

Self-Esteem and Education

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Imagine someone saying: ‘But I know how tall I am!’ and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 279).

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of self-esteem has generated huge interest in recent years. It has been hailed by serious and not-so-serious thinkers, from professional psychologists to chat show hosts, as an essential ingredient of human well-being. During the last decade or so, the self-esteem industry has burgeoned thoughtlessly and irresponsibly, with outfits like the Body Shop telling us that their products will ‘activate your self-esteem’. The response to this has been varied. Social scientists stepped and measured self-esteem, then informed us that high self-esteem wasn’t the unqualified good we thought it was; it is correlated not with educational achievement, but with bullying and alcohol and drug abuse. Philosophers came along and raised questions about what self-esteem *means*, and in what form, if at all, it ought to be promoted in classrooms.

But what is the debate really about? What concerns or anxieties inspired it? This is the question I want to address in this presentation.

I follow Wittgenstein in his preoccupation with philosophical motivation, i.e. the inclinations and impulses that generate keen interest in certain questions. Wittgenstein wrote: ‘Being unable—when we surrender ourselves to philosophical thought—to help saying such-and-such; being irresistibly inclined to say it—does not mean being forced into an assumption, or having an immediate perception or knowledge of a state-of-affairs’ (1953, para. 299). I think the self-esteem debate is driven by ‘irresistible inclinations’ in ways we cannot afford to ignore.

One of these is the inclination to measure self-esteem. Another is the inclination to denigrate self-esteem as a concept, in response to all the hype. Both inclinations are in my view misguided, and I shall look at them in turn.

II. MEASURING SELF-ESTEEM

The concept of self-esteem does not enjoy a simple status in our ordinary repertoire of mental concepts, but most of us have a pretty good idea of what it means to say that someone has ‘low self-esteem’. People with low self-esteem have a poor opinion of themselves. They are self-effacing, self-critical, even self-loathing to the point of (as we sometimes say) apologising for existing. The meaning and consequences of this condition are well worth exploring, since people who suffer from low self-esteem are likely to be preoccupied with thoughts like: I don’t deserve to do well; I don’t have

the capacity to do well; it isn't even worth trying; I'll only make a fool of myself; I'm useless; I'm pathetic; and so on. Self-destructiveness and even destructiveness towards others, shame, envy and jealousy, are likely corollaries of such thinking. People with low self-esteem may even be paralysed by self-doubt, and concerns about the threat to their educational, social and personal prospects are entirely understandable.

The idea of measuring self-esteem suggests a rational response to such concerns. First, develop an instrument or procedure which is capable of measuring self-esteem accurately. Second, select your cohort. Third, measure the self-esteem of members of this cohort. Fourth, explore the correlations between self-esteem at various levels and educational/social variables. Finally, on the assumption that low self-esteem has been shown to be correlated with educational under-achievement, explore and assess various methods of boosting or enhancing self-esteem.

The beauty of this approach is that it is empirical. It resists the idea that we can *know* that low self-esteem causes educational under-achievement without scientifically respectable verification. It says that the investigation must be independent of the unreliable 'folk' or 'armchair' psychology that underlies much everyday thinking.

The idea that self-esteem can be measured fits admirably into this scheme. Within a chosen cohort, fine distinctions are made between self-esteem levels. We are in the realm of psychometrics, characterised by its numerical approach to what are known as mental constructs (such as self-esteem). On this basis, recent studies have produced startling conclusions. For example: low self-esteem is *not* significantly correlated with educational under-achievement; high (rather than low) self-esteem *is* correlated with alcohol and drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour (Emler, 2001). These conclusions seem to turn folk psychology, i.e. our normal expectations, on its head.

However the conclusions are only as sound as the implicit assumptions that underlie them, and if we dig a little deeper, we unearth some questionable assumptions.

1. Affective states are ordinarily only quantified in a loose or general way. You may feel angry, but not to the extent that you are overwhelmed by your feeling, or you may feel so angry that your blood pressure soars, you cannot sleep or work, and so on. Such discriminations are, Aristotle believed, of crucial importance, since we go wrong ethically to the extent that our feelings are 'excessive' or 'deficient' relative to the situations we find ourselves in. These are quantitative discriminations in the loose sense that they suggest 'more' or 'less' feeling. But it is a huge assumption to infer from this that such quantities can be measured.
2. This assumption relies on another: that affective states are usefully treated *as if* they were physical objects. The concept of measurement is of course drawn from the physical world, where we have learned to make fine discriminations in both spatial and temporal dimensions. Feelings have neither weight nor height, nor any other properties which instruments or procedures typically measure. It is an assumption to suppose that measurability is meaningful in such a context.
3. They are treated *as if* they were physical objects, except in one crucial sense. We can check each other's perceptions of physical objects. We cannot check a person's 'perception' or 'report' of her self-esteem levels, and this is seen as regrettable but unavoidable. However, it is an assumption to suppose that self-reports can be the basis of reliable, numerical discriminations.
4. It is assumed that something can be measured though its nature or 'ontological status' is largely unknown. For example, Emler: '[self-esteem measures] are able to assess the level of *something* with a fair degree of reliability or precision...' And: 'Knowing that one has measured something with a reasonable degree of

precision is not the same as knowing *what* one has measured or whether it is what one intended to measure' (2001, pp. 9-11). Despite this worrying uncertainty (imagine someone saying, 'I know I've measured something, but I'm not sure whether it's heat, weight or time'), Emler, like many others, is content to talk about *reliability* and *precision*.

