

Self-Esteem and Academic Performance of Adolescents

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Abstract: This is essentially library-based research that is aimed at understanding the meaning and adverse consequences of low self-esteem in youngsters; particularly students in colleges and universities. Sociometer theory has provided the theoretical underpinning in understanding the issue of self-esteem in adolescents. The current study identified the factors that result in low self-esteem of adolescents and linked it with the academic performance of students and other spheres of life in general. The study has provided certain suggestions for parents and teachers that can either help prevent lowering the self-esteem of children or improve it after its deterioration. These suggestions have practical significance for academics and parents for improving the academic and non-academic performance of adolescents.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Students, Sociometer Theory, Adolescent

Introduction

The concept of self-esteem has provoked a large body of theoretical and empirical research (Tus, 2020; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Self-related perceptions have become an important area in education due to its impacts on students' behavior and their academic performance (Tus, 2020). Educational institutions are thus putting an effort to improve self-esteem of individuals as it is assumed that high self-esteem will lead to positive outcomes and several benefits (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Self refers to the mindful reflection of one's identity, having an existence separate from others and from the environment. Self-esteem is a feeling about how much an individual values himself (one's self-worth) (Orth & Robins, 2022). According to the authors self-esteem does not necessarily reflect a person's objective characteristics and competence, and is therefore subjective evaluation of one's worth (Donnellan et al., 2011). It is a multidimensional concept, which can be calibrated along a scale as it exists in degrees and is a vitally important component of one's self-concept (Orth & Robins, 2022). Self-esteem is the liking of one's self, assessing one's self on knowing personal capabilities and shortcomings, and a feeling of importance to others (Kurtović et al., 2018). According to Gabriel et al. (2009) people develop a "success" identity versus a "failure" identity, depending upon their perception of self.

The aim of this study is to conduct a meta-analysis to ascertain whether self-esteem has any effect on students' academic and non-academic performances. The findings would presumably allow an accurate and nuanced understanding of the significance of self-esteem in educational institutions with respect to their performance. Furthermore, the study would be beneficial both for theoretical and practical applications that would promote a better cognizance of self-esteem as well as the outcomes it

predicts, and even for determining whether efforts at boosting self-esteem are worth undertaking in order to solve performance problems.

Sociometer Theory and Self-Esteem

According to Sociometer theory (Leary, 2021; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) people want to have a sense of belongingness to social setups because social inclusion has several adaptive benefits (e.g., knowledge sharing within social groups, provision of group resources, opportunities to grow, and protection against outsiders) (Ferris et al., 2015). According to this theory self-esteem is like a sociometer that subjectively monitors the value of an individual in a group and of his relationships in that group. When an individual feels that his relational value is low in a particular group, it will lower his self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Harris & Orth, 2020). He will then struggle hard to restore and increase social inclusion. Individuals with a low self-esteem are more exposed to depression due to social exclusion (Stice et al., 2004; Harris & Orth, 2020). Social exclusion has been termed as 'Ostracism' (Ferris et al., 2015; Kothgassner et al., 2021).

The Meaning of Self-Esteem

Different overlapping concepts are used in place of self-esteem, such as self-image, self-efficacy, self-perception, self-acceptance, self-respect, self-confidence, self-worth, however all refer to the way an individual views himself (Harris & Orth, 2020; Kothgassner et al., 2021). These concepts can set a positive or negative tone of a person's overall opinion about his value; both positive and negative (Minev et al., 2018).

The definition of self-esteem has no consistency whatsoever (Baumeister et al., 2003; Brito et al., 2022; Alicke et al., 2020) and may also vary in breadth and sophistication. Self-esteem is either an emotional response, which is a generalized feeling about self that can be positive or negative or it is the collective result of a set of judgments, which pertain to one's competence across a range of dimensions, such as intellectual competence, social skills, and even appearance, etc. (Emler, 2001). According to the former view these judgments are substantially shaped by the generalized feelings of self and with respect to the latter view the generalized feeling is the net result of these more specific judgments. The effects of low self-esteem can either be localized or generalized. In the former it will have an effect on certain spheres of life, but in the latter case it will cast a profound shadow on virtually all aspects of the student's social and academic life.

