environment. Mild signs of acceptance may evoke high self-esteem and euphoria, and mild signs of disinterest or disapproval may crush self-esteem and elicit despair (see Figure 18.5).

This seems to be the case for people with unstable self-esteem. Kernis and Goldman (2003) suggested that unstable self-esteem reflects "fragile, vulnerable feelings of immediate self-worth that are influenced by potentially self-relevant events" (p. 114). This view is undoubtedly correct, and sociometer theory helps to explain the source of highly variable self-esteem. When the sociometer overresponds to events that are relevant to relational value, people display swings in self-esteem that are out of proportion to the evaluative implications of those events. Indeed, the personality factors associated with unstable self-esteem are those that characterize a person with an unstable sociometer. For example, high dependence on other people makes their reactions particularly important, an impor-

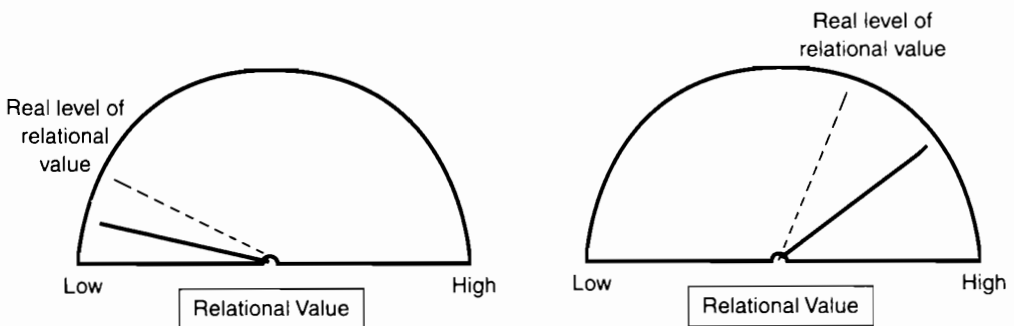


FIGURE 18.5. A person with a hypersensitive sociometer experiences greater swings in perceived relational value (thus, self-esteem) than are warranted by the situation.

erished self-concept fails to provide an anchor from which one can assess one's relational value independently of immediate feedback, and overreliance on social approval renders one's value in other people's eyes more important than it needs to be (see Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). The literature on self-esteem instability (see Kernis & Goldman, 2003) can be integrated, if we assume that people with unstable self-esteem have hyperactive sociometers.

A person's attachment style is also related to self-regulation, and the sociometer may be involved. Srivastava and Beer (2005) suggested that anxiously attached individuals have a reactive sociometer because they employ hyperactive strategies to monitor others' reactions to them and are more vigilant to signs of possible acceptance and rejection. Additionally, Pietromonaco and Barrett (2006) found that nonsecurely attached individuals are more likely than securely attached individuals to seek acceptance and liking from others. In particular, people with a preoccupied attachment style are more likely to rely on others for help in regulating what they think and feel about themselves, and their evaluations of themselves are associated with the degree to which they feel cared for and understood by another person.

Hyposensitivity

A hypoactive sociometer is relatively insensitive to changes in relational value (see Figure 18.6). Large changes in one's relational value to other people result in only slight movement in the sociometer and negligible changes in state self-esteem. A sociometer that does not react to interpersonal feedback cannot adequately assess the person's relational value. Although instances arise in which a person ought to disregard other people's reactions, chronically doing so leads the person to be ostracized by everyone because he or she fails to react intelligently to situations that ought to convey low or declining relational value.

