



# Culture, cognition and behavior in the pursuit of self-esteem



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## ABSTRACT

Self-esteem research, arguably the largest field of research in the history of social science, has devoted much of its efforts to the idea that self-esteem causes a broad range of behavioral and social problems, but has failed to produce strong, consistent evidence for most claims. However, this research has conceptual and methodological problems, including a limited understanding of the role of culture, and the assumption that global levels of self-esteem are the main causal mechanism of interest. This paper argues that self-esteem motivated behavior may be better understood as socio-culturally contextualized pursuits of valued identities, which are difficult to understand without considering their social and cultural conditions. Self-esteem therefore lies at the intersection of culture and cognition, and it is argued that an interdisciplinary approach to self-esteem pursuits could be beneficial. A way to reconcile constructionist views of identity with a cognitive self is then suggested and discussed. It is possible, by drawing on models of neurocognition, to think of a cognitive self as performed, context-dependent, and emergent rather than fixed, internal, and expressed. Finally, the paper discusses the social contingencies and consequences of self-esteem pursuits in relation to research issues such as aggression, stratification, crime, masculinity, and political attitudes.

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## 1. Introduction

The interaction between culture and cognition has long been a black box of human behavior, no doubt a consequence of the conventional compartmentalization of culture and cognition research in academia. In recent decades, however, some researchers have identified new ways of bridging this research. In particular, growing enthusiasm has followed DiMaggio's (1997) seminal paper on the prospect of a sociology of culture and cognition, resulting in special issues of *Poetics* (Cerulo, 2010a), the *European Journal for Social Theory* (Strydom, 2007), and *Sociological Forum* (Cerulo, 2014). These ambitions are fueled by the realization that “the convergence of perspectives is too striking and the complementarity of research questions and research skills too fortuitous to let such an opportunity for multidisciplinary synergy pass unexploited” (DiMaggio, 2002:280). This paper will explore such an opportunity for synergy, using self-esteem theory as a case where the interaction of culture and cognition has been overlooked.

In contrast to traditional cognitive sciences,<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the universal aspects of cognition, a cognitive sociology highlights the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of cognition.<sup>2</sup> Cognitive sociology has largely focused on the relationship between culture and cognition, for example in the important theoretical and methodological implications of

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<sup>1</sup> Cognitive sciences here refer to disciplines such as cognitive psychology, neurocognition, and artificial intelligence research.

<sup>2</sup> “Cognition” is used in the broad sense of the cognitive sciences and includes intuition, automatic and sub-conscious processes and processes intertwined with emotions.

adopting a dual process view of culture (see Vaisey, 2009). In the same vein, culture has mainly been represented by practice theories (in particular that of Bourdieu, 1990) and toolkit theories (see Swidler, 1986).

This paper deviates from the previous literature by introducing a constructionist perspective in cognitive sociology. Despite being highly influential in cultural sociology, constructionist views of culture in action have thus far been largely absent from the emerging cognitive sociology. At first sight constructionism may appear incommensurable with the cognitive sciences, but this impression is perhaps more a symptom of what DiMaggio (1997:264) called different “modal intellectual styles,” frameworks, and terminology, than a symptom of fundamentally incompatible ideas.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore possible bridges between the constructionist notion of performed identities and cognition in self-esteem pursuits. There are three intentions behind this. First, to broaden the horizons of a sociology of culture and cognition. Second, to contribute to self-esteem research by showing ways in which socio-cultural factors mediate the relationship between self-esteem and behavior. Third, to show sociologists that the concept of self-esteem gives us access to a wealth of research that helps us to understand how emotion and cognition motivate the pursuit of certain identities. The paper approaches the unexplored opportunities of psychological self-esteem research, and treats this research as a case to be examined from a cognitive sociological perspective.