5. Finally it is assumed that we can meaningfully distinguish 'high self-esteem' from 'low self-esteem', rather as we meaningfully distinguish tall people from short people. I mean it is assumed that this distinction will command general assent, whereas I doubt that this is so. It is my view that the concept of low self-esteem is considerably more robust than the concept of high self-esteem. We are more likely, in other words, to agree about which individuals to place in the first than the second category. Roy Baumeister (2003) says of the latter: 'High self-esteem is... a heterogeneous category, encompassing people who frankly accept their good qualities along with narcissistic, defensive, and conceited individuals' (p. 1). If this is true, questions like 'did Hitler have high self-esteem?' cannot be expected to command agreement in ordinary usage, and it is far from clear what has been measured when a social scientist talks about high self-esteem.

III. MEASUREMENT WITHOUT CHECKING

How can one know that something can be reliably and precisely measured if one cannot check that this has been done? My complaint is not that this question has been unaddressed by psychometricians. It is that it has been unconvincingly answered.

Emler says, for example:

It is good practice in psychological measurement to demonstrate that one can obtain similar results using different methods of measurement. With respect to self-esteem, this has yet to be demonstrated. But this should not discourage us from looking for patterns of evidence within the methods of measurement that are available (p. 12).

Emler also reports that efforts have been made to correlate self-report measurements with observer ratings, without success. The implication is that self-esteem measurement by self-reportage fails to meet a desirable standard of good practice, and the comment that we should not be discouraged by this is puzzling, to say the least. Why should we pay attention to research that is of a poor standard? And what are we to make of the apparent contradiction between Emler's apologetic comment about good practice, and his claim that the Rosenberg (1965) scale, one of the most widely used measures of self-esteem, 'achieves quite a high level of precision' (p. 8)?

There is an epistemological problem here, and it received its most forceful and original expression in the later work of Wittgenstein. My opening quotation from his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) alerts us to the danger of thinking that we are saying something meaningful when we claim to know something but lack a yardstick or checking procedure. I do not know how tall I am because I can place my hand on top of my head, for I am not saying anything that can be tested or disagreed with. Nor does it make sense to say of someone: 'He *has* something. But I don't know whether it is money, or debts, or an empty till' (Wittgenstein 1953, para. 294). It is similarly meaningless to say that someone *has* high self-esteem, which might be a good or a bad thing to have, but we do not know what it is.

Emler hints at this when he says that one should be able to 'obtain similar results

using different methods of measurement'. He is talking here about the importance of checking, and he develops this point when he says that test scores must be 'consistent with what is known or believed to be the nature of the phenomena' (p. 9). He is right about this. The problem is that what is 'known or believed' to be the nature of self-esteem has become problematic and controversial. Our use of 'common knowledge' as a kind of yardstick is fraught with anxiety, and one response to this is to say (as philosopher Richard Smith says) that self-esteem is not really an interesting concept at all. It is a 'thin' concept, a blunt verbal tool, and should be replaced or at least supplemented by a 'thicker' or 'richer' range of self-concepts, like 'diffident', 'humble', 'shy'.

The call for a 'richer vocabulary' elicits our sympathy. Who could seriously doubt that it is better to draw on a subtle, nuanced vocabulary, than to rely on a few worn-out words and phrases? Smith seems to be opening the door to a truly sensitive and individual response to human beings. However I think that this impression is mistaken.

IV. WHY SELF-ESTEEM IS IMPORTANT IN EDUCATION

Smith's scepticism about the concept of self-esteem is introduced through this well-known quotation from the philosopher J. L. Austin:

If only we could forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy.

Austin was an ordinary language philosopher, committed to exploring how words are used in everyday life. He had no time for theories of beauty, or indeed theories of anything transcendent, and he certainly had no interest in contemplation or attention of the kind discussed in this conference. Forgetting about the beautiful in favour of the dainty and the dumpy was a way of saying that the real business of philosophy is analyzing ordinary, everyday language.

Was this what Smith was after when he praised Austin's preoccupation with the dainty and the dumpy? I think not. I think he was after a sensitive response to individuals, and I would like to suggest that, inadvertently, he makes such a response impossible.

