



## Report

## Self-reflection and feelings of self-worth: When Rosenberg meets Heisenberg

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## ABSTRACT

The more people think about their attitude toward some issue, the stronger their attitude becomes. The present research examined whether this strengthening effect also applies to self-evaluative attitudes. In four studies, we had some participants complete a self-evaluation measure before rating their momentary feelings of self-worth (Studies 1, 2, and 4) or implicit self-feelings (Study 3). In all four studies, evaluative self-reflection led low self-esteem participants to feel worse about themselves and high self-esteem participants to feel better about themselves. We did not find this self-esteem polarization effect when more general emotions of happiness and sadness were measured (Study 2) or when participants reflected on non-evaluative aspects of themselves (Study 4). These findings suggest that evaluative self-reflection has different consequences for low self-esteem people than for high self-esteem people, and that order effects in personality research may represent actual changes in self-feelings rather than methodological confounds.

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In 1927, the German physicist, Werner Heisenberg, first described a peculiar effect commonly known as the uncertainty principle. According to this principle, the act of measuring some phenomenon can alter the phenomenon itself. For example, in order to measure the temperature of a body, a standard mercury thermometer must absorb thermal energy, thereby slightly cooling the temperature of the body being measured.

In psychology, the perils associated with measuring a phenomenon are well-known. For example, the use of a one-way mirror in which participants can be observed without awareness is designed to reduce the degree to which the act of observing some behavior can cause the behavior to change. A colorful example is provided by a study that found that women wash their hands more often after using the toilet when another woman is present in the washroom than when they (believe) they are alone (Munger & Harris, 1989). Similar effects occur when attitudes are being assessed. For example, participants who are first asked whether they intend to vote in an upcoming election later claimed to have voted more frequently than participants who were not first asked whether they were going to vote (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987).

Asking people to frequently express their attitude also produces temporary attitude change, with frequently-expressed attitudes becoming more accessible (Powell & Fazio, 1984) and extreme (Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992). In fact, even asking people to think about their

attitude can cause their attitude to change (Tesser, 1978). In one investigation, participants were asked to indicate their feelings toward a number of issues (Tesser & Conlee, 1975). Using random assignment to conditions, participants were then instructed to think about these issues for either 30, 60, or 90 s. Afterward, they indicated their feelings again. Attitude polarization increased as a monotonic function of time spent in thought about the issue: the more time participants spent thinking about their attitude, the more extreme their attitudes became.

Building on previous findings, the present research investigates a related phenomenon: Does asking people to evaluate themselves alter the way they feel about themselves? To illustrate, suppose people are asked to indicate how competent, honest, and intelligent they are, as is commonly done in research that gathers self-reports of personality and self-concept. How might these evaluations influence the person's momentary feelings of self-worth? Our suspicion is that feelings of self-worth will rise among those who are accustomed to appraising themselves positively but fall among those who are accustomed to appraising themselves negatively. These associations suggest a testable hypothesis: Filling out a self-evaluation questionnaire should raise feelings of self-worth among high self-esteem people but lower feelings of self-worth among low self-esteem people.

We are not aware of any previous research that has directly tested our hypothesis, but several theories are consistent with it. For example, self-awareness theory argues that emotions and attitudes are strengthened when people turn their attention inward (Scheier & Carver, 1977). To the extent that this is so, we should find that the act of evaluating oneself makes high self-esteem people feel better about themselves and low self-esteem people feel worse about themselves (Brown, 1988; Sedikides, 1992). Research on biased assimilation effects also supports this hypothesis. This research has found that

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individuals' attitudes are strengthened after they spend time considering attitude-relevant material (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). As applied to the present research, this line of research suggests that self-reflection will enhance high self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth, but diminish low self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth.

Order effects in attitude measurement also bear on our hypothesis. Schwarz, Strack, and Mai (1991) asked survey respondents to indicate how satisfied they were with their marriage and how satisfied they were with life in general. The correlation between these two judgments was substantially higher when the marriage item preceded the general life satisfaction item than when the order of these two questions was reversed. Presumably, this occurred because thinking first about their marriage led happily married people to feel better about their lives and unhappily married people to feel worse about their lives.

In sum, several lines of research suggest that asking people to appraise themselves may alter how they feel about themselves. We conducted four investigations to test this hypothesis. In these studies, we asked participants to indicate how they presently were feeling about themselves. Some participants answered this question after first evaluating their more specific traits and qualities, and others answered this question without first evaluating themselves. We predicted a self-esteem polarization effect: in comparison to a control (no self-reflection) condition, the act of evaluating oneself will lead high self-esteem people to feel better about themselves, but low self-esteem people to feel worse about themselves.

