

# **THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF SELF-ESTEEM: SOCIOMETER THEORY**

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Human beings appear to be strongly and pervasively concerned with self-esteem. Whether one thinks of a 17th-century French aristocrat (or a member of a modern street gang) resorting to lethal violence in response to a vaguely insulting hint of disrespect, or a woman reappraising her desirability after being rejected by her lover, or a child winning a contest, or a middle-aged businessperson who has been passed over for a promotion, or a sports fan whose favorite team has just reached the championship, or a student debating whether to try again after a disappointing exam performance, the impact of self-esteem on emotion and behavior is palpable and familiar. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to imagine an otherwise healthy and well-adjusted person who is truly indifferent to self-esteem.

Most contemporary psychologists would likely agree with Markus' (1980) suggestion that the "notion that we will go to great lengths to protect our ego or preserve our self-esteem is an old, respected, and when all is said and done, probably one of the great psychological truths" (p. 127). Theorists of many persuasions have discussed the importance of the self-esteem motive to human behavior; self-esteem has been implicated in a variety of behavioral, cognitive, and affective reactions; and many psychological problems have been attributed to an unfulfilled need for self-esteem. Indeed, self-esteem ranks among the most extensively studied constructs in behavioral science.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop and evaluate an explanation for why people are so concerned about their self-esteem. Specifically, we propose that, rather than playing a direct causal role in thought, emotion, or behavior (as has often been supposed), self-esteem is an internal, psychological monitor of something that is very important to people—namely

social belongingness. Health, happiness, success, and survival depend heavily on maintaining social ties to other people, and so it is vitally important to be the sort of person who will be a desirable relationship partner or group member. At its core, self-esteem is one's subjective appraisal of how one is faring with regard to being a valuable, viable, and sought-after member of the groups and relationships to which one belongs and aspires to belong.

We proceed in the following way. After defining self-esteem, we provide a brief overview of existing perspectives on self-esteem. Then we explicate our own understanding of the basis for the self-esteem motive. We argue that self-esteem is a sociometer—an internal monitor of the degree to which one is valued (and devalued) as a relational partner. The central propositions of the theory furnish a series of specific, testable hypotheses about self-esteem, which we evaluate in light of the empirical literature. Laboratory and other findings are examined for relevance to the sociometer theory and its specific hypotheses. We then use sociometer theory to reinterpret several interpersonal phenomena that have been explained previously in terms of the self-esteem motive.

## I. Concept of Self-Esteem

As we use the term, *self-esteem* refers to a person's appraisal of his or her value. Global self-esteem denotes a global value judgment about the self, whereas domain-specific self-esteem involves appraisals of one's value in a particular area (such as on social, intellectual, or athletic dimensions). Self-esteem is, by definition, a subjective judgment and, thus, may or may not directly reflect one's objective talents or accomplishments. Indeed, self-esteem is related more strongly to perceptions of others' evaluations of oneself than to seemingly objective indicators of one's ability or goodness, for reasons we explain later.

Importantly, self-esteem is an affectively laden self-evaluation. Self-evaluations are assessments of one's behavior or attributes along evaluative dimensions (e.g., good–bad, positive–negative, valuable–worthless). Some self-evaluations are dispassionate (i.e., they have no emotional concomitants), whereas others are affectively laden. For example, people not only evaluate themselves as having behaved well or poorly, but they often feel good or bad about how they have acted. They not only know that they possess certain desirable or undesirable characteristics, but they also experience accompanying positive or negative emotions when they think about them. When people succeed, they not only know they performed well and

evaluate themselves positively, but they feel good about themselves. In contrast, when they fail, people not only comprehend their deficiencies at a cognitive and coldly evaluative level, but experience an affectively based decrease in self-esteem. Many previous writers have equated self-evaluation with self-esteem, which ignores the essential difference between merely evaluating oneself positively or negatively and evaluating oneself in a way that has potent affective concomitants. At its core, self-esteem refers to how we *feel* about ourselves (Scheff, Retzinger, & Ryan, 1989), and Brown (1993) persuasively argued that self-esteem is inherently rooted in affective processes. Rather than being based solely on cognitive self-evaluations, self-esteem involves affective processes that may or may not be related to specific, conscious self-evaluations.

Researchers interested in self-esteem have focused primarily on individual differences in dispositional or trait self-esteem. *Trait self-esteem* is a person's long-term, typical, affectively laden self-evaluation, or what James (1890) aptly described as the "average tone of self-feeling" that each person carries around. As a person's typical or summary self-evaluation, trait self-esteem may or may not reflect a person's self-esteem in a particular situation. *State self-esteem*, also called *self-esteem feelings*, refers to a person's affectively laden self-evaluation in a particular situation. If we ask, "How does Person X feel about him- or herself right now?" we get an index of X's state self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Throughout this chapter, we distinguish between trait and state self-esteem as necessary.

## II. Self-Esteem Motive

People appear to be pervasively concerned with protecting and enhancing their self-esteem. Writers of many theoretical orientations have suggested that people possess a strong and pervasive motive to maintain a certain level of positive feelings about themselves—to "increase, maintain, or confirm . . . feelings of personal satisfaction, worth, and effectiveness" (Jones, 1973, p. 186), and a broad range of research in personality and social psychology is based on the assumption that people want to avoid losses of self-esteem.

The assumption that people possess a self-esteem motive has provided the foundation for a great deal of work in behavioral science. Most theories of personality have discussed the importance of self-esteem to personality functioning (e.g., Adler, 1930; Allport, 1937; Horney, 1937; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1959). Within social psychology, the self-esteem motive has been invoked as an explanation for a wide variety of cognitive and behavioral

effects, including social comparison (Wills, 1981), attitude change following counterattitudinal behavior (Aronson, 1968; Steele, 1988), self-serving attributions (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfeld, 1978; Zuckerman, 1979), self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978), prejudice (Katz, 1960), and self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Cognitive patterns of interpreting information about the self are also consistent with the notion that people are motivated to uphold self-esteem. Greenwald (1980) asserted that one of the broadest patterns of distortion by the “totalitarian ego” was toward what he called “beneffectance”—showing the self to be benevolent and effective across many spheres. Likewise, an influential review by Taylor and Brown (1988) suggested that people systematically distort information about themselves in three primary ways, one of which involves exaggerating their good, desirable, positive qualities.

Emotional patterns also suggest that self-esteem is a pervasive human concern. As we discuss in detail later, losses of self-esteem are invariably associated with dysphoric reactions such as depression, anxiety, jealousy, and hurt feelings. Emotions that involve global condemnation of the self are highly aversive and often produce violent outbursts that seem designed to thwart any downward revision of the self-concept (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992).

The research literature on people’s search for feedback about themselves has been dominated by two main views, both of which have supportive evidence (see Sedikides & Strube, 1997). One is that people seek positive, self-enhancing feedback that will boost their self-esteem. The other is that people seek consistent feedback that will confirm their existing views of themselves. Although these two perspectives make conflicting predictions about some circumstances, they agree emphatically that people want to avoid *losses* of self-esteem and so are loath to receive feedback that is more negative than their current self-appraisal. Even the most ardent advocates of the view that people seek consistent feedback about themselves agree that people have an affective preference for favorable feedback (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987; see also Shrauger, 1975). Furthermore, Sedikides (1993) has demonstrated that this motive toward self-enhancement is more powerful than the competing motives for accurate self-assessment and for self-consistency (see also Grzegolowska-Klarkowska & Zolnierczyk, 1988).

Developmental psychologists have also emphasized the importance of self-esteem in adaptive development (Harter, 1993a), and the self-esteem motive has been implicated in many forms of emotional and behavioral problems (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995). Not surprisingly, then,

clinical and counseling psychologists have focused on the therapeutic implications of self-esteem (Bednar, Wells, & Peterson, 1989).

To be sure, some of the evidence for the existence of a self-esteem motive pertains to the public self and some pertains to the private self. That is, people seem concerned both with maintaining a favorable, positive view of themselves and with having other people regard them favorably. Still, public self and private self are highly intertwined, and the fact that people often try to make other people admire them does not contradict the assertion that they are pervasively concerned with maintaining their private self-esteem as well. Indeed, several authors have pointed out that validation by others is a necessary prerequisite to many self-perceptions, and so people may try to impress others as a means of maintaining favorable self-views (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Haight, 1980; Leary, in press; Schlenker, 1980, 1985; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). The theory we describe below makes this link between the private and public aspects of self explicit.

### **III. Function of Self-Esteem**

If the research literatures summarized above are to be believed, self-esteem is an exceptionally pervasive and potent psychological motive. Given people's widespread concern with self-esteem, one might suspect that it is a powerful aid to adaptation and success or provides other noteworthy benefits. However, it is not at all clear what self-esteem actually *does* or why people should be so concerned with maintaining it.

One goal of this chapter is to explain why people are so concerned with self-esteem. Some readers may think that this goal is unnecessary because over the past couple of decades American society has widely embraced the idea that low self-esteem causes many problems in life, such as drug addiction, teen pregnancy, school failure, juvenile delinquency, unsafe sex, crime, and violence (see Mecca et al., 1989). In our view, there are a few liabilities associated with having low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1993), but these are too weak and scattered to offer a satisfactory explanation of why people are so concerned with maintaining their self-esteem (Adelson, 1996; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Dawes, 1994). As Mecca et al. (1989) concluded in their edited compilation of research findings on the links between self-esteem and various personal and social difficulties: "The news most consistently reported, however, is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent" (Mecca et al., 1989, p. 15). Most writers have not addressed the question of why people

try to maintain self-esteem, appearing to assume that they seek self-esteem for its own sake. Pepitone (1968), for example, asserted that “the striving toward higher self-esteem and status (or avoidance of loss of esteem and status) must surely be counted as the most powerful and pervasive psychological motivation . . .” (pp. 349–350; see also Rosenberg, 1965). Nonetheless, at least five previous perspectives on the function of self-esteem can be identified.

#### A. WELL-BEING AND POSITIVE AFFECT

First, some writers have assumed that people seek self-esteem because high self-esteem is linked to subjective well-being and positive affect. When self-esteem rises, people experience pleasant, positive emotions, and when it falls or is threatened they experience unpleasant, negative emotions. Even if self-esteem had no other effects than to influence emotion, people might be chronically concerned about maintaining self-esteem simply because of their inclination to avoid unpleasant emotional states and to seek positive emotional states. Yet this answer is inadequate and unsatisfying. Surely it cannot be an accident of nature that self-esteem is strongly associated with human emotion if self-esteem otherwise has no pragmatic value. To invoke the emotional effects as a full explanation begs the functional question and implies that the concern with self-esteem is fundamentally misguided.

#### B. SUCCESSFUL COPING

Bednar et al. (1989) suggested that self-esteem serves to provide people with “continuous affective feedback from the self about the adequacy of the self” (p. 112). This affective feedback—self-esteem—is positive when the individual is coping with a psychological threat but negative when he or she is avoiding a threat. In turn, the level of self-esteem affects the probability of subsequent coping; high self-esteem increases coping, whereas low self-esteem increases avoidance. In our view, the difficulty with this perspective is twofold: It does not easily account for many known causes and effects of self-esteem, and the feedback loop it proposes is dysfunctional when people are coping poorly. Decreasing self-esteem would signal inadequacy, thereby leading to further avoidance, followed by even lower self-esteem and greater avoidance. As Bednar et al. themselves noted, “the psychologically weak will become weaker with the passage of time, whereas the strong will become stronger” (p. 133). Such a feedback system

might be functional if changes in self-esteem reflected a person's true resources for effective coping because a poorly coping individual might be better off avoiding than engaging the threat. But given that self-esteem is only weakly tied to one's "true" ability to cope with challenges, the system would be of questionable benefit.

### C. SELF-DETERMINATION

Early humanistic psychologists traced self-esteem to a condition in which a person's real and ideal selves were congruent (e.g., Rogers, 1959). In a more recent exposition of this theme, Deci and Ryan (1995) proposed that "true self-esteem" emerges when people behave in self-determined, autonomous ways that reflect their "innate potentials and phenomenal core" (p. 46). When people are true to themselves, they have a healthy, integrated sense of self as well as high self-esteem. In contrast, they suggested that a second kind of self-esteem—"contingent self-esteem"—depends on the person matching standards that are imposed by oneself or others. In their view, true self-esteem is healthy and adaptive, whereas contingent self-esteem leads people to forsake their personal autonomy and true selves in order to please others or to achieve standards that are incongruent with who they really are. As will become clear, our view of self-esteem differs sharply from that of self-determination theory and similar humanistic perspectives.

