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YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK: THE PERPETUATING NATURE OF SELF-ESTEEM

Randall E. Osborne
Indiana University East
Richmond, Indiana 47374

ABSTRACT: Residents at a shelter for battered women and children were given the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and a 25-item abuse history questionnaire upon entrance to the shelter. During the resident's 30-day stay at the shelter, measures of acceptance of offered guidance/counseling services were also collected, and a measure of exit outcome was given just prior to the resident's leaving the shelter. A higher score on the exit outcome test indicated that the resident chose an exit outcome that moved her back toward the abusive relationship. Correlations between self-esteem, magnitude of abuse history, guidance/counseling services accepted, and exit outcome as well as *t*-test analyses comparing self-esteem (computed categorically as high or low) to exit outcome were computed. As predicted, initial self-esteem levels significantly predicted exit outcome. Those residents with lower self-esteem levels upon entrance to the shelter were most likely to return to the abusive relationship, while those with higher entrance self-esteem levels were likely to exit by moving away from that relationship. The correlations suggest the existence of some compelling relationships between the variables and abusive relationships.

KEYWORDS: Abuse shelters, battered women, crisis intervention, cycles of abuse, family violence, self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Every individual has encountered someone who suffers from low self-esteem. Many of these same individuals have also expended a great deal of time and effort trying to "help" that person recover from their negative feelings of self-worth. But, as anyone who has ever tried to enhance the self-esteem of someone else can tell you, the task is difficult at best. It seems that everyone should want to feel better about themselves and, as such, should welcome positive feedback from others with open arms. Although at some level this is true (e.g., Snyder and Higgins, 1988; Brown, *et al.,* 1988; Tesser, 1988), individuals suffering from low self-esteem may have as many good reasons to resist positive information as they do to seek it out or accept it (Tice, 1993). Before moving on to illustrate how individuals with low self-esteem may perpetuate their own misery (by engaging in interpretive patterns that specifically reinforce their negative self-views), further time should be spent explaining why low self-esteem individuals may work very hard to avoid positive feedback.

Why and when will low self-esteem persons resist positive feedback? Low self-esteem persons have been characterized as having a self-defeating attitude that can perpetuate the feelings of low self-esteem (Brockner, 1983). Although this concept seems to make perfect sense, some individuals may feel that it is so counter intuitive as to have little or no heuristic value. The thought of a negative self-esteem loop perpetuating the misery of the individual with low self-esteem is certainly not something pleasant to consider. Recent lines of

research, however, do converge on this perpetuating cycle and the implications that such a cycle would have for the self of the individual in question and the behavioral choices that the individual will make (Spencer, *et al.,* 1993; Osborne and Stites, work in progress).

Individuals with low self-esteem have been shown to be less certain about which self-related characteristics describe them (Baumgardner, 1990), to get bound up in thinking about what they should be like rather than what they are like (McKay and Fanning, 1987), to prefer negative feedback over positive because it supports feelings of control and predictability of self (Lecky, 1945; Swann, *et al.,* 1992), to have different self-related motives than individuals with high self-esteem (Tice, 1991, 1993), and to lack positive self-views that would otherwise allow for self-esteem to be enhanced (Blaine and Crocker, 1993).

Psychologists have long known that individuals need to feel that their social environments are controlled and predictable. This need for predictability in social interaction was noted by Simon (1990) as one of the few invariants in human information processing and interaction. This need for consistency and predictability, however, also suggests that individuals with low self-esteem may find positive feedback particularly distressing. Positive information can be perceived by individuals with low self-esteem as posing a direct threat to self-consistency and predictability.

Self-motives may play a role in the perpetuating nature of self-esteem as well. Because the first goals of individuals with low self-esteem in social situations are to avoid embarrassment, humiliation, failure, or rejection (Tice, 1991), they do not approach these situations with the same motives as individuals with high self-esteem. Since the goal is to avoid negative consequences, the low self-esteem individual may find positive feedback to be particularly stressful, because it may place even greater demands on them for future performance (Tice, 1993). Individuals also have a strong emotional investment in the conceptions they hold of their selves (Greenwald, 1980). Because of these emotional investments, the individual rarely will reject those prior self-conceptions in the face of newly acquired discrepant self-related feedback.

Low self-esteem and high self-esteem individuals may also choose the same self-motive for entirely different reasons. One such motive is called self-handicapping (Berglas, 1988; Berglas and Jones, 1978). When utilizing self-handicapping, the individual may initiate actions to sabotage his or her own performance (or at least make success much less likely) in order to create ready made excuses for anticipated failure (Berglas and Jones, 1978). An individual may make situational success seem even less likely by either not practicing a difficult task or by bemoaning how sick they feel or how tired they are prior to some type of situational performance. Then, if they perform poorly in the situation, the lack of practice or ill health may be blamed. If the individual succeeds despite the adversity, he or she can take even greater credit for the success.