One more point before we present our research. Although we have discussed our experimental hypotheses as being symmetrical, they may well apply more to low self-esteem people than to high self-esteem people. There are two reasons for this. First, as a methodological matter, high self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth are already very high; ceiling effects may prevent them from climbing even higher following evaluative self-reflection. Second, previous research has shown that high self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth are more stable and less subject to situational influences than are low self-esteem people's (Brown, 2010; Brown & Marshall, 2006), perhaps because their self-views are held with greater certainty and clarity (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993). To the extent that this is so, we should find that self-reflection lowers low self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth more than it raises high self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

The participants were 36 University of Washington (UW) undergraduates (13 males), participating in exchange for extra credit in a lower-division psychology course. All participants had completed the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale earlier in the academic term. This scale, which is arguably the most popular self-report measure ever devised, focuses on general feelings toward the self without reference to any specific quality or attribute. Participants complete the scale by indicating their agreement with each of 10 items (e.g., "I take a positive view of myself." "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.") on 4-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *strongly agree*). After reversing the scoring for 5 negatively-worded items, a total self-esteem score is found by summing the 10 responses.

#### Materials

**Momentary feelings of self-worth.** A four-item scale was used to measure momentary feelings of self-worth. The scale, which has been used extensively in prior research (e.g., Brown, 2010; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Marshall, 2001), consists of two positive items (pleased with myself, proud) and two negative items (ashamed, humiliated).

Participants indicated to what extent they were presently experiencing each emotion on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *a great deal*). After reversing the scoring for the two negative items, a total feelings of self-worth scale was formed ( $\alpha = .56$ ).<sup>1</sup>

**Self-evaluation questionnaire.** A 16-item self-evaluation questionnaire was constructed, consisting of eight positive items (e.g., attractive, competent, kind, lovable) and eight negative items (e.g., inferior, undesirable, unfriendly, unintelligent). Participants in the self-reflection condition were instructed to indicate to what extent each trait described them, using a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). After reversing the scoring for the negative items, we summed all items to create a self-evaluation index ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### Procedure

At the start of the experimental session, the experimenter led participants into a small room equipped with a computer. The experimenter then left participants alone, instructing them to indicate when they were through. Thereafter, all instructions and materials were presented on the computer, assuring participants of privacy during the remainder of the experiment.

After signing an informed consent form, participants in the control condition immediately completed the momentary feelings of self-worth scale; in contrast, participants in the self-reflection condition completed the self-evaluation questionnaire before completing the momentary feelings of self-worth scale. There were no other differences between the two conditions, and the experimenter who administered the test was blind to participants' experimental condition.

#### Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects of gender, and this variable was excluded from all subsequent analyses.

#### Self-evaluations

As expected, self-esteem scores were strongly related to self-evaluation scores in the self-reflection condition ( $r = .76$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### Main analyses

We anticipated that self-esteem differences would be greater in the self-reflection condition than in the control condition because completing a self-evaluation measure would lower feelings of self-worth among low self-esteem participants and raise feelings of self-worth among high self-esteem participants. To test these hypotheses, we conducted a regression analysis with feelings of self-worth as the criterion and experimental condition (−1 control, 1 = self-reflection) and self-esteem (centered around its mean) as predictors. An interaction term was also entered by multiplying the two predictors to create a cross-product score.

The analysis revealed a main effect of self-esteem,  $F(1, 32) = 30.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .49$ , and the predicted self-esteem  $\times$  self-reflection interaction,  $F(1, 32) = 4.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ . Fig. 1 depicts the predicted values for participants scoring one standard deviation above and below the mean on self-esteem. In accordance with predictions, self-esteem differences were greater when the emotion measure was completed after self-reflection,  $t(32) = 5.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .46$ , than in the control condition,  $t(32) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .17$ . Additional tests showed that the experimental manipulation influenced feelings of self-worth among low self-esteem participants,  $t(32) = 2.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .18$ , but not among high self-esteem participants,  $t < 1$ .

<sup>1</sup> Because the internal reliability of this scale was so low, we also analyzed the data including valence as a repeated measure. No significant effects of this variable were found, so we ignored it in all remaining analyses. Moreover, the internal reliability of this scale was higher in Study 2.

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