

Defensiveness: A Menace to High Self-Esteem

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We live in a society where high self-esteem is synonymous with – and believed to be essential to – well being. And why not? There is a wide range of evidence that high self-esteem has many positive effects for individuals. Research has linked high self-esteem to higher expectation to succeed; to higher task performance; and to being more independent and self-directed, and less prone to mood swings and depression. These findings have contributed to, and perhaps even led, a promotion of self-esteem in the popular media, and in our educational and social institutions.

This endorsement of self-esteem has gone largely undisputed until relatively recently.

In their presentation, “Understanding Negative Consequences of High Self-Esteem: The Role of Defensiveness,” Kathleen Hoffman and Traci Mann from the University of California, Los Angeles examined evidence that disputes the popular notion of self-esteem. According to Hoffman and Mann, there is research suggesting that the value of self esteem may not be all it’s cracked up to be, and may even be opposite of what we’ve thought.

A DIFFERENT EXPLANATION

Some of the most convincing evidence for the negative effects of high self-esteem has come from research on self-regulation. The literature suggests that under conditions of ego threat, people with a sense of high self-esteem may not be able to suspend their positive illusions to make accurate self-evaluations. In other words, an individual’s egotistical illusions can interfere and impair an individual’s judgment by overestimating their own abilities and setting unreachable goals for themselves. (*Editor’s note: Anyone who has seen American Idol has witnessed this phenomenon.*)

Hoffman and Mann seek to replicate and improve on a previous study by Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice (1993) which delved into the question of negative effects of self esteem and, through an experimental manipulation, found that high self-esteem and ego threat did not lead to aggression, whereas narcissism mixed with ego threat did lead to aggression.

Drawing on the self-regulation literature, Hoffman and Mann challenge these findings and argue an alternative explanation to the role of narcissism.

They hypothesize that there are two variations of high self-esteem: one that is pure high self-esteem, and one that includes defensive behavior with an unrealistically positive manner. The researchers argue that it is defensiveness, not high self-esteem that was the cause for the negative behaviors. Hoffman and Mann replicated Baumeister et al’s study with an added measure to distinguish between the two states. Their results were significantly different than the earlier study.

By differentiating participants with high self-esteem and those that a sense of defensiveness, results showed that those who were identified as having high self-esteem did not perform worse than other people in the ego threat condition. Hoffman and Mann failed to find the often-cited results that high self-esteem leads to poor self-regulation after threats to the ego. In the present study, individuals with high self-esteem made big commitments, but they were successful in living up to them. Hence, these individuals did not have a case of inflated unrealistic self-esteem, but true high self-esteem.

The results suggest that high self-esteem alone is not a disadvantage to self-regulation under ego threat. However, the presence of defensiveness may trigger the aversive impact of high self-esteem. The presentation suggests that just as we cannot blindly assume that high self-esteem is always positive, we must also not consider self-esteem as encompassing two dimensions. Rather, we need to distinguish between true high self-esteem and some other condition that may.