In extreme cases, people's sociometers are essentially out of service. If being valued and adored has the same subjective effect as being devalued and detested, then the person is incapable of interpersonal self-regulation. The person who rarely experiences anxiety, hurt feelings, or guilt in situations in which others dislike, detest, or ostracize him or her may have a broken sociometer. Although no direct evidence bears on this point, one exemplar of an insensitive or "stuck" sociometer would seem to be the antisocial (or

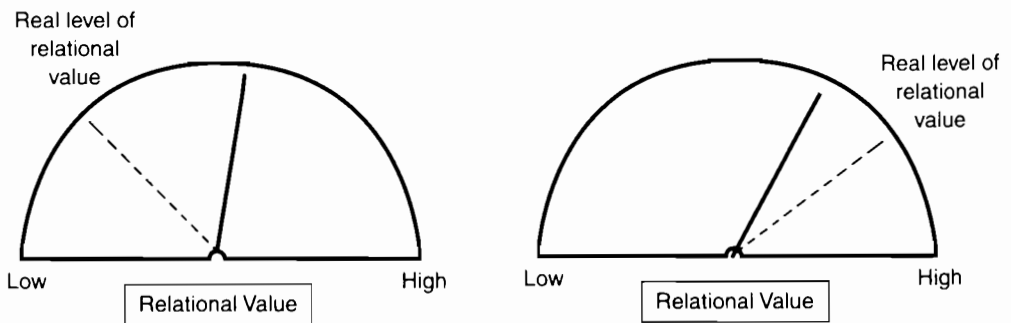


FIGURE 18.6. A person with a hyposensitive sociometer experiences smaller changes in perceived relational value (thus, self-esteem) than are warranted by the situation.

sociopathic) personality, which is characterized by impaired empathy and a weak conscience. The selfish, manipulative, and hurtful behaviors of the person with antisocial personality disorder seem to stem from indifference to how his or her actions are perceived and evaluated by other people, and to the ostracism that often results. A person with an antisocial personality is deceitful, egocentric, irresponsible, and manipulative (Lykken, 1995)—characteristics that most people try to avoid because they likely lead to rejection. This is not to say that an out-of-order sociometer lies at the heart of sociopathy (although it might), but it does suggest that sociopaths have broken sociometers.

SECONDARY SATISFACTION OF SELF-ESTEEM

As noted, sociometer theory suggests that people's apparent efforts to protect their self-esteem stem from an interest in maintaining their relational value to other people. Although it is easy to see how public behaviors may enhance one's image and value to other people, one can ask whether people sometimes try to maintain self-esteem in their own heads.

The ability to self-reflect allows people to override their natural and immediate reactions by reconstruing the personal meaning of events. As a result, people sometimes interpret events that objectively ought to make them feel bad about themselves in ways that allow them to maintain self-esteem. In essence, people can cognitively override the sociometer. One such example involves implicit self-esteem compensation, whereby people experience a boost in self-esteem after their belongingness is threatened (Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2007). Compensatory cognitive strategies help to buffer against threats, but there has been considerable debate regarding whether these self-serving biases or positive illusions are beneficial to people's well-being (Colvin & Block, 1994; Robins & Beer, 2001; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Viewing self-esteem as a sociometer involved in self-regulation suggests that these biases and illusions are probably detrimental. The sociometer effectively regulates interpersonal relations only to the extent that it provides a reasonably accurate picture of other people's reactions to the individual vis-à-vis acceptance and rejection. In overriding and fooling the system, positive illusions increase the likelihood of misregulation. Positive illusions about the self undoubtedly make people feel better and, occasionally, allow them to maintain a positive attitude and motivation in the face of adversity. But, over the long haul, positive illusions circumvent the sociometer's function. Convincing oneself that one is more acceptable than one actually is makes no more sense than convincing oneself that the car's gas tank contains more gasoline than it really does. It may make one feel better temporarily but, to the extent that it deters appropriate or remediative action, the ultimate outcome will often be negative.

CONCLUSIONS

Conceptualizing the sociometer as a psychological mechanism that monitors people's social environments and helps them minimize the likelihood of rejection is helpful in thinking about the self-regulation of interpersonal behavior. Research supports the idea that people possess a regulatory mechanism that responds to changes in relational value,

and the concept of a sociometer provides an overarching framework for conceptualizing a variety of phenomena, such as self-esteem, interpersonal emotions, reactions to rejection, individual differences in rejection sensitivity, and personality disorders (particularly the narcissistic and antisocial disorders). Importantly, the metaphor of the sociometer as a psychological gauge of relational value may also provide insights into what goes wrong when people self-regulate in dysfunctional ways that damage their relationships with other people.

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