### D. DOMINANCE MAINTENANCE

Operating within an ethological perspective, Barkow (1980) proposed that self-esteem is an adaptation that evolved in the service of maintaining relative dominance in social relationships (see Tedeschi & Norman, 1985, for a similar argument). Starting with the assumption that early human beings lived in groups that were characterized by dominance hierarchies (such as modern nonhuman primates), Barkow reasoned that mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing dominance may have developed alongside the ability for self-relevant thought. To the extent that enhancing one's relative dominance would facilitate the acquisition of mates and other reproduction-enhancing resources, the tendency to monitor and increase one's social standing would have been adaptive. Because dominance was associated with attention and deference from other members of the group, self-esteem became associated with attention and deference. Thus, according to Barkow, the motive to evaluate oneself positively reduces, in evolu-

tionary terms, to the motive to enhance one's relative dominance (and thus reproductive fitness). We find ourselves sympathetic to this evolutionary argument because the universality and potency of self-esteem suggests that it is an inherent, adaptive part of human nature. Yet, for reasons that we will explain later, we do not think that all of self-esteem reduces to issues of social dominance.

## E. TERROR MANAGEMENT

One of the more controversial explanations of self-esteem is provided by terror management theory. According to terror management theory, self-esteem buffers people against the existential terror they experience at the prospect of their own death and annihilation (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). People are motivated to maintain self-esteem because it helps them to avoid the paralyzing terror they would otherwise experience. Consistent with terror management theory, experimental manipulations that make mortality salient do heighten people's concerns with self-esteem. Furthermore, high self-esteem lowers people's anxiety about death (Greenberg et al., 1992). Despite strong support for aspects of the theory, data do not yet support the strong argument that the function of the self-esteem system is to buffer existential anxiety, and a few studies have failed to support aspects of the theory (Sowards, Moniz, & Harris, 1991). Furthermore, contrary to what terror management theory would suggest, people often engage in unhealthy, dangerous, and even life-threatening actions in order to make desired impressions on other people (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994), suggesting that concerns with social approval sometimes override fear of death.

## F. SUMMARY

Space does not permit a full critique of these existing approaches to self-esteem. Each has notable strengths as well as logical and empirical weaknesses. We do not think that the data are sufficient to dismiss any of these perspectives outright, but we believe that sociometer theory provides a broader, more parsimonious explanation of what is currently known about self-esteem.

## **IV. Sociometer Theory**

The fact that people are highly and pervasively motivated to protect and enhance their self-esteem suggests that self-esteem must somehow be linked



to some important and highly desirable outcome. In this section we identify that outcome and provide an answer to the question of the function of self-esteem.

### A. METERS AND MOTIVES

We begin by noting that people are sometimes very concerned about things that, of themselves, provide minimal pragmatic or material consequences. One relevant type of concern involves the importance people attach to measures or gauges. People may react to certain stimuli not because the stimulus itself has any direct value or consequences, but because the stimulus reflects the quantity or quality of something that is important. For example, many people become distressed when the indicator on the bathroom scales points to a particular number not because the number itself has any consequences, but because it reflects an undesired state of affairs. By analogy, we suggest that people devote so much attention to their self-esteem not because self-esteem per se has particular consequences, but because self-esteem is a gauge or monitor of something that is important. Psychological theorists may have erroneously concluded that maintaining self-esteem is important for its own sake because they did not recognize that self-esteem resembles a gauge. People may be invested in self-esteem not because self-esteem itself has any inherent value, but because self-esteem reflects something that is of paramount importance. Self-esteem may then be sufficiently salient and potent that people could occasionally lose sight of what it is supposed to measure and act as if they cared about self-esteem for its own sake, but their concerns with self-esteem reflect a more genuine, valuable, and adaptive commodity than simply feeling good about themselves.

According to sociometer theory, self-esteem serves as a subjective monitor of one's relational evaluation—the degree to which other people regard their relationships with the individual to be valuable, important, or close. Put somewhat differently, the self-esteem system monitors one's eligibility for lasting, desirable relationships, including membership in important small groups. The self-esteem system is essentially a *sociometer* that monitors the quality of an individual's interpersonal relationships and motivates behaviors that help the person to maintain a minimum level of acceptance by other people (Leary & Downs, 1995). Subjectively, high self-esteem reflects the perception that one is a valued desirable person for groups and close relationships, whereas low self-esteem reflects the perception that one's eligibility for social inclusion is low.

Of course, the idea that self-esteem reflects people's beliefs regarding how they are perceived and evaluated by others (what are often called

“reflected appraisals”) is not new. This notion appears in the writings of James (1890); the symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1932); various neo-Freudians (Horney, 1937); humanistic and phenomenological psychologists (Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1959); sociologists (Felson, 1993); and many contemporary social, developmental, and personality psychologists (e.g., Harter, 1993b; Rosenberg, 1979, 1981; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Sociometer theory goes beyond previous observations that self-esteem is simply influenced by other people’s appraisals to propose that the self-esteem system is designed to *monitor and respond* to others’ responses, specifically in regard to social inclusion and exclusion. Whereas previous approaches have viewed self-esteem as a simple reflection of other people’s evaluations [i.e., Cooley’s (1902) “looking glass self”], sociometer theory views self-esteem as a gauge that, much like fuel gauges and thermostats, has a function in terms of monitoring and maintaining the quality of people’s interpersonal relationships. Before describing the operation of the sociometer in detail, we must examine a fundamental assumption underlying the sociometer theory of self-esteem.

## B. NEED TO BELONG

Thus far, we have suggested that self-esteem is a prevailing concern because it reflects one’s eligibility for social inclusion. Obviously this proposition is valid only to the extent that eligibility for inclusion in social groups and relationships is nontrivial and of high pragmatic value. We have reviewed elsewhere considerable evidence regarding the pervasive importance and value of social attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, we present just a brief overview of that material.

The value of belonging to groups and having close relationships is hard to dispute. From an evolutionary standpoint, the essence of adaptiveness is to produce offspring who will in turn reproduce. This requires survival up to reproductive adulthood, successful mating and gestation, and nurturance of offspring until they are able to care for themselves sufficiently to survive and mate. On all these counts, the lone human being is at a serious disadvantage in comparison to those who live with others. Mere survival is difficult alone, especially if one has to compete against groups for scarce resources. Members of groups can share knowledge and divide labor to promote greater success and efficiency. And, at least some temporary affiliation is obviously necessary for mating itself. Furthermore, social ties to others may increase a woman’s successful gestation, particularly with regard to providing food and protection during the last months of pregnancy. In addition, once they are born, offspring are more likely to receive care,

protection, and other resources if they belong to a group than if left alone or even if they live only with one or both parents (Barash, 1977; Bowlby, 1969; D. Buss, 1991).

It is therefore quite plausible that evolutionary selection has instilled in human nature a fundamental motivation to form and maintain at least a small number of social bonds. Elsewhere, we reviewed a broad assortment of empirical evidence consistent with this notion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; see also Barash, 1977). People form social bonds quite easily and readily and with minimal impetus. They are reluctant to break social bonds, even ones that have ceased to be necessary or useful or even in some cases that generate pain and other problems. Cognitive and emotional patterns also suggest a motivated preoccupation with being accepted, and people who are deprived of social attachments suffer a broad assortment of negative consequences, including higher rates of mental and physical illness, stress, misfortune, and general unhappiness.

People appear to be particularly predisposed to seek and maintain interpersonal relationships that are characterized by stability, affective concern, frequent contact, and continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From an evolutionary perspective, relationships that possessed these characteristics would have promoted survival and reproduction to a greater extent than relationships that did not. In addition, stable, caring, long-term relationships that involve regular interactions are more beneficial to people's everyday happiness and well-being. Thus, although people avoid being shunned or rejected by most other people, they are particularly concerned with maintaining certain kinds of close interpersonal relationships.

### C. THE SOCIOMETER

Thus, it seems fairly safe to conclude that the human organism is characterized by a basic need to belong—a fundamental motivation to form and maintain at least a handful of meaningful social attachments. The power and importance of this motivation are sufficient to think that people might well possess an internal meter to monitor such relationships. Indeed, when something is extremely important to an organism's well-being, internal mechanisms tend to develop for monitoring it. For example, pain serves to signal the possibility of damage to the body, and hunger and satiety monitor how well the person is obtaining nutrition and sustenance.

The central tenet of sociometer theory is that the self-esteem system monitors the quality of an individual's actual and potential relationships—specifically the degree to which other people value their relationships with

the individual. People do not always seek to be explicitly accepted but rather *relational appreciation*—the sense that other people regard their relationships with the individual as valuable, important, and close. When low relational evaluation, and particularly relational *devaluation* is experienced (and belongingness implicitly or explicitly threatened), the sociometer evokes emotional distress as an alarm signal and motivates behaviors to gain, maintain, and restore relational appreciation. In an evolutionary analysis of friendship, Tooby and Cosmides (1996) made a similar point, suggesting that “adaptations should be designed to respond to signs of waning affection by increasing the desire to be liked, and mobilizing changes that will bring it about” (p. 139). In our view, self-esteem is a familiar, affectively potent response because it is the adaptation that performs the essential job of monitoring and reacting to social acceptance and rejection.

### *1. State and Trait Self-Esteem*

Some might raise the theoretical objection that the sociometer perspective renders self-esteem superfluous: Why not simply acknowledge that people experience emotional distress when they are rejected and elation when they are accepted, without bringing self-esteem into the picture? Ample evidence shows that emotion responds powerfully to changes in belongingness (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, for a review), which raises questions about the theoretical or systemic benefits of self-esteem per se.

To overcome this objection, it is necessary to demonstrate that the benefits of self-esteem go beyond simple detection of acceptance and rejection. In our view, this crucial benefit involves the anticipation of interpersonal outcomes. That is, self-esteem not only signals one’s relational value in the immediate situation but reflects the general outlook for relational appreciation and social belongingness in future encounters and relationships. Given the importance of social acceptance to human well-being and survival, a viable monitoring system must do more than simply set off alarms of emotional distress when one has already been rejected (at which point it may be too late to do anything to prevent exclusion). The system must also monitor the person’s suitability for membership in desired groups and relationships generally and motivate behaviors that promote acceptance even when relational devaluation is not an immediate problem.

These two monitoring systems—one immediate and one long term—correspond to the common distinction between state and trait self-esteem. *State self-esteem* monitors the person’s current relational value and, thus, the degree to which he or she is or is likely to be accepted and included versus rejected and excluded by other people in the immediate situation (Leary & Downs, 1995). The state self-esteem system monitors the person’s

behavior and social environment for cues relevant to relational evaluation and responds with affective and motivational consequences when cues relevant to exclusion are detected. *Trait self-esteem*, in contrast, involves the assessment of the degree to which one is the sort of person who generally will be valued by desirable groups and relationship partners. It is a subjective sense of one's potential for social inclusion versus exclusion over the long run.

An analogy to a stock market analyst may clarify the interplay between state and trait self-esteem in monitoring belongingness. Successful investors monitor changes in the stock market at two levels. They are, of course, interested in daily, if not hourly changes in stock value and are prepared to make fast investment decisions when market conditions change at any time. Their ongoing responsiveness to changes in the market is analogous to the state self-esteem system. At the same time, however, investors take a long-range perspective to anticipate the state of the market in the future, and their reactions to hourly and daily events depend on their assessment of a stock's long-term potential. Depending on their projections regarding future losses and gains, investors may or may not act on the basis of the state-like fluctuations they observe. In the same way, trait self-esteem provides a subjective projection on long-term relational appreciation. People can weather dips in acceptance (and, thus, state self-esteem) when they believe that the long-term projections for belongingness are positive (and trait self-esteem is high).

In this conceptualization, the link between actual social inclusion and trait self-esteem level is significant but slightly distant because trait self-esteem does not reflect whether one is actually accepted at the moment but whether one is acceptable in general. Thus, trait self-esteem does not change every time a social bond is made or broken (or offered or threatened). Rather, it changes only to the extent that changes in one's social world revises one's appraisal of how eligible and desirable one is for having good social bonds in general. Thus, a gap sometimes exists between one's current perceived relational value (state self-esteem) and trait self-esteem. This discrepancy may account for several circumstances that might otherwise seem to contradict the notion that self-esteem is tied to relational appreciation and devaluation.

For one, a person can be high in trait self-esteem despite not having a large number of close ties or important memberships at present. If trait self-esteem were a direct and explicit index of actual belongingness, then a lack of social ties would lead inevitably to low trait self-esteem. But the discrepancy between state and trait self-esteem could allow the person to regard the lack of current social bonds as a temporary aberration or a reflection of external circumstances rather than an indication of his or her

essential low relational evaluation by other people. An individual might still regard himself or herself as a highly desirable partner who will eventually have excellent social relationships and, thus, have high self-esteem.

