

Collective Self-Esteem

Julie A. Garcia
California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo
jgarc31@calpoly.edu

Diana T. Sanchez
Rutgers University, New Brunswick
disanche@rci.rutgers.edu

To appear in Lopez, S. J. (Ed.) (in press). The encyclopedia of positive psychology. London:
Blackwell Publishing.

Personal characteristics—unique attributes, abilities, traits, and values, and also group memberships—gender, religious affiliations, sexual orientation, race, and political affiliations, shape our self-esteem. Personal self-esteem is defined as the feelings of self-worth one obtains from one's personal characteristics; whereas, collective self-esteem is defined as the feelings of self-worth one derives from one's group memberships. For the remainder of this entry, we will focus exclusively on collective self-esteem.

Measuring Collective Self-Esteem

Luhtanen and Crocker developed a measure of collective self-esteem that includes four subscales: membership, importance, public regard, and private regard. The membership subscale measures perceptions of one's worth as a social group member. The importance subscale indicates how central that social group is to the individual's self-concept. The public regard subscale measures perceptions of how others view one's social groups. The private regard subscale indicates personal beliefs of one's social group's value.

Luhtanen and Crocker's measure assesses general self-esteem tied to groups, but can also be modified to address particular groups. Researchers have used this scale to measure a wide array of group variables, including: gender, race, mental health status, and sexual orientation. In addition, researchers have used this scale to create an overall collective self-esteem score, and have also examined the subscales, and their correlates, separately.

Collective Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Reactions to Threat

People are motivated to maintain a positive image of their social groups. Tajfel and Turner outlined ways people strive to preserve and inflate positive collective self-esteem. For example, when the value placed on one's social group comes into question, a person might dissociate from that devalued ingroup, attempt to elevate the status of that ingroup by competing

with outgroups, or creatively compare one's ingroup to outgroup members such that one's ingroup comes out on top.

Collective self-esteem influences how a person will respond when their social group's image is called into question. For example, Crocker and Luhtanen found that private regard influenced how participants rated ingroup and outgroup members following either group success or failure feedback. When participants received group failure feedback, they tended to show greater tendencies toward ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation compared to those with lower private regard or those who received group success feedback. In other words, the participants who received group failure feedback experienced a blow to their collective self-esteem and either perceived an ingroup member more favorably or an outgroup member more negatively in order to repair their collective self-esteem. Thus, this finding highlights that people are motivated to maintain positive collective self-esteem and will react to ingroup and outgroup members in ways that will preserve or enhance those positive group images.

Collective self-esteem also influences when a person will experience threat. Some research on social comparison has found that people perceive greater self-esteem threat when performing well in a higher performing group, compared to a lower performing group, known as the big-fish-little-pond-effect (BFLPE). Collective self-esteem scores attenuate this effect. When people have high collective self-esteem, group achievements positively affect self-esteem. Thus, only people low in collective self-esteem show the BFLPE. In other words, it is not threatening for people to perform well in a high performing group when their self-esteem is based, in part, on that group's performance (i.e., they have high collective self-esteem).

Collective Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being

Empirical research has also shown a positive correlation between collective self-esteem and various indicators of psychological well-being. Primarily, this research has investigated race- and gender-specific collective self-esteem because gender and race represent ascribed social groups that apply to everyone. This work indicates that some dimensions of collective self-esteem play a more important role in psychological health than others.

Private Regard

Private regard measures a person's sense of pride in their social identities. Race-specific private regard typically has a moderate to strong positive correlation with psychological health. Race-specific private regard predicts greater self-esteem, superior psychological health, greater self-efficacy and fewer depressive symptoms among African Americans, White Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. Thus, it is not surprising that fostering racial pride has a strong link to psychological health, especially given that some theorists suggest that creating racial pride is an ultimate goal of racial identity development. Research on gender-collective self-esteem yields similar results: greater private regard among women predicts greater self-esteem and less depressive and anxious mood.

Public Regard

Public regard refers to a person's perception of the value that others place on their social identities. Although some groups indicate low public regard due to stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs, this does not translate to experiencing low self-esteem, as initial researchers had proposed. In other words, people who are members of devalued social groups do not necessarily internalize the negative perceptions that others hold for their group. While public regard does not predict the self-worth of devalued group members, lower public regard does predict anxious mood and psychological distress among women and African Americans.

However, Sellers and Shelton suggest that the link between public regard and distress may be, at least in part, explained by greater perceptions of discrimination. African Americans who indicate low public regard perceive greater racial discrimination, which, in turn, predicts poorer mental health outcomes. However, perceptions of low public regard may also simultaneously attenuate the negative effects of racial discrimination. Perceptions of public regard may essentially operate as a proxy of the extent to which devalued group members are aware of their stigmatization in the greater society. This likely explains why public regard buffers against experiences of discrimination. When people from devalued groups expect that others devalue their group (i.e., have low public regard), this helps them cope with experiences of discrimination, suggesting that expectations of rejection may soften the blow of discrimination. Minorities and women who report lower public regard understand that the world at large devalues their particularly identities, thus they may learn to expect, and consequently develop ways to cope with discrimination.

Importance of Social Identities

The centrality or importance of social identities rarely, if ever, directly predicts psychological well-being or self-esteem. However, the centrality of social identities may intensify the link between other dimensions of collective self-esteem and psychological health. For example, the positive link between African American's private regard and self-esteem is stronger for highly identified African Americans than less identified African Americans. Similar to public regard findings, highly identified African Americans perceived more discrimination than less identified African Americans. However, high identification buffered the negative effects of racial discrimination. Thus, for African Americans and possibly other devalued groups, identification and low public regard emerge as both a risk factor for perceiving discrimination but also a buffer for associated psychological health.

Although most initial research on collective self-esteem has looked at single group memberships in isolation, a growing number of researchers are now examining the interplay of the collective self-esteem of multiple identities on outcomes. As this research area grows, we will have a better sense of the complexity of multiple group memberships and their influences.

SEE ALSO: Self-esteem; Collective well-being