Self-views are based upon information gathered by individuals from explicit or implicit feedback from others (Alicke et al., 2020). Some definitions of self-esteem distinguish it from other concepts related to self (such as self-knowledge and self-efficacy) due to the fact that self-esteem represents the affective and/or evaluative component of the self-concept by signifying how people feel about themselves (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Self-esteem is self-perception rather than reality (Baumeister et al., 2003) and is therefore subjective in nature, which is largely influenced by how others view us (Alicke et al., 2020). Responding to other people's perceptions, self-esteem level thus works as a warning system—with feelings of low self-esteem indicating an individual's exclusion from a group (Ferris et al., 2015; Harris & Orth, 2020).

Self-esteem has been referred to as contingent self-esteem, which is an individual's perception of the self-value or worth that depends on perceived successes or failures or compliance to self-standards in a particular domain (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). According to Swann and Bosson (2010), self-esteem has been debated as to whether it is an overall evaluation of the self (i.e., global self-esteem) or of a specific

self-relevant, mostly intellectual abilities and social competence (i.e., domain-specific self-esteem). The latter is also known as an individual's self-esteem at work (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Global self-esteem is assumed to have predictive ability for outcomes measured at an overall level by bundling several outcomes together (Trzesniewski et al., 2006), whereas specific self-esteem is assumed to have predictive ability for specific level outcomes that are measured at a specific level (e.g., academic self-esteem predicts academic outcomes) (Marsh et al., 2006). A majority of the authors have referred to global self-esteem in their work (e.g., Orth et al., 2008; Alicke et al., 2020).

Low Self Esteem of Students

According to Choi et al. (2019), low self-esteem plays an important role in etiology and depression in students and they usually fall prey to pessimism. Disappointing academic and non-academic performance, social status, physical appearance, or any other reason can have an adverse effect on a student's level of self-esteem and he can become persistently apprehensive, lose drive, and exhibit serious behavioral problems.

At times students' self-esteem may be affected by ill-treatment by someone inside or outside the classroom. A feeling of 'being a born loser' traps such people. Furthermore, people with low self-esteem tend to be sensitive to disparagement and focus on others opinion about them (Rosenberg & Owens, 2001; Zhou, 2020). They also tend to keep those people at an arm's length by whom they feel threatened of being ridiculed and thus try to conceal their inner thoughts and feelings from others (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). The authors concur that such individuals have low contribution towards group tasks/discussions and might have an attitude of ambiguity, avoiding risks because they are defensive about their self-esteem, which refrains them from putting their abilities to the test. As a result, individuals with a low self-esteem may lack impulsiveness, are non-creative, fearful, and feel lonely and isolated from others.

Students with a low self-esteem usually have social anxiety disorder, which is a fear of negative evaluation. For a student with a low self-esteem, this problem might be perpetual. For example, a student might be nervous about an upcoming presentation, particularly if he has had an unpleasant experience in the past, such as being embarrassed or ridiculed in front of the class. The perception of being unable to accomplish a task properly does not mean a person is worthless, it means that an individual is just stuck into negative thought patterns or more appropriately into negative thinking traps. When the mind is stuck into negative thinking traps, individuals are more prone to depression, unsafe relationships, drug abuse, and other adverse activities-including criminal and violent acts.

Most of the behavioral issues in the adolescent have a connection with low self-esteem, which include depression, wrongful relations, drug abuse and other criminal activities (Sunderland et al., 2021). According to the authors, depression often adversely affects academic performance, gives rise to behavioral problems, and deprived socialization; educational institutions are often the best place to witness all these symptoms. Adolescents, while their transition from school to colleges and universities, lack the ability to cope with the social demands of the upcoming generation, and with their academic demands of the dynamic and challenging environment (Feldman & Elliot, 1990). The need is for constant supervision and control over the acts of adolescents to evade any unpleasant occurrences. Adolescents who are unsupervised, tend to switch to drug abuse, develop anxiety, stress, depression, and low self-esteem (Richardson et al., 1993). Sanders and Turner (2018) have affixed the blame on the parents for their inability to develop good relationships with their children in an age when they need it most to monitor behaviors.