Low self-esteem sufferers may consider esteem to be an extremely limited resource that they are not willing to risk even if positive self-feelings could be the payoff (Osborne, 1993a, 1993c; Pelham, 1991, 1993). Blaine and Crocker (1993) suggested that persons with high self-esteem tend to engage in self-serving attributions (thereby attributing situational events and feedback in such a way as to bolster feelings of self-worth). These same researchers, however, also found

that persons with low self-esteem will either not use self-serving biases or may even choose to self-deprecate (thereby maintaining negative self-feelings even in the face of positive feedback). Osborne and Stites (work in progress) suggest that the degree of self-negativity may be the deciding factor in determining whether the individual will self-deprecate.

This summary of the implications and ramifications of low self-esteem may help one to understand the tug-of-war that the low self-esteem person may be experiencing with his or her own self. According to Brown (1993), low self-esteem individuals face a unique bind because they have two mutually incompatible motivational needs. On the one hand, the individual is motivated to acquire positive information about self and, therefore, self-enhance. At the same time, however, this individual is motivated to maintain self-consistency. In this fashion, the low self-esteem individual is placed in a particularly dangerous crossfire from which the safest path of escape may simply be to maintain the self-esteem status quo (De La Ronde and Swann, 1993).

How does low self-esteem perpetuate itself? The manner by which individuals interpret their successes and failures plays a pivotal role in determining future actions (Seligman, 1975; Weiner, 1986). In his original model of learned helplessness, Seligman (1975) suggested that depression could result from exposure to uncontrollable outcomes. In a sophisticated reformulation of this model, Abramson, *et al.* (1978) concluded that it was not just the level of controllability for the event that determined depression but also the attributions the individual made for such events. At least three types of attributions are likely: internal versus external, global versus specific, and stable versus specific. In this reformulation, individuals who make stable, global, and internal attributions for an uncontrollable event are likely to experience a depressive reaction.

Numerous studies on depression show what has come to be known as a "depressive explanatory style" (Peterson and Seligman, 1987), and this explanatory style has recently been applied to the manner in which low self-esteem sufferers interpret feedback as well. Even in situations where feedback about the controllability of the event is ambiguous, some persons seem to "choose" to explain the event in a fashion that makes them feel bad. Low self-esteem persons have been shown to actively interpret events in a fashion that perpetuates low self-esteem (Osborne and Stites, work in progress; Tennen, *et al.,* 1987). Osborne and Stites (work in progress) found that low self-esteem persons interpret their failures so as to allow them to blame themselves for those failures, and they suggested that such interpretive patterns may determine the future self-related actions of those persons.

Based on the model of Abramson, *et al.* (1978) and information about the motives and goals that seem to motivate individuals with low self-esteem, Osborne (1993a-c) suggested that individuals may interpret self-related feedback on three levels: 1) internal versus external; 2) temporary versus stable; and 3) global versus specific. The manner in which self-related feedback is interpreted can directly influence the impact such feedback will have on self-esteem (Osborne, 1993a-c).

Osborne and Stites (work in progress) provided self-related situational scenarios to subjects with high and low self-esteem. First, the subjects were administered self-esteem questionnaires. Then, they were asked to read multiple

situational scenarios and were instructed to choose from a list of options for each scenario the option that most closely matched why they thought such as event might happen to them (these items were based on the Attributional Style Questionnaire of Peterson and Seligman, 1987). As predicted, subjects with low self-esteem chose explanatory options that labeled positive self-related events or successes as due to external, temporary, and specific causes. At the same time, these low self-esteem persons chose internal, stable, and global explanatory options for negative self-related events or failures.

By making differential interpretations for successes and failures, the low self-esteem sufferer perpetuates his/her misery by guaranteeing that positive feedback will be minimized while negative feedback will be maximized. High self-esteem subjects showed the opposite pattern. Individuals with high self-esteem interpreted positive self-related events or successes in a fashion that allowed them to take credit for those successes while rejecting blame for failures by making external, temporary, and specific interpretations for negative self-related events.

