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The Self-Esteem Myth

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The idea that self-esteem is an essential part of a healthy personality is now virtually institutionalized in American culture. A quick visit to the local bookstore will reveal a myriad of titles loosely arranged under the category “self help.” The entire educational structure, especially at the elementary level, takes self-esteem as a basic imperative for the educational process.

The state of California even set up a task force in the late 1980s, charged to raise self-esteem in young people. State Assemblyman John Vasconcellos took the lead, convincing then-Governor George Deukmejian to establish the task force as a state project.

Now, a team of researchers has taken a closer look at the idea that self-esteem is a crucial factor in personal happiness, achievement, and behavior. Their research conclusively destroys the self-esteem myth and demonstrates that the nation’s obsession with self-esteem was never based on science in the first place.

The researchers, Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger and Kathleen D. Vohs, published their findings in the January 2005 issue of Scientific American. As the magazine explains, “Boosting people’s sense of self-worth has become a national preoccupation. Yet surprisingly, research shows that such efforts are of little value in fostering academic progress or preventing undesirable behavior.”

This article deserves wide attention, and should serve as a reminder that the reign of pop psychology has produced social effects that continue to influence the minds and lives of countless Americans. Many of the most cherished assumptions of secular psychology run into direct conflict with the Christian worldview. The self-esteem myth is a prime example of how unbiblical thinking can lead to countless problems. At the same time, these researchers are out to prove that the self-esteem myth was never based on any credible scientific evidence at all.

The team aims their sights at the self-esteem movement and, in particular, at the National Association for Self-Esteem [NASE], a group which aims to “promote awareness of and provide vision, leadership and advocacy for improving the human condition through the enhancement of self-esteem.” But, as these researchers counter, “regrettably, those who have been pursuing self-esteem-boosting programs, including the leaders of NASE, have not shown a desire to examine the new work, which is why the four of us recently came together under the aegis of the American Psychological Society to review the scientific literature.”

What did they find? Well, for one thing, these scientists discovered that many of the advocates of self-esteem have no idea what self-esteem is, and have no means of measuring it. It turns out that most of the theorists and investigators who have been dealing with the issue have simply asked persons what they think of themselves. As these researchers argue, “Naturally enough, the answers are often colored by the common tendency to want to make oneself look good.” As these

scientists see it, “psychologists lack any better method to judge self-esteem, which is worrisome because similar self-ratings of other attributes often prove to be way off.”

Interestingly, this quartet of scientists reviewed the literature that argues for a correlation between physical attractiveness and self-esteem. As it happens, those who register self-esteem also report themselves to be physically attractive. The complicating factor in all this is that others do not see these individuals in the same way—at least in terms of their physical attractiveness. As these authors explain, “What seemed at first to be a strong link between physical good looks and high self-esteem turned out to be nothing more than a pattern of consistency in how favorably people rate themselves.”

If all this seems like a parody of a self-esteem seminar, hold on. The researchers argue that both high self-esteem and low self-esteem are rooted in a person’s larger worldview and self-concept. Those with low self-esteem, in the authors’ term, those prone to “floccinaucinihilipilification,” are not merely negative about themselves, they are negative about everything.

There’s more. While self-esteem advocates have argued that high self-esteem leads to a lowering of social prejudices, these researchers found exactly the opposite: “people with high self-esteem appear to be more prejudiced.”

This team also accused self-esteem proponents of confusing correlation and causation. “If high self-esteem brings about certain positive outcomes, it may well be worth the effort and expense of trying to instill this feeling. But if the correlations mean simply that a positive self-image is a result of success or good behavior—which is, after all, at least as plausible—there is little to be gained by raising self-esteem alone.”

When it comes to academic performance, the evangelists for self-esteem have argued that raising students’ feelings about themselves would lead to greater academic achievement. The team admits the early work did show a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance. Nevertheless, the research did not sustain the claims. Researchers Sheila M. Pottebaum, Timothy Z. Keith and Stewart W. Ehly, all then associated with the University of Iowa, tested over 20,000 high school students in both the 10th and the 12th grades. “They found that self-esteem in 10th grade is only weakly predictive of academic achievement in 12th grade. Academic achievement in 10th grade correlates with self-esteem in 12th grade only trivially better. Such results, which are now available for multiple studies, certainly do not indicate that raising self-esteem offers students much benefit. Some findings even suggest that artificially boosting self-esteem may lower subsequent performance.”

In other words, telling children they are doing well when they are actually doing poorly is a destructive lie that misleads the student and, if anything, leads to even further frustration.

Another claim routinely made by self-esteem advocates is that adolescents are likely to show more sexual restraint and behavioral control if they demonstrate high self-esteem. “All in all,” these researchers report, “the results do not support the idea that low self-esteem predisposes young people to more or earlier sexual activity. If anything, those with high self-esteem are less inhibited, more willing to disregard risks and more prone to engage in sex. At the same time, bad sexual experiences and unwanted pregnancies appear to lower self-esteem.” Is this surprising? When it comes to alcohol consumption, another common adolescent form of risk-taking, the data appear to conflict. Nevertheless, at least some studies have shown that high self-esteem is linked to frequent alcohol consumption. All this suggests that adolescents with high self-esteem may translate much of that confidence into risk-taking behavior.

An individual’s high self-esteem does seem linked to a personal sense of happiness. “After coming to the conclusion that high self-esteem does not lessen the tendency toward violence, that it does not deter adolescents from turning to alcohol, tobacco, drugs and sex, and that it fails to improve academic or job performance,” the researchers “got a boost when we looked into how self-esteem relates to happiness.” They found that people with high self-esteem seem to be happier than others, and are thus less likely to be depressed.

Nevertheless, this team raises again the question of correlation versus causation. Does self-esteem produce happiness, or does happiness tend to boost self-esteem?

What about all those self-esteem programs? This research team concluded, “We have found little to indicate that indiscriminately promoting self-esteem in today’s children or adults, just for being themselves, offers society any

compensatory benefits beyond the seductive pleasure it brings to those engaged in the exercise.”

This is an amazing article, but it is not likely to receive the attention it deserves. Those pushing the self-esteem agenda hold sway throughout the educational establishment, the psychological community, and the culture at large. An entire industry of self-esteem enhancing seminars, conferences, books, and therapeutic programs means big business and big money. Furthermore, the idea that self-esteem—simply feeling good about ourselves without reference to reality, achievement, virtue, or behavior—is a prerequisite to contentment is itself both seductive and dangerous.

The Christian worldview completely reverses this cycle. The Christian finds satisfaction, not in a sense of self-worth, but in knowing the one true and living God. Human beings are indeed made in God’s image, and every single human life is thus worthy of respect and dignity. Nevertheless, the gospel makes clear that the Christian’s identity is found in Christ—not in the self.

As a matter of fact, this is one of the most transformative and liberating realities of the Christian faith. It’s not about us—even as we are the recipients of God’s grace and mercy.

Scientific American has done us all a great service by exploding the self-esteem myth, and indicating just how superficial and baseless the claims of self-esteem advocates are now shown to be. Expect an energetic retort from the self-esteem industry. They won’t go down without a fight.

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