Investigating Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Relational Psychological Tendencies

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Abstract

Self-esteem is frequently evaluated in relation to other attributes of the human persona, with emphasis often falling to how the trait affects intimate relationships. Today's society gives priority to self-esteem when individuals evaluate potential intimate partners due to schemas concerning the perceived necessity of the trait in others. It is often scrutinized that without a relatively high self-esteem, an intimate partner is more likely to exhibit undesirable behaviors such as a tendency towards introversion, an inability to address relational issues, and a proneness to being "clingy." In this study, participants reported perceived levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and psychological positions held about intimate relationships. Results revealed six significant correlations whose implications are discussed further in this report. Of the correlations observed, the two most enlightening may be the significant positive correlation between instantaneous self-esteem and relational satisfaction, and the moderate negative correlation between instantaneous self-esteem and relational anxiety. The implications of these findings will be further discussed.

Introduction

The importance of developing and maintaining relational health is often perceived to be an expectation in today's society. In order to avoid attaining a social stigma, individuals may seek out fulfilling relationships. The importance of attaining such relationships for those entering adulthood is magnified and supported by the findings that lacking intimacy can be especially detrimental to the progress and well-being of life for emerging adults (Rauer, Pettit, Bates, Lansford, & Dodge, 2013). Emerging adulthood is the developmental period found between adolescence and adulthood characterized by the exploration of identity, decision making, and intimacy (Eryilmaz & Atatk, 2011). Individuals within the age range of eighteen to twenty-five are considered to be the emerging adults who are in need of the aforementioned relationships (Pettit et al., 2013). A perception held by many emerging adults is that having a high self-esteem will enhance their ability to initiate and maintain healthy intimate relationships (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Before the validity of this idea can be evaluated, a further investigation into the nature of self-esteem is necessary.

Research has shown that chronic levels of self-esteem play a vital role in one's motivation for social interactions (Anthony, Holmes & Wood, 2007). For the purposes of this study, self-esteem is considered to be how individuals regard their own traits, characteristics, and worth across all situations. The definition of self-esteem is often referred to as global self-esteem (Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001). The implications that self-esteem may have on the mindset of emerging adults depends heavily upon which extreme of the trait individuals tend to gravitate towards, with the extremes being low self-esteem and high self-esteem. Low self-esteem individuals tend to believe they are of small worth, will fail in future relationships, and have little faith in a partner's ability to positively regard interactions between one other (Anthony, Holmes,

& Wood, 2007). Those with a high self-esteem possess a general love for themselves, are more open to new interactions with others, and tend to take more risks in life (Brown et al., 2001; Anthony et al., 2007). It is important to note, however, that no one individual may be completely characteristic of either extreme. Rather, each individual is subject to the social experiences of the past that positively or negatively influence levels of self-esteem, leading to shades of grey regarding the attribute (Anthony et al., 2007).

A leading theory that may further explain how social experiences and self-esteem affect one another is known as the sociometer theory. At the foundation of the sociometer theory is the "power of perception." How an individual perceives his or her own value in the eyes of others affects the self-esteem level of said individual (Murray, Rose, Griffin, & Bellavia, 2003). Further, following the re-evaluation of perceived self-esteem, an individual is likely to change how he or she approaches a social or relational situation (Murray et al., 2003). This cycle of perceived self-esteem, react to the resulting relational situation, and then re-perceive self-esteem perpetually fluctuates how confident a person may or may not be. The literature goes on to propose that there are multiple sociometers designated specifically for various relational networks, such as platonic, mating, and work-related (Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010). While each of these networks may not directly affect one another on a day-to-day basis, an individual must place a value as to the worth of each network (Kavanagh et al., 2010). Placing more value in one network than another, such as valuing the work-related sociometer over the mating sociometer, could indirectly lead to a perceived devaluation of self-esteem within a network (Kavanagh et al., 2010). For the example given, an individual may lower their self-esteem in regards to intimate relationships due to a focus on work.

For the purposes of this study, the effects of self-esteem on the mating sociometer, and vice versa, are to be exclusively evaluated. Recently, researchers Kavanagh, Robins, and Ellis (2010), investigated how rejection or acceptance by a member of the opposite sex affected the mating sociometer of an individual. Results revealed what proponents of the sociometer theory would predict; relational rejection by a member of the opposite sex negatively affected self-esteem levels of participants, while relational acceptance by a member of the opposite sex led to a more positive perception of the self (Kavanagh et al., 2010).