Self-esteem research has been a part of psychology for well over a century now. Its introduction is commonly attributed to William James (1890), who simply considered self-esteem to be the balance of one's success divided by one's pretensions. After an estimated 35,000 scientific publications on the topic (Zeigler-Hill, 2013) since then, self-esteem research is arguably one of the largest research topics in the history of the social sciences (Scheff & Fearon, 2004).

The notion of self-esteem has nonetheless received limited attention outside of psychology (Leary, 2002). Yet self-esteem has often been thought to involve social achievements and judgments, and even James (1890) promoted the importance of recognition from others. Self-esteem is also closely related to, yet distinct from, many traditional sociological notions such as social capital and status, and concepts such as recognition (Honneth, 1995) and the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959).

What makes self-esteem distinct from these sociological concepts is that self-esteem refers to and focuses on primarily mental processes, which in turn are intertwined with socio-cultural processes. In self-esteem research, the concept is commonly defined as *an evaluative attitude toward the self* (Rosenberg, 1965). This puts the emphasis on cognitive and emotional aspects and situates self-esteem inside the mind of the actor. Self-esteem attitudes may of course involve one's ideas about others' evaluative attitudes toward one's own self, attitudes one does not necessarily share, but the interpretation of the social relationship is mental. Self-esteem is treated here as an abstract category, encompassing different self-conscious emotions such as pride and shame (see Scheff & Fearon, 2004), and their associated cognitive evaluation processes (see Tracy & Robins, 2004). However, this micro-foundation in cognition and emotion does not make self-esteem less of a socio-cultural phenomenon in practice (see Section 2).

The idea that self-esteems is a cause and/or effect of socio-cultural processes, has been the basis of much empirical research. During its relatively long history, self-esteem has been thought to be involved, perhaps primarily, in many “social problems” (c.f. Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989). However, despite sizeable research efforts, evidence linking self-esteem to specific behaviors remains limited at best, which has led some researchers to express skepticism about the causal capacity of self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). It is important to note here that there are significant limits to mainstream self-esteem research. In addition to methodological and conceptual issues (c.f. Baumeister et al., 2003), most self-esteem research has neglected cultural and social aspects (Scheff & Fearon, 2004), and has treated self-esteem as an intra-psychological phenomenon (Leary, 2002). Furthermore, most of this research shares the problematic presumption that the central causal mechanism of self-esteem motivated behavior is a relatively stable global attitude, which can be described as a bi-directional vector or level (c.f. Hoelter, 1986; Smelser, 1989).

As Crocker and Park (2004) pointed out, it might be more fruitful to study what different people's self-esteem is contingent on and how they attempt to pursue those contingencies. In contrast to mainstream self-esteem research, research on the contingencies of self-esteem pursuits “*is still in its infancy*” (Crocker, Luhtanen, & Sommers, 2004:174). A whole new range of questions opens up if we shift the focus from self-esteem as a vector-like trait before or after action toward what people believe they need to do to be persons of value. A cultural and sociological perspective must then be added in addition to the psychological to make sense of where people get their ideals from, how people's pursuits rely on a social reproduction of values, how environment and social interaction facilitate or hinder certain pursuits, and how people understand and evaluate their selves using cultural schemas.

This paper explores the relationship between self-esteem and behavior from an interdisciplinary perspective, and attempts to integrate individual desires to be a person-of-value with the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of pursuing those desires. The paper is divided into three parts. First, the state of self-esteem research and some of its major challenges are briefly reviewed. Next, this paper argues for a shift in focus toward the question of what identities people value and pursue, and how they try to enact them. This part also addresses the challenge of reconciling the cognitive self with a constructionist view of identity as performed. Finally, the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of three distinct aspects of self-esteem pursuits are discussed in relation to both micro- and macro-level social problems.

## 2. The challenges of self-esteem research

Self-esteem, or the lack thereof, has been hypothesized to be involved in many social problems including prejudice, crime, violence, educational performance, alcohol and drug use, adolescent drinking and smoking, and adolescent engagement in

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