Numerous studies have found a relationship between self-esteem and perceptions of the cause of domestic violence (Cannon and Sparks, 1989; Schutte, *et al.,* 1986). Little clear evidence exists, however, on the relationship between self-esteem levels upon entering the shelter and the abused person's decision to return to the abusive relationship. Although Schutte, *et al.* (1986) found that only 4 out of 48 women in their shelter sample planned to go back to the abusive relationship, a very different pattern might emerge if measures are taken of the actual (rather than the planned) outcome.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the procedure of Osborne and Stites (work in progress) was extended to an applied setting and tracked true outcome upon leaving the shelter rather than just planned outcome. Residents of an abuse shelter were given self-esteem scales, an abuse history questionnaire, and varying levels of on-site guidance and counseling; then, upon departing the shelter, outcome data were collected. Outcomes were scored to reflect the degree to which the outcome moved the resident back into or away from the abusive relationship. By tracking the true outcome, it became possible to determine whether or not prior abuse history, entrance self-esteem levels, or levels of on-site guidance and counseling most significantly predicted outcome upon leaving the shelter. (The levels of guidance/counseling sought by shelter residents were on a volunteer basis and could be confounded with both entrance self-esteem levels and prior abuse history.)

Given the role self-esteem has been shown to play in both interpretations for events (Abramson, *et al.,* 1978; Osborne and Stites, work in progress) and in future behavioral choices (Swann, *et al.,* 1992), the author predicted that those residents with lower self-esteem scores would be more likely to exhibit shelter exit outcomes that moved them back toward the abusive relationship. In this case, self-esteem scores were recoded as either high or low and then used as a categorical variable in *t*-test analyses of the subjects' outcome scores. Correlations were also computed between entrance self-esteem levels, prior abuse history, levels of guidance/counseling, and shelter exit outcome.

Table 1. Correlation between the four variables examined in this study.

	Self-Esteem	Abuse History	Guidance/ Counseling	Exit Outcome
Self-esteem	1.000			
Abuse history	- 0.179	1.000		
Guidance/Counseling	- 0.061	0.486	1.000	
Exit outcome	- 0.830	0.223	0.369	1.000

RESULTS

A paired *t*-test was run to study the relationship between self-esteem and exit outcome. Self-esteem level strongly predicted abuse history outcome ($\bar{X}$ = -2.25; $t_{(1,19)}$ = -10.411; $p < 0.0001$). Those shelter residents with higher self-esteem were more likely than their lower self-esteem counterparts to choose outcomes that moved them away from the abusive relationship. Persons with lower self-esteem chose outcomes that moved them back toward the abusive relationship.

The correlation matrix between self-esteem entrance levels, prior abuse history scores, levels of guidance/counseling accepted, and shelter exit outcome, conforms to prediction as well (Table 1). The highest correlation obtained was between entrance self-esteem levels and exit outcome. The negative correlation signals that the higher the entrance self-esteem level, the less likely the residents were to exit the shelter in a manner that moved them back toward the abusive relationship.

Levels of guidance/counseling accepted while a resident at the shelter also correlated significantly with magnitude of abuse history (Table 1). In this case, the positive correlation indicates that the greater the magnitude of abuse history, the greater the seeking of offered guidance/counseling. One potentially troublesome aspect of the correlational findings, however, was the marginally significant correlation between levels of guidance/counseling accepted and exit outcome. The modest positive correlation between these two variables (Table 1) suggests a relationship between levels of guidance/counseling sought and more negative exit outcomes. Certainly nothing in this data suggests a causal link between these two variables, but the suggested relationship between them merits further study.

DISCUSSION

These findings support Osborne and Stites' (work in progress) suggestion that self-esteem level will influence the future actions of an individual. The role that self-esteem may play in the manner by which individuals interpret abuse and in the abuse outcome choices individuals will make is of crucial importance. Further research needs to address the potential impact of self-esteem enhancement programs on outcome choices of battered shelter residents. If

self-esteem plays such a crucial role in determining whether the abuse victim will migrate back toward or away from the abusive relationship following residency at a shelter, the role that self-esteem enhancement strategies might play in helping such victims make better exit choices must be assessed.

Although discussing abuse is in no way a pleasant experience, the importance of such conversations cannot be overstated. Questions about why individuals with low self-esteem may migrate back toward abusive relationships are really not that difficult to answer. First, remember that self-uncertainty is considered to be much more uncomfortable than self-certainty. This fact, in conjunction with an awareness that many abusive relationships are predicated on the efforts of the abuser to maintain control over the abused, makes the situation even more powerful. Once low self-esteem is in place, even if it comes about because of abuse, it tends to perpetuate itself in the fashion described earlier. Since the abuse victim may actually believe that he or she deserves no better, attempts by others to enhance their self-esteem will be met with little initial success.

Once the individual's time at the shelter is over (bear in mind that most shelters allow residents to stay a maximum of 30 days), what other choice would the victim see him- or herself capable or worthy of making? Because the victim's self-definition is so wrapped up with that of the abuser, the less threatening exit outcome, in terms of potential impact on self, is to migrate back to the relationship. Although the abuse victim does not covet the abuse, he or she may covet a lack of self definition and/or self-uncertainty even less.

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