In a similar fashion, the discrepancy between relational evaluation and trait self-esteem allows the possibility that someone might have low trait self-esteem despite having many strong social ties. A person might regard himself or herself as an undesirable partner who has somehow managed to be valued by other people but who may in the long run end up alone. One example of such a discrepancy involves the impostor phenomenon, in which the person believes that he or she has managed to gain acceptance by concealing the true self and that eventually others are likely to discover his or her true nature and then reject him or her (Clance & Imes, 1978). Appraising oneself as an undesirable partner might also lead one to regard one's social ties as precarious and unstable. In any case, such a person would have low trait self-esteem despite being amply valued as a relational partner by other people.

## *2. Automaticity*

Several properties of the self-esteem system can be proposed on the basis of the sociometer function. First, the system should be highly sensitive to indications that one's social inclusion or acceptance is in danger. Second, it should operate continuously (or almost continuously) at an unconscious or preattentive level so that relational devaluation would be detected no matter what else the person is doing. Third, assuming that most people have at least the minimum amount of social acceptance they need most of the time, the system should be more sensitive to relational devaluation (i.e., potential rejection) than to relational appreciation (i.e., further acceptance).

Even though social inclusion is of paramount importance to their physical and psychological well-being, people do not possess the cognitive capacity to constantly monitor other's reactions to them at a conscious level. Thus, a system for monitoring relational appreciation and devaluation would have to function automatically, probably at a preconscious level (Cherry, 1953; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977). As McNally (1987) noted, people are "prepared" to detect and process threats of evolutionary significance nonconsciously.

The primary advantage of automatic systems is their efficiency. Assessing real and potential belongingness is important to human well-being, but to consciously think through the implications of all interpersonal transactions and social experiences to assess their implications for belongingness would interfere with the person's ability to process other information (not to mention being terribly draining). Therefore, a mechanism

for monitoring one's global desirability for groups and relationships would need to be automatic. For maximal efficiency, the sociometer system should alert people to every possible instance of relational devaluation and, thus, it would be quite efficient at keeping constant watch for any relevant developments.

By all accounts, the self-esteem system possesses all of the characteristics of an automatic cognitive mechanism (Bargh, 1984, 1990). The processing of information vis-à-vis relational appreciation–devaluation is autonomous (occurring independent of other cognitive processes), effortless (requiring few cognitive resources), and largely involuntary and unintentional (beginning spontaneously). This automaticity permits people to monitor others' reactions for cues relevant to inclusion and exclusion while devoting conscious attention to other things. Thus, people may be interacting quite mindlessly when the nonconscious detection of such a cue prompts a conscious assessment of the situation. The automaticity of the self-esteem system explains how the concern with self-esteem can be as pervasive as researchers have assumed, yet people are only occasionally aware of monitoring others' reactions to them. In order to detect and respond to cues relevant to one's eligibility for social inclusion, the system must operate automatically and nonconsciously.

We are not the first to suggest that people monitor social cues, including those relevant to inclusion and exclusion, rapidly, automatically, and without conscious awareness. Along these lines, Rosenberg (1986) suggested that, "at a given instant, a person's self-respect may be high, but in the following moment an unkind word, a gentle frown, or a slight setback may cause it to plunge sharply" (p. 126). Similarly, Cooley (1902, p. 208) observed that people live "in the minds of others without knowing it"—an apt description of an automatic process that monitors others' reactions to the individual.

### *3. Affective Aspects of Self-Esteem*

Evidence suggests that self-esteem is, at its base, a motivational-affective process rather than a cognitive one (see Brown, 1993). James (1890) observed, for example, that the self is not "cognized only in an intellectual way . . . When it is found, it is felt" (p. 299). Similarly, Cooley (1902) indicated that there "can be no final test of the self except the way we feel" (p. 40).

Most motivational and drive systems produce aversive feelings when deficiencies are detected and pleasant affect when drives are satisfied. People experience negative affect when they are hungry, tired, or afraid, but positive or neutral affect when they are well-fed, rested, or safe, for example.

The negative feelings that accompany deficiencies in goal states may serve three functions: they alert the individual to internal or external conditions that pose a threat to the individual's well-being, they interrupt ongoing behavior to allow an assessment of the situation and its possible threat, and they motivate behaviors that remove the undesired state (and its removal serves as negative reinforcement for goal attainment) (e.g., Averill, 1968; Frijda, 1986; Izard, 1977). Thus, we assume that a system for monitoring one's relationships would produce negative affect when relational deficiencies are detected.

*Changes* in state self-esteem may be especially likely to set off emotional responses. Several recent treatments have emphasized that emotions respond more to change than to stable circumstances. Thus, anxiety occurs when threats become closer (Riskind & Maddux, 1993, 1994; Riskind, Moore, & Bowley, 1995; Riskind & Wahl, 1992), satisfaction comes with improvement in conditions or other changes in outcomes (Hsee & Abelson, 1991; Hsee, Abelson, & Salovey, 1991), romantic passion results from increases in intimacy (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999), and a multitude of positive and negative emotions ensue when the self is perceived as getting closer to or farther away from its ideals or other standards (Carver & Scheier, 1990). By the same token, a drop in relational evaluation is likely to be accompanied by aversive emotions, whereas increased relational appreciation may bring positive, pleasant feelings.

The integral role that affect plays in self-esteem may be tied to the self-esteem system's evolutionary significance. Affective systems preceded cognitive ones phylogenetically (Izard, 1984). Furthermore, although conscious cognitions can cause affective responses, emotion may also occur as a result of preconscious processing (Zajonc, 1980). In light of this, we speculate that the affective-motivational aspects of the self preceded the emergence of the cognitive aspects. "In both evolutionary and ontological terms, affective experiences precede the development of evaluative thought as regulatory processes" (Ford, 1987, p. 638).

#### D. DETERMINANTS OF SELF-ESTEEM

Although considerable research has identified types of events that raise and lower self-esteem, sociometer theory offers a novel perspective on why these particular factors have their effects. According to the theory, things that affect self-esteem do so via their perceived association with social inclusion and exclusion.



### *1. Valued Social Attributes*

If self-esteem is a subjective monitor of one's eligibility for inclusion, changes in self-esteem should be most responsive to events that have implications for how highly people are valued as relational partners by other people. Thus, we may learn about the determinants of self-esteem by examining the criteria that lead others to include vs exclude people from groups and relationships (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

First, people tend to exclude individuals who are not likable or are otherwise socially undesirable interactants. Unfriendly, argumentative, uncongenial people make undesirable partners and group members. People prefer to spend time with others who are friendly, pleasant, and nice. Second, groups exclude incompetent individuals. This can be seen formally in employment contexts, in which competence is a clear and explicit criterion for being hired and promoted. Even in informal groups, however, the person who cannot make any contribution to the group is unquestionably a less desirable member than someone who can help the group accomplish its tasks and achieve its goals (even if those goals are social ones). Third, unattractive people are regarded as less desirable group members and relational partners than more attractive ones. Physically appealing people are sought out more and receive more offers of inclusion than unattractive people. This ranges from romantic dates that might initiate relationships to employment and other contexts. Fourth, groups exclude people who break their rules and violate their norms. Untrustworthy, dishonest, unreliable people impair the group's functioning and impose costs and difficulties on others. The exclusion of violators can be seen formally in the practices of imprisoning or exiling people who break the rules. Likewise, deviants are often ignored or ostracized, and relationships often break up when one person regards the other's actions as sufficiently immoral. As is shown below, virtually all events that threaten self-esteem involve incidents that portray the individual as socially undesirable, incompetent, physically unattractive, or irresponsible or immoral. Furthermore, the primary dimensions of self-esteem reflect these same basic evaluative dimensions (Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Harter, 1993b; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991).

One implication of the argument that self-esteem is an internal measure of the properties that enhance the likelihood of belonging is that having high self-esteem should entail perceiving oneself as being likable, competent, attractive, and moral. Together these traits signify that the person would be a highly valued relational partner, if not sought after for membership in desired groups and relationships. Conversely, to have low self-esteem signifies a deficiency in one or more of those areas, and such deficiencies

render one vulnerable to being ignored, avoided, or excluded. In other words, low self-esteem signifies a judgment that one may not be the sort of person with whom other people will want to form lasting relationships.

## 2. *Dominance and Self-Esteem*

Barkow's (1980) explanation of self-esteem, described earlier, resembles sociometer theory in its use of an evolutionary argument. However, rather than linking self-esteem to social inclusion, Barkow tied it to dominance in a social hierarchy. Because dominance is associated with attention and deference from other group members, self-esteem became associated with attention and deference. Human beings seek self-esteem, according to Barkow, because the motive to evaluate oneself positively reduces to the motive to enhance one's relative dominance.

We are sympathetic to Barkow's analysis in many respects. As noted earlier, a motive as strong and pervasive as self-esteem likely conferred some degree of reproductive success among prehuman hominids to have become such a central part of human nature. Yet we differ with Barkow in suggesting that the system serves to maintain interpersonal relationships rather than enhance dominance per se. First, self-esteem seems to be more closely tied to acceptance and approval than to dominance. Self-esteem is often involved in situations in which dominance appears to be irrelevant, whereas the events that raise and lower self-esteem virtually always have a potential for influencing other's reactions vis-à-vis social inclusion and exclusion. Put differently, people's self-esteem is more likely to be hurt by expressions of disinterest, dislike, or rejection than by indications of insubordination. Second, interactions with more dominant people do not seem to threaten our self-esteem, which would seem to be implied by Barkow's approach. Third, Barkow's analysis would seem to predict that self-esteem would be more salient to male than female members of the species, given that dominance hierarchies more strongly control the resources and outcomes of men than women. Yet, women appear as likely as men to suffer losses in self-esteem.

In our view, dominance is related to self-esteem because status is sometimes a criterion for inclusion. The self-esteem system may become activated in situations involving dominance and submission when one's relative status has implications for the person's relational value. When relative status has implications for inclusion, self-esteem will be related to dominance because high status often increases both the benefits and the security of belongingness. To use a simple analogy, the higher one's rank in a corporation, the fewer people there are who can fire you, and the more who will seek you out as ally, mentor, and advisor. Similarly, higher status members of social

groups tend to feel more secure in their membership than lower ranking members. Also, higher rank gives one proportionally larger shares of the group's resources as well as more influence to make sure that the group pursues policies and projects that will serve and not thwart one's interests. Viewed in this way, Barkow's perspective is consistent with sociometer theory.

### 3. *Audience Effects on Self-Esteem*

Obviously, not all instances in which people experience relational devaluation deflate self-esteem. People are not motivated to be valued and accepted by everyone they meet, and rejection by peripheral persons may have little or no effect on self-esteem; a person needs only a certain amount of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). After being included in a certain number of primary groups and relationships, the motive to belong should decrease. Not only can a person's psychological, social, and physical needs be satisfied by a relatively small number of other people, but an increasingly number of relationships may actually interfere with existing social relationships, thereby lowering overall social inclusion. As with many motivational systems, satisficing, rather than maximizing, appears to be the rule (Simon, 1990). Tesser and Cornell (1991) presented evidence consistent with this point. Their data suggested that, although people are motivated to maintain their self-esteem at some minimum level, they are not motivated to maximize it.

When assessing their own behavior as it relates to relational evaluation, people presumably rely primarily on the standards of the people whose acceptance they desire. (People may use other standards for other purposes, but these would have little relevance to self-esteem) Thus, sociometer theory provides a new perspective on the concept of *reference group*. Merton and Kitt (1950) offered reference group theory to explain the processes by which people take the values and standards of other individuals and groups as their own frame of reference. In our view, a person's reference group consists of those persons whose acceptance the person desires. This perspective explains why people adopt the standards of their reference groups as well as why reference groups have such a potent impact on the development and maintenance of the selves of individual group members (Kuhn, 1964). Another way to say this is that a reference group consists of persons whose real or imagined reactions to the individual most dramatically affect his or her self-esteem.

There may be important cross-cultural differences in the sociometer. We have characterized trait self-esteem as an internal measure of one's perceived eligibility and desirability for memberships in desired relation-

ships and groups. In some cultures, people may be inextricably embedded in social groups on the basis of unchangeable, ascribed characteristics such as gender, caste, and family. The more fixed and stable social relations are, the less likely people are to be concerned about individual self-esteem. Conversely, the great preoccupation with self-esteem in contemporary Western cultures may reflect the pervasive instability of social relations in these societies. When people are constantly subject to changing jobs, spouses, neighbors, friends, and lovers, the danger of ending up alone is always present, and people are likely to be constantly and deeply concerned with maintaining their social connections and, thus, self-esteem. Relational uncertainties such as these should make people more attuned to the sociometer.

#### *4. Events with No Immediate Implications for Belonging*

People sometimes experience changes in self-esteem even when events appear to have no important, long-term consequences for acceptance. On the surface, this fact would seem to contradict the claim that the self-esteem/sociometer system serves to maintain a sufficient level of belongingness. On closer inspection, however, such events are consistent with the theory.