Causes of Low Self-Esteem

There may be several root causes for low self-esteem in students; however, some of these are worth mentioning. The first and foremost reason for low self-esteem is a student's self-perception or the actual acts of people around him, which makes him feel that the society does not acknowledge the abilities and competencies possessed by him and does not value the things that make him different or special. More often, a failure might have been blown out of proportion, which is coupled by the taunting remarks of the teacher that are taken very seriously by the student. A person who takes such a message to his heart becomes inhibited about or embarrassed by his failure and strives to cover up the things that make him special or different. During this process his self-esteem suffers a great loss. To further add to the misery such students are labeled as 'geeks' and become social outcasts. Some of the students carry forward the bad experiences from their childhood. Later these experiences might become self-fulfilling prophecies thus drastically affecting their day to day lives in the form of low self-esteem (Mwakanyamal et al. 2018),

Unhealthy competition is a popular blame agent for lowering self-esteem. Not only does unhealthy competition damage self-esteem, it also hinders interpersonal relationships. Kohn (1993) labels such a competition as a show of insecurity rather than a demonstration of strength and confidence. According to Atmaca and Ozen (2019), competition infers comparisons which must be abolished for the sake of protecting self-esteem. Teachers and parents should try not to make comparisons between the children on the basis of their abilities and competencies as the weaker child can develop inferiority complexes. Every individual has a unique set of abilities that need to be nurtured rather than tarnished. Teachers and parents should uphold and encourage the natural differences found in children. Unhealthy competitions can further be a source of nurturing feelings of jealousy and at times resulting in serious consequences (Bentancourt & Camilleri, 2021).

The Consequences of Self-Esteem

The question as to whether self-esteem actually has an impact on real-life outcomes or is it merely a by-product of success and well-being in the personal relationships, work and workplace, and in the domain of health has been much debated in the literature (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Orth & Robins, 2022). People having sound self-esteem are considered to be dynamic and responsive to life happenings (Chung et al., 2014). The authors particularly consider emerging adulthood as a period of considerable opportunities and challenges. The importance of this period is characterized by the patterns of adaptation that stem out of their determination (Jensen, 2011). One of the most salient concerns of the students, while their transaction from high school to college/university, is increased academic rigor and competitiveness (Chung et al., 2014). The authors have described this phenomenon as moving from being a "big fish in a little pond" to being a "little fish in a big pond." This transition is usually marked by a negative impact on self-esteem because students' high expectations clash with the ground reality by competing with other "big fish" for good grades, and for many the failure is inevitable failure (Marsh & Hau, 2003). Researchers apprehend that college students have exaggerated hopes about their grades (Chen et al., 2021) and when the students fail to meet their inflated expectations, their self-esteem is thus adversely affected (Chung et al., 2014). Due to the transformation from childhood to adulthood, global self-esteem is more likely to change. Moreover, during the process of becoming an adult, individuals often question one's identity and subsequent reformulation of self-evaluations.

Self-esteem has an effect on students' performance, but the reverse is also true. Good or poor performance of a student can either boost or knock down the students' level of self-esteem. High self-

esteem usually encourages behaviors that lead to successful outcomes, such as work, school, and relationships and reduce the risk for psychological and health related problems, use of drugs, and antisocial behavior (Orth et al., 2012; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). In light of these findings, an important societal goal is a better comprehension of the way self-esteem of adolescents change after joining college/university is considered a critical life period (Chung et al., 2014).

Self-esteem is a cause of important consequences in one's life and has a causal connection with task persistence (Baumeister et al., 2003). Self-esteem can have a positive or negative effect on the behavior, and ultimately performance, of students in an academic context. Individuals with low levels of self-esteem engage in poor performance (Ferris et al., 2015; Noronha et al., 2018). Moreover, studies have revealed that low self-esteem can deviate behavior in individuals (Leary et al., 2006; Berber Çelik & Odaci, 2020). On the contrary, individuals with high self-esteem seek to prove their worth by engaging in good, if not exemplary, performance and adhering to organizational norms (Ferris et al., 2015). In general, the literature proposes that academic grades have a positive association with high self-esteem (Chung et al., 2014).