Taking into account the nature of self-esteem, sociometer theory, and the implications both have on emerging adults, we sought out to understand what other dimensions of relationships would be affected by self-esteem and self-efficacy. It was hypothesized that self-esteem and self-efficacy would significantly affect relational psychological tendencies.

Method

Participants

Twenty-eight undergraduate students (21 females and 7 males; average age= 20, SD= 1.7) from a mid-sized university in the Southwest were recruited. The sample consists of 35.7% Caucasians, 10.7% Black/African American, 50% Latino/a or Hispanic, and 3.6% Asian/Asian American. Participants volunteered to participate in this research to fulfill a course requirement or receive extra credit for a class.

Measures

Descriptive Data. A questionnaire requesting information about each participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and collegiate year was administered to participants.

General Self-Esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989) was utilized to assess participants' general self-esteem level. A sample item includes, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Agree, 4=Strongly Disagree).

Instantaneous Self-Esteem. The 20-item State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) was utilized to assess participants' self-esteem at that time. A sample item includes, "I feel confident about my abilities." Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not at All, 5=Extremely).

General Self-Efficacy. The 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale was utilized to assess participants' general self-efficacy level. A sample item includes, "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." Items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale (1=Not at All True, 4=Exactly True).

Relationship Dimensions. The 61-item Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire (Walkey, 1979) was utilized to assess participants' perspectives on intimate relationships across twelve sublevels. A sample item includes, "I am confident about myself as an intimate partner." Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not at All Characteristic of Me, 5=Very Characteristic of Me).

Procedure

As participants entered the classroom, they were instructed to sign in and take a seat. The experimenters explained that the study was investigating the relationship between self-esteem, self-efficacy, and intimate relationships. Participants were then given instructions on completing the materials. Next, participants completed the general self-esteem, instantaneous self-esteem,

general self-efficacy, and relationship dimensions questionnaires. After completing all forms, participants were fully debriefed.

<div align="center">Results</div>

A bivariate correlation was conducted between general self-esteem, instantaneous self-esteem, self-efficacy, twelve dimensions of relationships, and the demographics of participants. There was a positive correlation between gender (*M*=1.25 *SD*= .44) and total self-efficacy (*M*=34.43 *SD*=5.04), *r*=.45, *p*<.05, *n*=28. Males reported a significantly greater confidence in their ability to accomplish tasks than women. Further, results revealed a negative correlation between college year (*M*=3.25 *SD*=1.35) and general self-esteem (*M*=27.57 *SD*=2.25), *r*=-.572, *p*<.01, *n*=28. As the year in college of participants increased, general reported self-esteem significantly decreased. There was also a negative correlation found between total instantaneous self-esteem (*M*=70.89 *SD*=14.35) and overall relational consciousness (*M*=14.89 *SD*=2.79), *r*=-.426, *p*<.05, *n*=28. The more confident participants felt about themselves at the time of the experiment, the less likely they were to reflect upon the aspects of their intimate relationships. There was also a moderate negative correlation between total instantaneous self-esteem (*M*=70.89 *SD*=14.35) and relational anxiety (*M*=10.79 *SD*=4.47), r=-438, *p*<.05, *n*=28. The higher the self-esteem for participants was, the less anxious they felt about their intimate relationships. There was a moderate negative correlation between total self-efficacy (*M*=34.43 *SD*=5.04) and the reported fear of relationships (*M*=13.07 *SD*=5.08), *r*= -.481, *p*<.01, *n*=28. The more confident that an individual felt in their ability to complete a task, the less they feared an intimate relationship. Finally, there was a correlation found between instantaneous self-esteem (*M*=70.89 *SD*=14.35) and relationship satisfaction (*M*=18.11 *SD*= 5.57), *r*=.418, *p*<.05, *n*=28.

The more positively participants regarded themselves at the time of the experiment, the more relational satisfaction reported.

<p style="text-align:center">Discussion</p>

The present study set out to determine if self-esteem and self-efficacy are related to twelve dimensions of relationships. Six correlations were found between the items in question to support this theory.