First, although state self-esteem responds to cues in the immediate social setting, it seems to involve more than a simple reaction to the implications of inclusion or exclusion in the current situation. People sometimes experience dramatic shifts in state self-esteem even when their inclusion is of no importance in the current situation. For example, a person may suffer a drop in state self-esteem in response to the rejecting reaction of a never-to-be-seen-again stranger even though their brief interaction has absolutely no consequences vis-à-vis inclusion. Similarly, participants in a psychology experiment may experience an increase in self-esteem after receiving feedback that they were particularly competent at solving anagrams even though anagram solving had no obvious interpersonal benefits in this instance.

Such examples suggest that state self-esteem responds not only to the immediate consequences of relational evaluation, but to its implications for potential appreciation and devaluation. Events often carry symbolic messages about one's broad eligibility for inclusion beyond the immediate situation. Thus, being accepted as a member of an organization affects state self-esteem not only because it involves current acceptance, but also because it implies that one is regarded as a prized group member with high relational value who will have opportunities for inclusion in other groups in the future. Being rebuffed by a stranger may affect self-esteem not because the stranger's response is of any consequence, but because it raises the possibility that one may be devalued by others whose reactions *do* matter.

Viewed in this way, state self-esteem can be regarded as an early warning system for events that, if experienced repeatedly, might eventually require a revision of trait self-esteem.

Second, social exclusion is not always either immediate or explicit. People suffer losses in self-esteem when they behave in ways that *might* lead to rejection even if no one else is currently privy to their behavior, and sometimes if they even *think* of doing something that, if discovered by others, might lead to rejection. Such an anticipatory feature of the sociometer is essential in order for the system to prevent people from privately engaging in behaviors that others may later learn about and to deter people from privately planning to perform behaviors that might jeopardize their connections with those individuals. Thus, one's private self-views are relevant to self-esteem because what one privately knows to be true about the self may eventually be discovered by others and, thus, have implications for social acceptance. In fact, it is highly beneficial that the sociometer alerts people to certain things about themselves privately in advance of public recognition so that they have the opportunity to fix them before they damage interpersonal relations.

Third, the fact that self-esteem functions to maintain belongingness does not preclude the possibility that the sociometer will sometimes respond in the absence of a true relational threat. Because occasional "false-positives" (registering unthreatening events as dangers) are less detrimental to well-being than a single "false-negative" (interpreting a dangerous event as benign), many regulatory mechanisms are biased in the direction of false-positives, occasionally responding even when no objective threat is present. When certain critical cues are detected, warning and defensive responses may occur even though they are not, when viewed objectively or in retrospect, necessary for the organism's well-being. Thus, certain interpersonal cues may cause changes in self-esteem and self-esteem motivation even when no actual threat to belongingness has arisen.

Finally, self-esteem may become functionally autonomous and thereby a preoccupation in its own right. Allport (1937) suggested that psychological processes that originally served a particular function sometimes begin to operate independently, losing contact to some degree with the function they originally served. In our view, the self-esteem system can become functionally autonomous so that people occasionally pursue self-esteem in situations in which belongingness is irrelevant or even in ways that are counterproductive. For example, a person who learns that failing to be conscientious in arenas that are important to other people results in negative, rejecting reactions may also behave conscientiously on much less important (if not downright trivial) tasks as well and may even "feel bad" (i.e., suffer a loss of self-esteem) for not completing such trivial tasks

conscientiously—even though doing so has no implications for belongingness. In fact, in some cases people do things that serve self-esteem while bringing some short-term cost to belongingness. For example, a person who refuses to apologize out of pride may be motivated by a functionally autonomous need to maintain self-esteem even though he or she is jeopardizing a relationship. Functional autonomy helps to explain such patterns.

## E. SELF-DECEPTION: FOOLING THE METER

One argument against the sociometer perspective involves people's propensity for distorting information about themselves in a favorable direction. A great deal of research documents people's tendency to interpret information about themselves in a more positive light than seems warranted by objective facts (for reviews, see Blaine & Crocker, 1994; Greenwald, 1980; Leary & Forsyth, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988). If the self-esteem system is a gauge that monitors relational devaluation, why do people sometimes distort their interpretations of self-relevant information? Such a bias would undermine the sociometer's effectiveness in detecting and responding to real and potential exclusion.

From the standpoint of the sociometer perspective, self-deception is a matter of having higher self-esteem than objective appraisals of one's relational evaluation would warrant (see Colvin et al., 1995). If self-esteem were only a direct and immediate measure of social inclusion, then self-deception would be a matter of people persuading themselves that they are more valued by other people than they are or by exaggerating the desirability, closeness, or importance of the attachments they have. However, because close relationships generally require frequent positive interactions, people presumably find it difficult to fool themselves into believing in nonexistent relationships or into mistaking a distant, causal relationship for a close one.

In contrast, if, as we suggest, self-esteem is also an appraisal of one's *eligibility* for attachments, there is much greater room for distortion. We suggested earlier that people sometimes have high trait self-esteem despite a lack of current attachments if currently available attachments are undesirable or limited. Although that might be objectively true, it also might be a fertile room for subjective misperception. For example, in our experience, many college students hold stereotypes indicating that students of the other sex on their campus are generally undesirable. On the face of it, such beliefs would seem maladaptive because, presumably, people would be better off exaggerating the positive attributes of their potential romantic partners. But the appeal of such beliefs can be understood if one assumes that they

serve to support the self-esteem of unattached members of such groups. Such individuals can tell themselves that their unattached status does not reflect on their general eligibility for desirable relationships. Instead, they can think they are unattached simply because the available partners are a sorry lot who don't deserve them anyway.

This kind of self-deception essentially fools the sociometer, thereby cognitively bypassing what the meter actually measures. The consequences of self-deception may thus be maladaptive. To the extent that people downplay or ignore real threats to belongingness in order to foster a sense of social acceptability or felt security, they may fail to take appropriate steps to maintain and, when necessary, repair important relationships. In addition, self-deception may undermine people's motivation to change in ways that enhance their relational value. Rather than making substantive changes that increase their desirability to others, people can simply find ways to convince themselves that they are desirable, thereby maintaining self-esteem without a correspondent improvement in relational appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

The practice of cultivating self-esteem for its own sake can be compared to drug abuse. Drugs take advantage of natural pleasure mechanisms in the human body that exist to register the accomplishment of desirable goals. A drug such as cocaine may create a euphoric feeling without one's having to actually experience events that normally bring pleasure, fooling the nervous system into responding as if circumstances were good. In the same way, cognitively inflating one's self-image is a way of fooling the natural sociometer mechanism into thinking that one is a valued relational partner. Similar self-deceptive processes have been identified in other domains. For example, people are highly motivated to have control over their environments but, when control is not possible, they often foster illusions of having control. These illusions make one feel good and may be adaptive in other ways, but they are obviously not as beneficial as truly having control. Thus, in the case of self-esteem, one wants first to be accepted, but if one's relationships are actually limited or tenuous, the individual may obtain some of the same affective benefits and maintain felt security by means of self-deception.

People who feel better about themselves than they seemingly should—those we call egotistical, conceited, or narcissistic—are viewed unfavorably by professionals and laypeople alike. The disparagement of people with

<sup>1</sup> We speculate that self-deception is, evolutionarily speaking, a relatively recent psychological development. Self-deception requires the capacity for sophisticated self-relevant thought, as well as other high-level cognitive abilities. As we conceive it, the sociometer likely emerged as a regulatory mechanism even before the dawn of self-consciousness and may have functioned more effectively before people developed the cognitive capacity that allowed them to override it.

excessively high self-esteem is an intriguing phenomenon: Why do we feel so strongly about such individuals? The answer may be that self-deception imposes costs on everyone who must deal with such persons. Others are forced to interact with an individual who falls short on certain inclusionary criteria—for example, they must contend with social unpleasantness or take up the slack for an incompetent or irresponsible member—all while the self-deceptive individual reaps the psychological benefits of being a good partner or group member (in the sense of feeling valued, having high self-esteem, and experiencing positive emotions). Because people want others to actually be desired partners and group members—not just for others to think that they are—there should be a strong tendency to resent, dislike, and censure people who engage in self-deceptive egotism (Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997).

Although researchers have focused primarily on self-enhancing interpretations, we should point out that people often distort information in a negative, self-deprecating direction as well. People often assume the worst about their performances (on tests, for example), judging themselves less able than the evidence eventually proves them to be. Similarly, they often react strongly with hurt feelings and lowered self-esteem to seemingly minor interpersonal slights and sometimes detect rejection when none exists. As Goffman (1955) noted, people tend to give a “worst case reading” to difficult encounters, assuming that their social images are more tainted by events than they are. Such considerations suggest that people are not perpetual egotists and that self-serving biases and egotism are countered by occasional self-deprecation.

## F. SUMMARY OF THE THEORY

We have proposed that self-esteem operates as an internal measure of one's potential for inclusion in desirable groups and relationships. It is thus essentially a meter that serves to monitor, regulate, and maintain interpersonal attachments, and it is designed to motivate behaviors to increase inclusion and forestall rejection. Self-esteem will be based on whatever criteria those important groups use to include or exclude individuals. These criteria will primarily involve some combination of competence, likability, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (or moral character in general). State self-esteem will respond to immediate cues relevant to relational evaluation, including particular episodes of acceptance and rejection, whereas trait self-esteem will be a relatively stable appraisal of one's relational value in general.



As a sociometer, the self-esteem system is likely to monitor the environment constantly for cues or signals that pertain to one's inclusionary status, and so automatic, preattentive processing is likely involved. Assuming that most people have some social ties most of the time, the danger of losing attachments is more urgent than the appeal of forming new ones, and so the sociometer should be especially attuned to cues that connote devaluation, rejection, exclusion, or any broadly undesirable aspect of the self. When the monitoring system detects cues suggesting that one may be rejected now or in the future, the sociometer triggers negative affect as a warning to take preventive or remedial action.

The sociometer is tied both to specific changes in actual interpersonal relationships and to the possibility of future changes. Thus, for example, a bad test score could trigger a loss of self-esteem and resultant anxiety because it suggests a lack of competence that could make one less appealing to others (for instance, as an employee or as a provider in a close relationship). The salience, pervasiveness, and emotional power of the sociometer most likely entail it acquiring a degree of functional autonomy in the sense that people may become concerned about self-esteem without always noting the link to belongingness.

## **V. Relevant Evidence**

Having described the sociometer theory of self-esteem, we turn our attention to research evidence relevant to the theory. We examine empirical evidence relevant to seven predictions of sociometer theory: (1) self-esteem responds strongly to inclusion and exclusion outcomes, (2) public events affect self-esteem more strongly than private events, (3) the primary dimensions of self-esteem reflect attributes that are relevant to being valued as a relational partner, (4) the importance people place on dimensions of self-esteem is interpersonally determined, (5) trait self-esteem is related to perceived relational appreciation and devaluation, (6) changes in self-esteem are accompanied by changes in affect, and (7) the sociometer is calibrated to efficiently detect relational devaluation. We discuss each of these bodies of evidence in turn.

### **A. SELF-ESTEEM RESPONDS TO INCLUSION/EXCLUSION OUTCOMES**

The fundamental prediction of sociometer theory is that people's feelings of self-esteem are highly sensitive to cues that connote the possibility of

social exclusion or rejection. Consistent with the theory, explicit indications that other people devalue, dislike, or reject the individual appear to be among the most potent causes of lowered self-esteem. Events such as romantic rejection, expulsion from family or social groups, unemployment, abandonment, and exile are typically devastating experiences that are accompanied by losses in self-esteem. On the other hand, indications that others value and embrace the individual—praise, love, bonding, admission to desired groups, and the like—are associated with increased self-esteem. As Jones (1973) observed, gaining information from others that one is liked and respected produces “satisfactions in [the] self-esteem need” (p. 187).

Thus, fluctuations in self-esteem are largely due to how people think they are regarded by others (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). The more support and approval people believe they are receiving, the higher their self-esteem tends to be (Coopersmith, 1967; Haas & Maehr, 1965; Harter, 1993a; Videbeck, 1960). Laboratory studies that have experimentally manipulated participants’ perceptions of rejection show that subjects who are led to believe that others reject them feel less positively about themselves (Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997). Furthermore, simply imagining scenes involving rejection leads to negative affect and physiological arousal (Craighead, Kimbell, & Rehak, 1979) and lowered self-esteem (Leary, Haupt, Stausser, & Chokel, 1998). Self-esteem is also enhanced by cooperative relationships relative to competitive ones (Deutsch, 1985), possibly because competitive relationships connote less acceptance than cooperative relationships. Importantly, research suggests that, among adolescents and adults, being valued by one’s peers—acquaintances, classmates, co-workers, and so on—may be more critical to self-esteem than the acceptance of close friends and family members (Harter, 1990). This may be because most people perceive that they are at least minimally valued by close friends and family members, whereas the degree to which people are valued and accepted by other individuals in their lives is less certain.