The huge interest in self-esteem stems, in my view, from an anxiety about *particular individuals* who have a tendency to think poorly of themselves. The phrase 'low self-esteem' is serviceable as a description of this tendency, but what we need to do is look more closely at what the tendency involves. I think it involves a profound denigration of the self: a sense that there is no beauty, truth or goodness in oneself, for these reside exclusively in other people. It involves a circular progression of thoughts, along the following lines:

1. I am worthless...
2. ... as demonstrated by the fact that I can't do things as well as other people...
3. ... so there's not much point in trying...
4. ... after all, when I try, I usually fail...
5. ... and my failures confirm that I am worthless.

All of us, I suspect, know individuals who are trapped by this tendency. All of us, perhaps, have been trapped by it ourselves, for shorter or longer periods of time.

When I say ‘trapped’, I don’t mean inescapably so. I mean that its circularity makes this progression of thoughts hard to escape from. Low self-esteem is powerfully de-motivating.

I am talking about ‘thoughts’, but it should be clear that what I have tried to do here is articulate the thoughts (or beliefs) that underlie a certain way of *feeling and behaving*. There is no gap at all between the tendency to *think* one is worthless, and the tendency to *feel bad* about oneself. There may be a very small gap (or none at all) between the tendency to feel bad about oneself and the inclination to *give up trying*.

What should teachers do about such children? I have considered two misguided answers. One says: boost their self-esteem. The other says: forget self-esteem, and look at their other qualities—for example, their diffidence—instead. Smith reminds us that diffident people can be lovable, as though the main issue is whether people with low self-esteem arouse our approval or disapproval. This is not the main issue. The issue is whether we acknowledge children who are trapped in the way I described, or whether we ignore their condition. This is my preliminary answer to what teachers should do about children with low self-esteem. They should acknowledge them.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that low self-esteem can be a crippling condition. It can be crippling educationally by instilling a sense of the futility of effort, and it can also be crippling ethically. For *effort* is an ingredient of the desire to live well, as Henry James famously wrote: ‘Responsible lucidity can be wrested from the darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars.’ In this sense education and ethics are inseparable; the desire to live well involves a desire to *learn* about oneself and others through ‘intense scrutiny’. People with low self-esteem often feel incapable of effort, and this feeling may, as I suggested, both de-motivate and confirm the sense of worthlessness.

The worst response to this condition is to thrust a questionnaire at someone and quantify the answers. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire is standardly used this way, enabling social scientists to calculate which children are most likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, or get pregnant in their teens. This is a *generalist response*—it merely classifies children’s likely prospects—and I think the refusal to acknowledge the low self-esteem of children on the grounds that we should be drawing on a richer vocabulary is no less generalist.

I want to close with a hypothetical self-esteem questionnaire which I have filled in for a fictitious character. The character is Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s novel *Mill on the Floss*, a fiercely intelligent and proud child whose loving nature and intellectual gifts are unappreciated by almost everyone around her. Her mother can think of nothing but Maggie’s humiliating lack of curls, alongside her pretty, curl-endowed cousin Lucy. The family condemns her as impossibly naughty and unnaturally clever, in a society where girls and women are expected to conform to a stereotype of femininity: demure, dependent, and if possible curly-haired. The author tells us:

When Maggie was not angry, she was as dependent on kind or cold words as a daisy on the sunshine or the cloud: the need of being loved would always subdue her...

Maggie always writhed under this judgment of Tom’s: she rebelled and was humiliated in the same moment: it seemed as if he held a glass before her to show her

her own folly and weakness—as if he were a prophetic voice predicting her future fallings—and yet, all the while, she judged him in return: she said inwardly, that he was narrow and unjust...

Here is Maggie's hypothetical Rosenberg questionnaire:

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. *Strongly disagree* 0
2. At times, I think I am no good at all. *Strongly agree* 0
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities. *Strongly agree* 3
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people. *Strongly agree* 3
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. *Disagree* 2
6. I certainly feel useless at times. *Strongly agree* 0
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others. *Disagree* 1
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. *Agree* 1
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. *Agree* 1
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself. *Strongly disagree* 0

Result: 11 out of 30.

This is a moderate to low result, and of course this is exactly what we would expect. What I would like to note here is how little we have learned when we know that Maggie scored 11 out of 30. What we *want* to know about Maggie is that she is desperate to be loved and also, thankfully, proud. We want to know how resilient she is, how likely she is to succumb to her beloved brother's taunts and bullying. We want to know how far she is likely to stand her ground against the criticism and scorn that is constantly directed towards her. The questionnaire touches on some of these things, but how much more we would find out if we sat down with Maggie and talked to her. Rather than view self-esteem as a property to be measured on a test, we should see it as an aspect of a person who deserves our attention, and is probably more than capable of having a conversation. For as Rom Harré (1998) rightly says:

Questionnaires are not instruments in the sense that thermometers are. They do not measure a property. They are invitations to a conversation.

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