Self-esteem (also known as self-regard) is defined as people’s evaluations about their worth, competence, and desirability. Self-esteem is a personality trait that has been widely studied by psychologists and other social scientists. There are different kinds of self-esteem. “Explicit” measures ask respondents to self-report to what extent they agree that they are a person of worth, that they have good qualities, and that they have positive attitudes toward themselves. “Implicit” measures of self-esteem assess beliefs about the self that operate below respondents’ conscious awareness. Explicit and implicit measures of self-esteem are not necessarily correlated with each other. This means that people can believe that they have high self-esteem, but have low self-esteem “deep down.” Similarly, people might think that they have low self-esteem, but they may secretly love themselves.

There are ongoing debates about whether the desire to hold positive self-views is a human universal that is valued in most cultures, or whether it is much more valued within individualistic nations. Individualistic nations promote a sense of uniqueness and independence from others, while collectivistic nations promote interpersonal connections and a sense of interdependence with group members. People from individualistic nations (e.g., the United States and Canada) typically score higher on explicit self-report measures of self-esteem compared to people from collectivistic nations (e.g., Japan and China). They also tend to be more likely to self-enhance (e.g., exaggerate their abilities) when given the opportunity. People from more collectivistic nations place a high value on self-criticism and self-improvement rather than self-esteem.

One attempt at resolving the debate has been to say that there is a difference between personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem. Personal self-esteem is how people typically define self-esteem—as applying to their individual characteristics and abilities. Collective self-esteem is a feeling of self-worth that is based on group memberships (e.g., family, occupation, or gender). Even though people from collectivistic cultures have lower personal self-esteem, they tend to have high collective self-esteem, and they also selectively self-enhance on collectively relevant attributes. Thus, some researchers argue that what appear to be cultural differences in self-esteem are actually measurement artifacts, and that all people need to feel good about themselves, whether they define their self as a separate individual or more
broadly to include relationship partners and group members. These scholars point out that the evolutionary function of self-esteem is to allow people to know to what extent they belong in their social environment, so it has to exist universally across cultures. When implicit measures of self-esteem are compared across such cultures, no differences are found.

Several studies have found that immigrants who have lived in Western individualistic nations for longer periods have higher self-esteem levels. Longitudinal studies that track individual immigrants over time find that their self-esteem levels rise after living in Western individualistic nations for as little as one year and that this rise is associated with levels of acculturation. In other words, the more people internalize their new culture's norms and values, the more their self-esteem grows. In addition, immigrants to Western individualistic nations who primarily speak the language of their new homeland have higher self-esteem than immigrants who primarily speak in their original language. Such studies suggest that it is possible for self-esteem to rapidly change within certain cultural contexts.

Self-esteem is typically seen as a sign of robust mental health, but there are debates about its value, even in individualistic cultures. Even though the term self-esteem is relatively new, philosophers have long debated the relative merits of loving oneself. For example, Aristotle weighed in on whether self-love and selfishness were synonymous and concluded that self-love could be a virtue or a vice. The New Testament reflects an awareness of the human tendency to prioritize the self, as in Jesus's command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

The modern self-esteem movement began in earnest in 1969 when psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden published The Psychology of Self-Esteem. Boosting self-esteem was viewed as a panacea for all personal and social ill; according to Branden: “I cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem.” Branden's ideas caught on quickly and soon became implemented in the American educational system.

There are a number of documented benefits associated with high self-esteem. People with high self-esteem have better psychological health, have lower depression
and anxiety, and report higher life satisfaction. However, there are also negative connotations of high self-esteem (e.g., vanity, egotism, arrogance, and narcissism), which is why more collectivistic cultures discourage it. High self-esteem has been linked with defensiveness, prejudice, aggression, and over-optimistic task persistence. In addition, in some cases, unrealistically positive views of the self (i.e., grandiosity or delusions) can signal mental illness. Some researchers see high self-control and high other-regard as more prototypical of mentally healthy people, regardless of cultural background.

There have been increases in explicit measures of self-esteem in American culture from the 1960s to the present. Research that examines such changes in collectivistic cultures is still needed.

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See Also:

- Acculturation
- Delusions
- Grandiosity
- Identity
- Munchausen Syndrome
- Self-Help

Further Readings