Furthermore, self-esteem appears to be more responsive to decrements than to increments in belongingness. Psychologists studying many different phenomena have noted the asymmetry of negative and positive events; in general, negative events evoke stronger negative feelings than equally positive events evoke positive feelings. (For example, failure is generally a more negative experience than success is a positive one.) Various explanations of this effect have been offered. For example, because most experiences in life range from neutral to positive, positive reactions from others lack the saliency and diagnosticity of negative ones (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). In a similar vein, rejection results in more potent aversive reactions than acceptance does in pleasant emotions, suggesting that the sociometer

displays this same asymmetry (Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995). As Fenigstein (1979) observed, "rejection and acceptance are not comparably balanced instances of positive and negative social interactions" (p. 81).

From an evolutionary perspective, an asymmetry in reactions to inclusion and exclusion is understandable. Most motivation and drive systems respond more strongly to deprivation states than to less-than-total satiation. The system that controls thirst and drinking, for example, triggers subjective feelings of thirst and drive-related behavior when an organism becomes dehydrated, but does not push the individual to remain maximally hydrated at all times. Similarly, from the standpoint of survival in a natural state, it would be more important for a person to detect and respond to relational devaluation than to seek to be maximally, unconditionally valued and accepted by an increasing number of people. As a result, the sociometer should be more likely to detect and respond to stimuli that connote relational devaluation rather than to those than connote relational appreciation.

Romantic outcomes undoubtedly provide some of the most impactful experiences of acceptance and rejection, and sociometer theory would predict that self-esteem would be strongly involved in intimate relationships. Sure enough, Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993) found that accounts of unrequited love contained frequent indications that romantic rejections led to drops in self-esteem. Rejected lovers spoke of wondering what was wrong with them and of losing confidence to approach other potential partners. Their accounts also contained a high frequency of self-enhancing statements, often peripheral to the narrative, which suggests that their personal interpretations of being rejected revolved around ways of restoring their self-esteem. Meanwhile, accounts by rejectors occasionally referred to getting a boost in self-esteem from being the target of someone's affections, although this seemed to evaporate once they determined that the suitor was not a desirable partner. Thus, self-esteem drops when a desired relationship is thwarted, and the offer of a relationship may boost self-esteem, but primarily if the potential relationship is appealing (see also Baumeister & Wotman, 1992).

The sociometer theory also predicts that how people feel about themselves when they perform certain behaviors should parallel their expectations about how others would react to their behavior vis-à-vis relational evaluation. Leary, Tambor, et al. (1995, Study 1) showed this to be the case. In this study, participants rated behaviors according to how they thought other people would react if they themselves performed each behavior. They also indicated how they would feel about themselves after performing each action. The rank order of the behaviors was virtually identical for expectations of others' reactions and one's own self-feelings. On an

event-by-event basis, events that make the possibility of rejection salient lower state self-esteem.

Baldwin's work on relational schemas shows that priming people (via a subliminal cue) with the picture or name of another person leads them to evaluate themselves according to the primed individual's standards (Baldwin, 1992, 1994; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990; Baldwin & Holmes, 1987). For example, Baldwin et al. (1990) found that graduate students evaluated their own research performance more critically after subliminal exposure to a picture of the scowling face of their department chair. Similarly, Baldwin, Sinclair, and Brugger (1995) showed that participants who received a subliminal prime of a critical person's name subsequently had lower state self-esteem than participants who were exposed to an accepting person's name. The fact that subliminal primes affect people's momentary self-evaluations supports the idea that people's private self-evaluations are tied to the real or imagined evaluations of other people and that these evaluations can occur automatically and nonconsciously (see also Baldwin, 1994).

Apparently, many people suffer a drop in self-esteem following the death of a loved one, and this decrease is sharper in cultures characterized by greater interdependence (Catlin, 1992). Such a finding is easily explained if we assume that people feel less valued as a relational partner when those who previously accepted them have passed away and that the strength of the effect is a function of the importance placed on one's interdependent relationships. The connection between relational devaluation and self-esteem also helps explain why people who are physically abused or assaulted often show decrements in their self-esteem (Bhatti, Derezotes, Kim, & Specht, 1989; Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993). Not only does physical violence connote that the perpetrator does not value his or her relationship with the victim, but in many cases, victims of assault (rape victims, for example) worry that their victimization will lead other people to reject them.

Self-esteem tends to decline when people move from one social milieu to another. For example, children often show a decrease in self-esteem when they move from one school to another (Rosenberg, 1986). Presumably, these effects occur because when people move into new or less familiar situations and social groups, they usually are less assured of acceptance than they had been in more familiar groups in the past. In addition to simply lacking the support they have in more familiar situations, people in novel situations are more likely to worry about behaving in ways that lead to rejection simply because of uncertainty about how best to act (Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

Sociometer theory makes the counterintuitive prediction that people's successes may lead to decreased self-esteem if they lead other significant people to devalue or reject them. For example, Jones, Brenner, and Knight

(1990) instructed participants to role-play a self-serving, reprehensible person in a structured interview, then gave them feedback indicating that they had either succeeded or failed at playing the role convincingly. Participants who scored low in self-monitoring subsequently reported higher state self-esteem when they failed at the role-play task than when they succeeded. Apparently, the possibility of being evaluated unfavorably (if not relationally devalued) for appearing to be a reprehensible person lowered their self-esteem in spite of their successful performance. Participants who scored high in self-monitoring showed the opposite pattern, displaying higher self-esteem after success than failure. Given that high self-monitors desire to behave consistently with situational demands (Snyder, 1974), they may have focused on being accepted for playing the assigned role successfully rather than on being rejected for appearing to be a bad person. Along the same lines, people whose primary groups reward failure with acceptance and approval not only avoid success but will show increased self-esteem when they fail (Kaplan, 1980), and people who desire the acceptance of deviant groups (such as gangs) show an increase in self-esteem when they behave in a delinquent manner (Bynner, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1981; McCarthy & Hoge, 1984). Overall, the data suggest that behaviors that might lead to rejection, not failure per se, lowers self-esteem.

## B. PUBLIC EVENTS AFFECT SELF-ESTEEM MORE THAN PRIVATE EVENTS

If self-esteem were primarily a mechanism for personal, *self*-evaluation, as most theorists have assumed, there would be no particular reason that public events (i.e., those known to others) would affect self-esteem differently than private ones (i.e., those known only to oneself). In contrast, if the sociometer theory is correct in conceptualizing self-esteem as an index of one's interpersonal desirability for social inclusion, the events known to others should have a stronger impact on self-esteem than confidential, private events because what other people know has much greater implications for social acceptance and rejection.

The empirical data strongly support the prediction that public events exert a stronger effect on self-esteem than private events. For example, failures that are known by other people are more likely to result in changes in self-esteem than are private failures (Stotland & Zander, 1958). Similarly, people's emotional reactions to ego threats are stronger when those threats are known by others (Leary, Barnes, & Griebel, 1986).

People are also more likely to engage in behaviors that appear designed to protect or enhance self-esteem when the esteem threat is public rather

than private (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Frey, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Schneider, 1969). Leary et al. (1986) had participants take a potentially ego-threatening test under one of four conditions that differed according to whether they personally would learn their score and whether they thought the researcher would learn their score. Before taking the test, they made attributions for their performance, believing in all conditions that the researcher would see their answers. Results showed that self-serving attributions were stronger for participants who were high in fear of negative evaluation who thought their scores would be public than for any other condition. Such a pattern documents that such attributions are often made for interpersonal reasons rather than to protect private self-esteem (Weary & Arkin, 1981). A similar finding appears in the literature on self-handicapping. Although Berglas and Jones (1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978) originally described self-handicapping as a means of protecting self-esteem, Kolditz and Arkin (1982) and Tice and Baumeister (1990) showed that self-handicapping occurred primarily when participants' behavior was public.

These findings are difficult to explain if we assume that self-esteem is affected only when people violate their own privately held standards. If the self-esteem system motivates people to maintain positive views of themselves, violations of personal standards should affect self-esteem and produce ego-defensive reactions whether or not others are aware of the behavior. Yet, behaviors that are known by others exert a far stronger impact on self-esteem than those that are private.

Several researchers have suggested reasons that threats to inner self-esteem are more pronounced in public (e.g., Aronson, 1968; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), but such explanations are unneeded if we assume that self-esteem is involved in monitoring others' reactions to the individual. As a mechanism for monitoring and responding to other people's responses to the self, the sociometer *naturally* responds to changes in others' perceived reactions to the individual.

### C. DIMENSIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM INVOLVE ATTRIBUTES RELEVANT TO RELATIONAL EVALUATION

Although it is often treated as a monolithic entity, self-esteem differs across various areas of people's lives. For example, the person with low academic self-esteem may possess high self-esteem regarding social attributes and moderate self-esteem regarding his or her athletic ability (Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Harter, 1993b; Hoyle, 1987).

Sociometer theory predicts that the primary domains of self-esteem should reflect factors that determine the degree to which people are valued by others. In support of this notion, the content of commonly used measures of self-esteem and self-concept reflect valued social attributes (see, for example, Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Harter, 1985, 1993b). First, most self-esteem inventories measure how well one gets along with others, as in being likable and friendly. Second, they measure self-perceptions of competence, such as being able to perform well in school or in a career and, in some cases, physical and athletic skills as well. Third, they measure self-perceptions of physical attractiveness, and, fourth, they often assess perceptions of one's personal goodness, worth, or value. These dimensions are identical to the primary criteria for inclusion and exclusion discussed previously. Factor analyses of self-esteem inventories also reveal similar dimensions. In addition to a dimension of global self-worth, people appear to differ in self-esteem on dimensions related to interpersonal attributes, intellectual ability, physical appearance, and physical ability (Heatherston & Polivy, 1991; Hoyle, 1987; Wylie, 1974). Because people are commonly valued and devalued on the basis of their social characteristics, their competence (including intellectual and physical ability), their appearance, and their possession of morally relevant attributes, self-feelings on these particular dimensions are particularly salient. In short, the basic dimensions of self-esteem appear to reflect the primary criteria on which people are valued as relational partners (and thus included vs excluded) by others.

Furthermore, research has shown that people's self-perceptions of their likeability, competence, and physical appearance strongly predict their overall self-esteem (Harter, 1993b; Pelham & Swann, 1989), and sociometer theory explains why this is the case. Believing that one possesses attributes that are likely to lead one to be valued by others will result in higher global self-esteem than believing that one does not possess such attributes (or, worse, believing that one's characteristics are likely to lead to relational devaluation). Consistent with James' (1890) notion that self-esteem depends on people's successes and failures in domains that people regard as important, self-perceptions in a particular domain (likeability, competence, appearance, or whatever) predict self-esteem only to the extent that people regard the domain as important (Harter, 1993b). Sociometer theory regards these "important" domains as those on which an individual has staked his or her social acceptance. An individual who believes her social acceptance is predicated on her athletic ability but not on her intelligence will suffer a greater loss of self-esteem following an athletic failure than an academic one.

As noted, people differ in their self-esteem in various domains, although the correlations among self-esteem in various domains tend to be high.

This pattern of differences in domain-specific self-esteem against the background of a general level of self-esteem is consistent with sociometer perspective. In addition to holding some general, omnibus sense of their relational worth (as reflected in overall self-esteem), people's self-esteem may be differentially affected when certain bases of relational evaluation become salient in particular contexts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As we've thought about the measurement of self-esteem from the standpoint of sociometer theory, it has become clear that few, if any, of the existing self-report measures of self-esteem cleanly assess self-esteem separate from other related constructs. As we defined it earlier in this chapter, self-esteem is an "affectively-laden self-evaluation" or "a person's appraisal of his or her value." Yet, measures of self-esteem typically include items that assess not only subjective self-esteem but also self-perceived competencies or self-efficacy, and sometimes perceptions of how one is regarded by other people as well. For example, some of the items on the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, undoubtedly the most frequently used measure of trait self-esteem, involve self-perceived competency rather than self-esteem per se (e.g., "I am able to do things as well as most other people." "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure"). Recently, Fleming and Courtney's (1984) scale has received considerable use (including by us), but it too assesses more than how the respondent evaluates or feels about him- or herself. For example, in addition to assessing self-evaluations, their Self-Regard Subscale—which is used as a measure of global self-esteem—includes items about social respect, confidence in one's abilities, and being inferior to other people. Fleming and Courtney's other subscales—for social confidence, school abilities, physical appearance, and physical abilities—are even more problematic in terms of assessing far more than self-esteem per se. The Coopersmith (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory, which has been used widely with children, casts an even wider net, asking respondents whether they worry, daydream, wish they were younger, get scolded, and are picked on by other children. Many researchers have also used Pelham and Swann's (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ), which asks respondents to rate themselves on 10 attributes—such as intellectual capability, physical attractiveness, emotional stability, and leadership ability—relative to a comparison group of other people of their age. Although Pelham and Swann correctly refer to the SAQ as a measure of "self-conceptions" or "self-views," some researchers have used it as a measure of self-esteem, which it is not.