Self-esteem is likely to be related to future social and personal outcomes (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). The proposition holds that individuals with high self-esteem are better equipped to face failures as compared to people with low self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003). This increased persistence has a tendency to translate into higher academic and occupational success in the long-term (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Perseverance is often required for the accomplishment of intricate tasks and helps in attainment of long-lasting pleasure and rewards (Mirković et al., 2020). In addition, evidence suggests that high self-esteem is related to stable relationships (Harris & Orth, 2020), which are related to socially significant life outcomes. High self-esteem enables more adaptive perseverance behavior (Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Mirković et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

Detailed analysis of the literature has led to certain suggestions that might be worthwhile in protecting an adolescent's self-esteem and improving his resultant performance. A student's self-esteem is an obvious indicator of his mental well-being and viewpoint on life. Parents and teachers therefore need to constantly monitor this indicator to see how a student feels about himself, and if needed, should intervene to reverse any dangerous downward spirals. All adolescents have their own justified reasons to respect themselves, but sometimes they are dreadfully seeking help to find those reasons and find salvage.

Parents have the strongest influence upon self-esteem of their children that is exercised via their parenting style. Parents should be careful in comparisons among their offsprings as every child is blessed with unique strengths and qualities. Moreover, parents should extend unconditional love to their children. They should not mix up the likes and dislikes for a behavior with the actual love for their child. Self-esteem can only be improved when the environment in which a person lives is improved. This also implies improving their interpersonal skills and social acceptance. According to Banstol et al. (2020), parents can improve self-esteem of their children through improved communication, limiting unrealistic expectations, and cultivating a sense of responsibility in them. Building trust in the children will help build up their self-esteem.

On the part of the teacher, students should be given positive feedback on a regular basis irrespective of their academic grades and performance in other areas. Teachers need to be very careful of choosing wording when they criticize a student. Disturbing and fatalistic comments are mortal to self-esteem. Frequent punishments and using discouraging words and comments will ultimately make the student

believe that he is good for nothing. Such beliefs will eternally remain with him for a long time and sometimes even forever. Every student needs special attention in the class. The teacher should understand their needs and respond accordingly. It will particularly help those students whose esteem is sinking or is already low.

Conclusion

The study will be concluded by sharing a personal incident that happened when the author was a child. Once my teacher twisted my ear because I could not understand something she taught in the class, despite the fact that I was a very obedient student. Although it was a minor incident, it became a major setback for my self-esteem. More than three decades have elapsed; I still carry with me the bitterness of those. I am sure there will be many people who have experienced some sort of ridicule either at the hands of their parents or teachers and which might have badly damaged their self-esteem. The reason for narrating this story was to draw a lesson and treat adolescents with dignity, which they deserve. The significance of self-esteem, particularly in the youngsters shall never be taken lightly because it shapes their future lives and careers. Low self-esteem can be considered as a risk factor that can lead to decreased academic performance of students; adversely affecting their grades and chances for better career opportunities.

Recommendations

The major limitation of this study is that it has been based entirely on existing literature, which implies that in discussing a sensitive concept like self-esteem some important topics might have been missed out. The extant literature may also have affected the quality of this study. Moreover, discussion has been limited to adolescents in the academic sector, thus ignoring the impact of self-esteem in other people who are working in different sectors, including teachers in the academic sector. Future researchers can advance this study and test the concept of self-esteem using empirical data, which can yield some interesting results that can be used by policy makers and practitioners in different fields as the unit of analysis—human—is common everywhere. Self-esteem is not only a problem in academia in fact it is part and parcel of human nature, therefore the issue of self-esteem should be studied in other settings as well to see how it affects the performance of employees in the labor-intensive sector. A majority of the studies that have been conducted on self-esteem are quantitative in nature. The focus of studying this phenomenon should be shifted towards quality research because the phenomenon itself is subjective and studying it qualitatively would better serve the purpose. Qualitative research would dig deeper into the issue and rather than dealing with the problems in a mechanistic way, we can deal with them in a more empathic manner. Furthermore, longitudinal research would give a clear picture of the impact of self-esteem in adolescents over a period of time. Longitudinal studies can be easily conducted in educational settings as students once they join a college or university are bound to spend a few years before they finally leave the institution upon completion of their education.

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