When demographical information was incorporated in the correlational analyses, it was found that males reported a higher perceived self-efficacy than women. Self-efficacy in the context of this study is an individual's perception of whether or not they will be able to complete a particular task. The aforementioned correlation may be due to women's traditional gender role of being reliant on males for security, leading to a generally lower level of openness to new experiences (Weiss, Freund, & Wiese, 2012). Another possible reason for the discrepancy between men and women's perceived potential to succeed in uncharted territory may be due to what Furnham, Hosoe, and Tang (2002) coined to be the "male hubris-female humility bias." In other words, men may tend to be overconfident in their abilities, while women may tend to underestimate what they can accomplish.

Further analysis of the demographic data suggested that as undergraduates' number of years in school increases, the overall reported self-esteem decreases. This finding directly conflicts with what has been previously speculated to occur as students move through educational careers. A possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that as students begin to approach the end of their collegiate careers, a fear of the unknown demands of adult life affects students' perceptions of themselves. This fear could be a product of the process of students re-

valuing both the work and the mating sociometers as they begin to transition to a new stage of life (Kavanagh et al., 2010).

A third significant correlation suggested that as participants' self-efficacy increased, their fear of relational intimacy decreased. It is important to note that a relationship is not an objective that can be completed. Relationships are multifaceted connections between individuals that are under constant construction, destruction, or repair. With this in mind, one can extrapolate that this correlation may be evidence of participants' recognition of societal expectations regarding the nature of a healthy relationship (Rauer et al., 2013). Research has also shown as an individual's self-efficacy increases, his or her motivation and performance may increase within a relevant task (Funder, 2013). Participants may be aware of the affect belief has on performance within a task, and therefore place a high value in the presence or absence of self-efficacy. Those with high confidence in their ability to complete tasks may take this into account, positively perceive their ability to maintain a healthy relationship, and then "perform" with less fear of "failing" an intimate partner.

When the instantaneous self-esteem total of participants was compared to the twelve sections of the Multidimensional Relationship Questionnaire, three correlations proved to be significant. Firstly, a moderate negative correlation was found between relational consciousness and instantaneous self-esteem. A second relationship revealed by the data illustrates a negative correlation between relational anxiety and the aforementioned dimension. The third and final significant correlation found was positive between instantaneous self-esteem and relational satisfaction. While these correlations are all related due to the common factor of the instantaneous self-esteem item, the rationality as to how and why such relationships exist may differ according to the literature.

Relational consciousness is best described as an individual's time spent reflecting on the intricacies of his or her intimate relationship (Snell et al., 2002). To better understand why relational awareness is negatively correlated with self-esteem, it is beneficial to consider why one would take time to ruminate about an intimate relationship. When one is happy with the condition of a relationship, he or she is less likely to occupy them self with worrying about improving said relationship. According to Funder (2013), a high self-esteem can lead to less time reflecting, or worrying, about intimate relationships. These findings consequently apply to the negative correlation between instantaneous self-esteem and relational anxiety. When one worries, especially about intimate relationships, he or she is likely to suffer from some level of stress. To stress about one's relational worth can lead to depression and poor mental health (Berg & Snyder, 2010). Findings such as this may help to solidify the societal view of high self-esteem being a valuable asset within intimate relationships.

Of the correlations found, perhaps the most influential is the positive correlation between instantaneous self-esteem and relational satisfaction. Extensive research has provided information supporting this claim. For example, Baumeister and colleagues (2003) stated that self-esteem is strongly correlated with overall happiness regardless of stress or circumstance. This information is valuable because individuals enter into intimate relationships hoping to satisfy emotional "needs." These "needs" are more likely to be satisfied when an individual exudes confidence as a buffer to any unwanted stimuli, resulting in the longevity of happiness.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The most influential limitation was a small sample size. With a larger sample size, more significant correlations may have been revealed.

One reason for such a small sample size was the short timeframe the study took place. While this study did provide some insight into the nature of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and intimate relationships, the study only investigated correlational data, leaving researchers unable to concretely conclude the causation of the significant relationships found. Further limitations included a three to one female to male ratio, a complete reliance on the responses of participants, and a lack of information regarding the perspective of individuals outside of college.

Concluding Remarks

Results revealed that self-esteem and self-efficacy would affect intimate relationships. Analysis of both the literature and data support this claim, with little evidence proving otherwise. This information is important because it reiterates the value of self-esteem and self-efficacy in intimate relationships. Implications include a better understanding of what dimensions of relationships are most affected by self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as how reinforcing one's positive perception of them self can lead to more positive relationships. In sum, an individual's pursuit of happiness through relationships could be aided by a positive regard of the self.

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