Each of these scales, as well as dozens of others that have been designed to assess self-esteem (see Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991, for a review) undoubtedly tap into the positivity of people's beliefs and feelings about themselves. However, given the broad content of their constituent items, most of these scales appear to assess more than self-esteem per se. By including items that assess conceptually different entities (e.g., self-esteem, ability, self-efficacy, self-confidence, reflected appraisals), the interpretation of the scale score is clouded.

Just as important, however, is the fact that simply knowing that one is good (or that other people think one is good) on one or more specific dimensions does not necessarily imply that the person *feels* good about him- or herself (that is, has high self-esteem). Undoubtedly, believing that one is efficacious and successful is often associated with higher self-esteem but this is an empirical relationship rather than a conceptual one. According to sociometer theory, believing that one is competent in a particular domain will lead to self-esteem only to the degree that the person believes that the attributes in question will lead other people to value having relationships with him or her. Put differently, beliefs about one's attributes should trigger changes in the sociometer only if those attributes are relevant to relational evaluation.



#### D. IMPORTANCE PEOPLE PLACE ON SELF-ESTEEM DOMAINS IS SOCIALLY DETERMINED

Sociometer theory predicts that the dimensions of self that are most important to people's self-esteem should be those that they believe *others* regard as important. Consistent with this, the importance people place on various domains of their lives (intellectual, social, athletic, etc.) correlates very highly with the importance they think other people place on these areas. Furthermore, self-esteem correlates highly with the individual's performance in domains he or she believes are important to others (Harter & Marold, 1991). Such effects are consistent with a model that links self-esteem to the monitoring of others' reactions to the individual. Furthermore, people tend to internalize feedback from these significant others more easily than feedback from other people, and respond to self-relevant stimuli consistent with the standards of whatever private audience is most salient. As Baldwin and Holmes (1987) observed, "individuals process self-relevant information according to patterns established in the context of significant relationships" (p. 1096).

According to sociometer theory, events that affect self-esteem do so because they imply changes in relational evaluation. For example, failure generally lowers self-esteem because it lowers one's relational value (and, thus, raises the possibility of rejection), whereas success increases self-esteem because it connotes greater relational value (and acceptance). As sociometer theory predicts, not only do people implicitly associate failure with rejection, but people with low trait self-esteem demonstrate a stronger nonconscious association between success–failure and acceptance–rejection than people with high self-esteem and are more inclined to see their social acceptance as precarious and conditional on their performance (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996).

Presumably, people develop different levels of self-esteem in different areas of their lives when others respond differently, vis-à-vis inclusion and exclusion, to their behavior in various domains. Thus, the academically proficient, but athletically inexperienced student may be acclaimed and accepted for his or her intellectual ability, but ignored (or even ostracized) when it comes to sports. Among adolescents, feelings of self-esteem are highest when among friends and lowest when in the classroom (Gecas, 1972). Presumably this is because most adolescents feel more accepted by their friends than by their teachers.

People differ in the number of self-defining dimensions they regard as personally important. Studies show that people who possess complex self-concepts more easily cope with the failures, stresses, and tragedies of every-

day life than people whose self-concepts are less complex (Linville, 1985, 1987). In our view, part of this self-complexity effects stems from the nature of the self-esteem system. In essence, a person with a simple self-concept stakes his or her social inclusion on only one or two dimensions of self. If a failure occurs in this domain, the person's sense of social inclusion will be threatened, resulting in a precipitous drop in self-esteem and in negative affect. In contrast, people who are high in self-complexity are somewhat buffered against failures in one domain by the other domains. Because their sense of inclusion is not based on a single attribute or relationship, they are less affected by failures in any particular domain.

#### E. TRAIT SELF-ESTEEM IS RELATED TO PERCEIVED RELATIONAL APPRECIATION AND DEVALUATION

If, as we have proposed, trait self-esteem involves the assessment of one's relational value over the long run, we should find strong links between trait self-esteem and events that connote relational appreciation and devaluation. The literature is rife with such connections.

##### *1. Development of Trait Self-Esteem*

When viewed from the standpoint of previous theories of self-esteem, low self-esteem is somewhat of a paradox (Baumeister, 1993); if people have a strong motive to maintain high self-esteem, why do certain people have low self-esteem? Has the self-esteem system of low-self-esteem people malfunctioned? Our answer is "no," and, in fact, it may be functioning quite well.

As we have suggested, people *do not* have a motive to maintain high self-esteem per se, but rather a system for monitoring and responding to threats to relational evaluation. For such a system to function properly, it must alert the individual to possible relational devaluation. Presumably, then, people with relatively low self-esteem are those who have had more than their share of cues indicating disinterest, rejection, or ostracism—from parents, teachers, peers, coaches, or whomever. When people experience relational devaluation, including explicit rejection, repeatedly over time, they are likely to develop relatively low trait self-esteem.

For example, one of the best predictors of trait self-esteem in children is the child's sociometric status. Children who are widely rejected or avoided by their peers have lower self-esteem than those who are accepted (Harter, 1993a, 1993b). Along these lines, Harter, Whitesell, and Junkin (1998) concluded from their study of the self-evaluations of disabled and normally

achieving adolescents, that “indices of peer social appeal . . . were [the most] highly correlated with global self-worth” (p. 670). In addition, relationships with parents are potent predictors of self-esteem. Studies have shown that positive and accepting relationships with parents are associated with higher self-esteem than negative, rejecting relationships (e.g., Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997; Litovsky & Dusek, 1985; McCranie & Bass, 1984). Overall, the relationship between perceived social approval and support and trait self-esteem is quite strong (Harter, 1987). As Shaver and Hazan (1987) noted “low self-esteem is a natural component of a negative model of self based on actual attachment-related experiences” (p. 116).

Possibly, childhood is so critical in the formation of trait self-esteem because children do not possess the adult’s ability to modify offending behavior to enhance inclusion, seek alternate accepting relationships in lieu of the rejecting ones, or cognitively minimize the meaning of certain rejecting behaviors (e.g., Mom’s had a bad day; my friend is putting me down because he’s envious). Thus, unlike that of the adult, the self-esteem system of the child is undefended against rejecting onslaughts.

Several writers have observed that few people have truly low self-esteem. By and large, those who score at the lower end of the distribution of commonly used measures of trait self-esteem are, in an absolute sense, *moderate* in self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Brown, 1993; Tice, 1993). This state of affairs is consistent with our analysis. People are much more likely to communicate their positive than negative reactions to others (Blumberg, 1972; Kanouse & Hanson, 1972), and relatively few people receive wholesale rejection. For example, when a woman rejects a man’s request for a date, she tends to offer an excuse that seems explicitly designed to minimize the damage to his self-esteem (Folkes, 1982). Thus, at worst, most people receive some mixture of accepting and rejecting feedback throughout life; even hardcore reprobates typically receive some positive feedback and feel valued by a confidante or two. As a result, few individuals feel absolutely uncludable.

## 2. *Reactions to Interpersonal Evaluation*

Several studies have documented an inverse relationship between trait self-esteem and negative reactions to failure and unfavorable evaluations (Jones, 1973; Rosenberg, 1965). People with higher trait self-esteem appear less bothered by negative evaluation than people with low trait self-esteem. Furthermore, people who have recently suffered a loss in self-esteem appear particularly motivated to attain others’ approval and to avoid disapproval, and people who are low in trait self-esteem score higher in need for approval and fear of negative evaluation than those who are high in self-esteem

(Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Hewitt & Goldman, 1974; Leary & Kowalski, 1993; Schneider, 1969). (Some studies have found a positive relationship between self-esteem and scores on the Crowne–Marlowe Social Desirability Scale, but this effect appears to be due to the fact that some people who score high on measures of self-esteem—those characterized as having “defensive” or “questionable” self-esteem—actually have low self-esteem but obtain high scores because of their tendency to rate themselves in an excessively favorable manner, Hewitt & Goldman, 1974). In the same vein, people with low self-esteem—whether dispositionally low or experimentally induced—are more attracted to those who approve of them and dislike those who evaluate them negatively than people whose self-esteem is high (Dittes, 1959; Hewitt & Goldman, 1974; Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971; Walster, 1965). Low self-esteem is also associated with rejection sensitivity—the disposition to expect, perceive, and overreact to social rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, in press).

Trait self-esteem is among the best predictors of social anxiety and shyness (Leary & Kowalski, 1993; Zimbardo, 1977). Social anxiety arises when people are motivated to make particular impressions on others but doubt they will do so (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Although people desire to make particular impressions on others for many reasons (Baumeister, 1982), a primary reason is to increase their social acceptance and inclusion (Leary, 1995; in press).

These assorted findings are consistent with sociometer theory. People who have low trait self-esteem are less likely to perceive that their needs for social inclusion are being met—that is, the sociometer is more likely to register low relational evaluation. As a result, people with lower self-esteem should be more sensitive to events that cause a downward drop in the sociometer than those with higher self-esteem. High-self-esteem people do not show these effects, presumably because they already feel adequately valued and included. People with high trait or state self-esteem, while not wishing to jeopardize their standing in others' eyes, need not chase after additional approval.

### *3. Stigmatization and Self-Esteem*

Our claim that trait self-esteem is a function of relational appreciation and devaluation may be questioned on the basis of research on the trait self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups. Although some research has shown that some stigmatized groups have lower than average self-esteem (obese children, for example, have lower self-esteem than children of normal weight; Sallade, 1973; Wadden, Foster, Brownell, & Finley, 1984), members of many stigmatized groups—for example, women, blacks, men-

tally retarded persons, and physically unattractive people—do not consistently have lower self-esteem than other people. Crocker and Major (1989) explained this paradox by suggesting that possession of a stigmatizing condition can actually protect people's self-esteem from damage caused by discriminatory behavior. Instead of attributing others' negative reactions to their personal characteristics, people can attribute rejection to prejudice against their stigma, thereby protecting their self-esteem.

Although such an attributional process may be at work, we also suggest that prejudicial treatment should not be expected to automatically lower trait self-esteem as some theorists have supposed. As we have seen, people need only a certain level of belongingness and are not motivated to be valued and included by everyone (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Once the person's need to belong has been fulfilled by relationships with some relatively circumscribed group of people, relational devaluation—even outright rejection—by others may have little effect on self-esteem. Such rejection may be upsetting, angering, or frustrating (because it interferes with the attainment of desired goals or connotes unjustified discrimination), but it need not affect self-esteem.

Thus, members of stigmatized groups may not suffer a loss of self-esteem as a result of the prejudices of out-group members because their needs for social inclusion are being satisfied by members of their in-group, such as parents, friends, and teachers (Hughes & Demo, 1989; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). The people with whom we form our most important and stable relationships are likely to be those who value their relationships with us in spite of our shortcomings and stigma. This analysis suggests that members of discriminated-against groups should suffer a decrement in self-esteem only to the extent that they either do not otherwise have an adequate social network or desire to be accepted by the out-group members who reject them (cf. Rosenberg, 1979, 1981).

#### *4. Moderating Effects of Trait Self-Esteem on Perceived Acceptance*

Although sociometer theory focuses on the effects of perceived acceptance and rejection on self-esteem, it acknowledges that a person's current level of self-esteem (either state or trait) can also moderate his or her perceptions of interpersonal feedback. The fact that people with high trait self-esteem tend to believe that others are more accepting of them than people with low self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995; Leary et al., 1998) is due partly to the effects of acceptance–rejection on self-esteem and partly to the reciprocal influence of self-esteem on perceptions of others' reactions. Felson's (1989, 1993) longitudinal studies of reflected appraisals show that not only do people's perceptions of others' appraisals (i.e., reflected apprais-

als) affect their personal self-appraisals, but self-appraisals influence people's perceptions of how they are perceived by others. Although Felson's research dealt with cognitive self-appraisals rather than self-esteem per se, we assume that the same process operates in both cases.

In our view, a history of rejection (or even minor instances of relational devaluation) not only results in lower trait self-esteem, but it calibrates the sociometer to be particularly sensitive to potential threats to inclusion. A person with a history of unequivocal rejection may be well-served by a heightened awareness of rejection cues that allow him or her to forestall potential exclusion. In contrast, someone whose inclusion has rarely been in question (and who apparently possesses attributes that will assure his or her acceptance in the long run) need not be as attuned to occasional indications that others do not fully value their relationships with him or her.

Recent research on adolescents' intuitive theories about self-esteem makes this point in a somewhat different way. Harter, Stocker, and Robinson (1996) asked adolescents to choose between three statements regarding the relationship between social approval and self-esteem, indicating whether (a) the degree to which others like and approve of them affects how they feel about themselves, (b) how they feel about themselves affects whether others like and approve of them, or (c) others' approval has no effect on their self-esteem. The results showed that participants who indicated that social approval determines their self-esteem had significantly lower self-esteem than participants who believed that self-esteem preceded approval. In addition, participants who thought that social approval determined their self-esteem appeared more sensitive to rejection, reported having lower peer support (which also appeared to fluctuate more over time), focused more on their social lives (often to the detriment of their schoolwork), and were more preoccupied by approval than the participants who thought that self-esteem determined approval by others.

Sociometer theory provides a straightforward interpretation of these patterns. People who do not feel adequately valued and accepted will experience low self-esteem because of the action of the sociometer. At the same time, they will become acutely attuned to the degree to which they are being accepted or rejected and, thus, will be quite aware that events in their social environment affect their self-esteem. The sociometer's detection of relational devaluation will motivate efforts to enhance their relational value, focusing them on their social networks and leading them to try to enhance inclusion and forestall rejection. In contrast, people who feel adequately valued and accepted will have high self-esteem, and, as long as their sociometers detect no threats to their inclusion, such individuals will be rather oblivious of the effect that social approval and disapproval is having on their self-esteem. Bolstered by having a full interpersonal tank,

they can travel many miles without a moment's thought to how much gas they have or even a conscious glance at the fuel gauge (even while the sociometer operates quietly in background mode.) As a result, they may not be aware of the effect that others' approval actually has on their self-esteem. Satisfied with the status quo, they feel no need to devote special attention to their interpersonal relationships nor to go out of their way to be accepted (Heatherton & Vohs, in press).

Of course, if Harter et al.'s (1996) participants are correct in their belief that their self-esteem is unaffected by social approval, sociometer theory would be in a great deal of difficulty. However, we have good reasons to doubt the validity of their claims. Leary, Hoagland, Kennedy, and Mills (1999) used Harter et al.'s measure to distinguish between participants who believed that their self-esteem was affected by social approval and disapproval and those who maintained that their self-esteem was not in the least bit affected by others' evaluations of them. Then, in a laboratory study, participants received bogus favorable or unfavorable feedback ostensibly from three other participants in the session. Although the favorability of the feedback affected participants' state self-esteem overall (as sociometer theory predicts), participants' responses to social approval and disapproval were unrelated to their beliefs regarding whether others' evaluations affect their self-esteem. Despite their claims to the contrary, the self-esteem of participants who denied that approval affects their self-esteem did in fact change as a function of other people's evaluations.

#### F. CHANGES IN SELF-ESTEEM ARE ACCOMPANIED BY AFFECTIVE CHANGES

We suggested that a mechanism that monitors stimuli of vital interest to the individual would be expected to evoke affective reactions when such stimuli were detected. If we compare how people generally feel when they believe they are valued, loved, accepted, respected, or included with how they feel when they think they are devalued, disliked, rejected, disparaged, or excluded, we easily see that events that lower self-esteem are aversive.

The feelings that accompany perceived social exclusion appear to be of two interrelated types. On one hand, when people experience a threat to self-esteem they feel badly *about themselves* (Brown, 1993). These feelings go beyond mere unfavorable self-evaluations (simply perceiving oneself as incompetent, evil, or weak, for example) to negative feelings about the self (e.g., feeling ashamed, self-conscious, desperate, devastated) (Semin & Manstead, 1981). Scheff et al. (1989) proposed that *shame* is the central emotion in low self-esteem (and that high self-esteem is characterized by

pride). To the extent that shame can be conceptualized as a vehicle for teaching and enforcing appropriate behavior (Buss, 1980; Scheff, 1990), failures to behave appropriately would raise the specter of rejection and, thus, elicit feelings of shame.

In addition, real or imagined relational devaluation produces diffuse negative affect that is not directly associated with self-evaluations. Rejection and its concomitant losses of self-esteem are associated with a variety of emotions, including anxiety, depression, hurt feelings, and loneliness (Burish & Houston, 1975; Leary, Barnes, & Griebel, 1986; Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, *in press*). In one study, the state self-esteem of students who had just received midterm exams correlated in excess of .50 with their feelings of anxiety and depression (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). In a related vein, Watson and Clark (1984) reviewed evidence that self-ratings correlate strongly with measures of negative affect and concluded that low self-esteem is an aspect of negative affectivity. Likewise, Pelham and Swann (1989) showed that self-esteem correlated negatively with negative affectivity and positively with positive affectivity. Conversely, when people are asked about sources of happiness, their top selections tend to involve the quality of their interpersonal relationships; a happy marriage, a good family life, and good friends are rated above occupational success, financial security, and possessions (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). Clearly, potent affective reactions are tied to the degree to which people are included in meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, belongingness buffers people against the experience of negative emotions. For example, the presence of social support lowers stress and promotes psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Goodenow, Reisine, & Grady, 1990; Manne & Zautra, 1989). Importantly, this effect is due to the perception that others value and care for the individual rather than to the pragmatic benefits of the received support (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1997). Indeed, if the monitoring system is highly sensitive to belongingness-relevant feedback, then having others show support would be particularly salient and welcome during times of stress, setting off a strong positive reaction that might not be apparent at other times, and this would be particularly true when the stress itself resulted from events that threatened self-esteem (such as final exams, divorce, or tenure denial).

#### G. SOCIOMETER IS CALIBRATED TO DETECT RELATIONAL DEVALUATION

Although evidence is only suggestive, the sociometer system appears to respond more strongly to decrements than increments in real and potential



inclusion. Granted, we feel good when we think we are valued or loved, but most people seem to feel far worse after learning they are devalued or hated. In two relevant experiments, participants who believed they were excluded showed a decrease in self-esteem feelings relative to a control group, but participants who thought they were accepted showed no corresponding increase in self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, et al., 1995, Studies 3 & 4; see also Videbeck, 1960). Studies of unrequited love show that rejected lovers suffered serious blows to their self-esteem, whereas targets of unrequited love (who had received positive, accepting reactions) had at most a small, transitory boost (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992).

Ogilvie's (1987; Ogilvie & Clark, 1991) research on the undesired self demonstrates a similar asymmetry. Ogilvie has shown that self-esteem and life satisfaction are more closely related to how far people think they are from their undesired self than to how close they think they are to their ideal self. If the undesired self is conceptualized as the self most likely to result in relational devaluation and social exclusion, such a finding is consistent with the sociometer perspective.

In mapping the relationship between objective changes in rejection-acceptance and subjective feelings of self-esteem, Leary et al. (1998) found that self-esteem was at its lowest when interpersonal feedback was mildly negative, but did not peak until exceptionally positive, accepting feedback is received. This pattern may reflect the fact that, from a practical standpoint, there is little difference between ambivalence and rejection. In everyday life, we impart positive outcomes on those we like and accept, but simply ignore or avoid those whom we regard neutrally or negatively. Except in extreme cases (such as when we exile or retaliate against someone), rejection carries no greater interpersonal penalty than indifference. As a result, people tend to regard ambivalence or neutrality as rejection. For example, a lover is likely to react about as negatively to a partner's ambivalence (i.e., "I really don't care whether we stay together or not") as to outright rejection. The same reaction is reflected in the cliché, "If you're not for me, you're against me."

## H. SUMMARY AND EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE

The research evidence strongly supports several hypotheses derived from sociometer theory. As the theory predicts, state self-esteem is highly responsive to events that connote inclusion and exclusion, particularly when those events are public rather than private. Furthermore, low trait self-esteem appears to emerge from a history of relational devaluation, and people with low self-esteem (either state or trait) act in ways that suggest that they

are deficient in belongingness. Thus, the results of numerous laboratory and field experiments, correlational studies, and longitudinal investigations support a link between perceived inclusion–exclusion on one hand and state and trait self-esteem on the other. As always, questions may be raised about the validity of any particular study, but taken as a whole, the data consistently show that self-esteem both responds to events that have implications for the individual's relational evaluation by others and moderates reactions to those events.

The importance people place on these events is closely related to how important they believe others regard them, and self-esteem correlates highly with the individual's performance in domains they believe are important to others. Clearly, self-esteem is tied closely to how people think others view them, and their self-evaluations change as a function of which other people are most salient to them at a particular moment. Such effects are consistent with a model that links self-esteem to the monitoring of others' reactions to the individual.

Furthermore, the data suggest that the basic dimensions of self-esteem—as revealed by analyses of common measures of state and trait self-esteem—involve attributes that are relevant to relational evaluation and, thus, inclusion and exclusion. The most important dimensions of self-esteem involve social qualities, competence and ability (both intellectual and physical), and physical appearance, which, as we saw, are also the primary factors that determine the degree to which people value others as friends, lovers, family members, and other relational partners. Although they support the sociometer perspective, these data must be regarded as only suggestive because of the possibility that the findings are empirically tautological. That is, investigators create measures of self-esteem based on a priori conceptions of what self-esteem entails. Content and factor analyses of these measures will only reveal dimensions that investigators built into them. However, the convergence of findings across diverse measures and studies suggests that the dimensions that have been uncovered reflect more than a particular researcher's idiosyncratic conceptualization of self-esteem.

Support also exists for the proposition that changes in self-esteem are closely tied to positive and negative affect. Changes in state self-esteem are associated with changes in mood, and trait self-esteem correlates highly with the predisposition to experience most varieties of negative emotion, including depression, anxiety, jealousy, embarrassment, and shame. To the extent that emotional systems are involved in helping the organism deal with life challenges, we can assume that the self-esteem system must serve some purpose other than its own self-maintenance.

More research is needed on the calibration of the sociometer. Research that examined the functional relationship between acceptance–rejection

and subjective self-esteem suggests that the sociometer is particularly sensitive to rejection, but many of the relevant studies involved participants imagining how they would feel if they received various patterns of feedback. Laboratory experiments in which participants received actual accepting or rejecting feedback are consistent with the role-playing studies as far as they go, but only one laboratory experiment has used more than two or three levels of feedback.

In brief, the available data strongly support the central propositions of sociometer theory. Furthermore, the theory provides a framework for parsimoniously integrating what is known about the features of the self-esteem system.

## **VI. Implications and Applications**

Having examined evidence relevant to sociometer theory, we turn our attention to how the theory may help us to understand several features of human behavior in which self-esteem has been implicated. Sociometer theory offers to bring order to the far-ranging literatures on self-esteem, as well as to explain several seemingly paradoxical findings that are not easily encompassed by other approaches. A complete discussion of the implications of the theory for understanding all aspects of self-esteem would require far more space than we can devote here. Thus, we settle for a brief look at how the sociometer model accounts for several known facts about self-esteem.

### **A. REACTIONS TO SELF-ESTEEM THREATS**

A great deal of research has examined people's reactions to events that threaten their self-esteem, such as failure, interpersonal rejection, and incompetence. According to sociometer theory, these events have their effects not because they threaten an inner sense of self-esteem but because they are associated with the possibility of relational devaluation.

People who confront events that may damage their self-esteem engage in a variety of behaviors that appear intended to ameliorate the threat (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Such self-serving or ego-defensive behaviors can occur preemptively before the threat has actually occurred or reactively in response to actual threats to self-esteem. For example, people who face the prospect of failure (or are uncertain about their chances of success) may create impediments to performance to which subsequent failure, if it

occurs, may be attributed (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Leary & Shepperd, 1986). It appears that people with low self-esteem are particularly prone to self-handicap to protect themselves against the implications of possible failure (Tice, 1991). In contrast, people with high self-esteem self-handicap mainly to increase their potential credit for success. From the standpoint of sociometer theory, these results suggest that those who are insecure about their interpersonal appeal seek to avoid any possible failure because it might provide reason for rejection or exclusion, whereas those who believe their interpersonal appeal is strong (i.e., those with high self-esteem) see less reason to worry about the implications of possible failure.

In addition to self-handicapping, people who confront threats to their self-esteem offer preemptive self-serving attributions (or self-reported handicaps) to create plausible excuses for possible failure. After failure, people may make self-serving attributions (Bradley, 1978), derogate the diagnosticity or validity of the test (Frey, 1978), deny the relevance of the failure for their self-esteem (Tesser & Paulhus, 1983), falsely claim that their performance was impeded by factors beyond their control (Higgins & Snyder, 1991), or compensate by enhancing the positivity of their self-evaluations on dimensions unrelated to the failure (Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

After devoting years to trying to understand the source of these self-serving reactions, most researchers acknowledge that they occur for several distinct reasons involving coldly cognitive, intrapsychic, and interpersonal processes (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). Without discounting previous explanations, we suggest that many, if not most of the behaviors that have been attributed to self-esteem motives arise not from concerns with one's private self-evaluation per se but from concerns with other people's reactions to the individual vis à vis inclusion-exclusion. From the sociometer perspective, ego-defensive behaviors do not reflect attempts to raise self-esteem per se (as has been widely supposed), but rather efforts to reduce the likelihood that failure or other undesirable behaviors will result in a disintegration of one's connections with other people.<sup>3</sup>

Even socially unacceptable behavior can enhance self-esteem if it increases the possibility of social inclusion. Research shows, for example, that people are more likely to cheat after their self-esteem has been lowered

<sup>3</sup> The sociometer analysis of self-serving responses is closely related to previous explanations proposing that people use public attributions as self-presentational tactics to convey particular impressions of themselves to others (Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977; Schlenker, 1980; Weary & Arkin, 1981). However, our analysis extends previous conceptualizations by linking these self-presentations to the need for social inclusion and by showing precisely how self-esteem is involved.

than when it has been raised. Aronson and Mettee (1968) attributed this effect to the fact that high self-esteem deters dishonest behavior, but it is also possible that cheating after a loss of self-esteem may be a means of restoring one's social image and relational appreciation by appearing to be a "winner." Similarly, people sometimes make "counter-defensive" attributions in which they accept responsibility for failure (Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975; Weary, 1979). Such attributions are far more readily explained by sociometer theory than by explanations that posit inherent needs for self-esteem. Specifically, because people who make self-serving attributions are sometimes disliked and rejected (Forsyth, Berger, & Mitchell, 1981; Forsyth & Mitchell, 1979), they sometimes find it in their best interests to either refrain from making such attributions or to make explicitly counter-defensive ones (Bradley, 1978).

This is not to suggest that ego-defensive behaviors never occur in private; they do. However, we attribute instances of private self-serving reactions to (a) people's concerns that their private behaviors may, at a later time, be known to others; (b) an automatic, overlearned tendency to engage in esteem-protecting actions even when they have no effect on others' reactions; or (c) an effort to lower one's own anxiety about one's private behaviors. For example, even a private failure may lead a person to question whether he or she can successfully perform the next time a similar evaluation occurs in public. In an effort to reduce the anxiety associated with such a possibility, self-serving responses may occur. We argue, however, that these responses are due to concerns with potential interpersonal outcomes rather than to violations of one's personal standards.

## B. SOCIAL COMPARISON

Self-esteem is affected not only by people's judgments of their objective characteristics but by how they compare themselves to others. Self-esteem improves if we compare ourselves to those with less desirable characteristics than ourselves (Affleck, Tennen, Pfeiffer, & Fifield, 1988; Schultz & Decker, 1985). In an early demonstration of this effect (Morse & Gergen, 1970), students completed an application for a research position alongside a confederate posing as another applicant. In one condition, the confederate was clean and well-dressed, whereas in another condition, the confederate was sloppy and unkempt. Participants who completed the application in the same room as "Mr. Clean" suffered a transient drop in self-esteem. Because of these effects of social comparison on self-esteem, people seek out others who are below them when their self-esteem is on the line (Wills, 1981; Wood & Taylor, 1991).

Tesser and Campbell (1983; Tesser, 1988) proposed a theory of self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) that deals with how people utilize social comparisons to maintain their self-esteem. Among other things, SEM theory predicts that people seek associations with those who are superior to them primarily if the others are superior on dimensions that are not relevant to the person's own self-concept (see Tesser, Campbell, & Smith, 1984). In contrast, people prefer to associate and compare themselves to people who have a lower standing on the dimensions they personally consider important. From the standpoint of sociometer theory, these effects occur because the presence of people who are superior to oneself constitutes a threat to social inclusion. When others are superior on dimensions that people view as important, they are more likely to view themselves as socially dispensable. In contrast, others' superiority on dimensions irrelevant to oneself poses no threat because the individual possesses desired characteristics that the comparison other does not. Because the other person's characteristics have no implications for one's relational value or social inclusion, self-esteem is not affected.

### C. CONFORMITY AND PERSUASION

Although much research has concluded that people with lower self-esteem are more easily influenced than those with higher self-esteem (Brockner, 1983; Cohen, 1959; Janis, 1954; Janis & Field, 1959), a meta-analysis by Rhodes and Wood (1992) showed that self-esteem is curvilinearly related to social influence: people with moderate self-esteem are more easily influenced than people with either low or high self-esteem. In line with the Yale-McGuire model of persuasion, Rhodes and Wood suggested that this pattern occurs because, relative to people who have moderate self-esteem, people with high self-esteem are particularly confident of their own opinions (and, thus, less likely to change their minds) and those with low self-esteem are more distracted from attending to and processing the message. As a result, both lows and highs are less persuadable than moderates, but for different reasons.

Without discounting this explanation of the relationship between self-esteem and influence, sociometer theory puts a slightly different spin on the effect. Conformity, compliance, and other forms of social influence are often mediated by people's desire to behave appropriately and avoid disapproval (Shaw, 1981). To the extent that people with high self-esteem already feel valued, accepted, and socially integrated, they may not be as concerned with behaving appropriately and fitting in as people who feel less so (Moreland & Levine, 1989; Snodgrass, 1985). Thus, because high-

self-esteem people do not respond to implied social pressure to conform, they are not easily influenced by other people.

People with low self-esteem, on the other hand, are more concerned about behaving in ways that increase relational appreciation. As a result, they tend to conform readily to obvious social norms (Brockner, 1983). Research shows that conformity is associated with higher need for approval, fear of social rejection, and a stronger interpersonal orientation (Hare, 1976; Shaw, 1981). However, when confronted with a persuasive communication (particularly one that is complex), people with low self-esteem may be distracted from focusing fully on the message by their self-conscious concerns regarding other people's reactions to them. As a result, they may not process persuasive messages fully and, thus, are not as easily influenced by them.

#### D. SELF-ESTEEM AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Close relationships—such as those involving romantic partners, spouses, and close friends—are particularly potent influences on self-esteem. People tend to feel very good about themselves when they feel accepted and loved by close relational partners, but very bad about themselves when their partners and friends seem disinterested or rejecting. Romantic rejection in particular undermines self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1993). Furthermore, people's trait self-esteem has implications for the quality and stability of their intimate relationships.

In general, people who have higher trait self-esteem have more satisfying and stable relationships than those with lower self-esteem (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). Not only are they happier and more satisfied, but their partners also report greater satisfaction with their relationships than the partners of people with lower self-esteem (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996a, 1996b). Many things may contribute to these differences, but one important factor involves how people with high vs low self-esteem perceive and react to their partners. People with high trait self-esteem tend to perceive their relational partners more favorably than people with low self-esteem, and their positive evaluations of their partners decline less over time (Murray et al., 1996a, 1996b). Furthermore, when their own self-esteem is threatened, they continue to believe that their partners regard them favorably, whereas people with low self-esteem react to self-doubt with heightened insecurity about their partner's love and tend to distance themselves from him or her (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998).

Our interpretation of these patterns relies again on the link between trait self-esteem and perceived relational evaluation. Relationships no doubt fare better when people feel that they are valued as relational partners. However, as we noted, the sociometer appears to be calibrated to be overly sensitive to relational threats (Leary et al., 1998). Thus, when people do not feel valued and accepted—either because of events that transpire in the relationship or their dispositional tendencies to feel less accepted—they tend to be particularly vigilant to cues that indicate threats to the relationship. As a result, they are sensitized to the relational implications of both their own and their partner's shortcomings, which leads them to detect and place greater weight on problems and transgressions than they would if they felt more relationally valued. Furthermore, people with low self-esteem are more likely than highs to believe that their personal failings and shortcomings will lead to rejection (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), which presumably leads them to infer that their personal failures will cause their partners to reject them (Murray et al., 1998, Experiment 4). Although people with lower self-esteem are often more concerned about their partner's regard than they objectively need to be (Murray et al., 1998), such reactions are predicted by the sociometer's negative bias and by differences in how low- and high-self-esteem people perceive relational threats.

In addition, as we described earlier, drops in the sociometer produce negative affect. People who do not feel adequately accepted in close relationships experience negative emotions that, if expressed, may then may create conflict and undermine the partner's satisfaction. Because people with lower trait self-esteem feel less valued and accepted overall (Leary et al., 1995), they respond more strongly to real and imagined relational difficulties, thereby fueling mutual dissatisfaction. People who have lower self-esteem tend to be more rejection sensitive, and rejection-sensitive people behave in ways that undermine their relationships when they do not feel valued and accepted (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Levy et al., in press).

This is not to say that high self-esteem is a reliable recipe for creating good relationships. In fact, some forms of favorable self-regard may weaken relationships. For example, narcissists, who have high self-esteem, tend to have relatively unstable relationships because they believe they can easily replace their current partner with an equal or better one (Campbell, in press). More generally, a recent review concluded that loving oneself is neither necessary nor sufficient for loving others and, in fact, can detract from it in multiple ways (Campbell & Baumeister, in press). None of these patterns is inconsistent with the general sociometer theory, however. Although narcissists do have unstable relationships and abandon them readily for new partners, they still maintain their favorable self-views by



believing that others accept and admire them. In fact, the very instability of their relationships is a result of their assumption that others desire them.

## E. EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

Low self-esteem has been implicated in several emotional disorders and maladaptive behaviors, and psychotherapeutic interventions for emotional and behavioral problems often target the client's self-esteem. A great number of psychological difficulties correlate with trait self-esteem (such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse), and others have been attributed to misguided efforts to bolster self-esteem (such as deviant and delinquent behavior; see Mecca et al., 1989). In our view, such problems do not arise from low self-esteem per se. Rather, they are the direct result of rejection or reflect maladaptive attempts to achieve a minimal level of social inclusion. By and large, these difficulties and low self-esteem are coeffects of unfulfilled needs for social inclusion rather than causally related. To the extent that the motivation to develop and sustain meaningful and supportive relationships is a fundamental interpersonal motive, difficulties in satisfying this need would be expected to lead to problems of various sorts. Although space does not permit a full discussion of the relationships among perceived exclusion, self-esteem, and psychological difficulties, we briefly discuss the implications of the theory for understanding and treating three categories of psychological disorders (see Leary, 1999; Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995).

First, self-esteem correlates negatively with nearly every variety of negative emotion, including depression, anxiety, irritability, jealousy, loneliness, and general negative affectivity (Block & Thomas, 1955; Burns, 1979; Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981; Kanfer & Zeiss, 1983; Rosenberg, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1985; White, 1981). People with low trait self-esteem also tend to be less satisfied with their lives in general (Campbell, 1981). In our view, these are largely emotional reactions to perceived social exclusion or a low sense of includability. As we discussed earlier, perceived rejection appears to lead to negative affect; indeed, negative emotion may be an inherent reaction to unfulfilled belongingness needs, as it is for other states of deprivation (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Leary, 1990; Spivey, 1989).

Second, given that high self-esteem is associated with positive feelings, it is not surprising that people with low self-esteem (trait or state) desire to reduce the negative affect associated with relational devaluation, sometimes resorting to behaviors that are maladaptive. Baumeister (1991) has documented the variety of ways in which people "escape the self" in order to avoid distressing self-examination through alcohol and drug abuse, eating

disorders, masochism, and other escapist behaviors. Through behaviors such as these, people intentionally disable their sociometers, rendering them temporarily incapable of registering real or imagined relational devaluation and inducing negative affect.

Third, many types of deviant, socially undesirable, and risky behaviors are more common among people with low than high self-esteem. Drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe driving, unwanted pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and criminal behavior are more likely among people who score low in self-esteem (Scheff et al., 1989), although the correlations are usually weak and the low self-esteem may often be the result rather than the cause of such problems. Despite these ambiguities, the ballyhooed relationship between low self-esteem and maladaptive behavior has led some to suggest that community interventions to raise self-esteem would help to alleviate such problems (California Task Force, 1990; Mecca et al., 1989), although to our knowledge such efforts have not met with any notable success. Sociometer theory sheds a different light on the link between low self-esteem and deviancy. In our view, it is not self-esteem but rather concerns regarding one's relational value and inclusion that produces such effects. People with low self-esteem will resort to more desperate, dangerous, or extreme measures to be valued and accepted than people who already feel valued by their primary groups. If this is true, community interventions should focus on heightening a sense of belongingness and social inclusion rather than self-esteem.

## **VII. Final Remarks**

Self-esteem has emerged as one of the cardinal constructs in behavioral science but, despite thousands of studies, no consensus has been reached on fundamental questions regarding the nature, function, and source of self-esteem. Although it undoubtedly does not address everything that is known about self-esteem, sociometer theory provides a plausible framework for explaining and integrating a great deal of the self-esteem literature. Notably, it provides a viable account for why human beings appear to have a pervasive need for self-esteem and explains why low self-esteem is associated with many problems in living.

If the sociometer theory of self-esteem is even partially accurate, researchers should augment their study of self-esteem with increased attention to the psychological systems by which people monitor and control the quality of their relationships with other people. Psychologists have long recognized that people appear to need self-esteem and possess a potent

desire to be accepted and included by others. Yet they may have underestimated the powerful link between these two pervasive psychological facts.

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