Gender Differences in Sources of Self-Esteem*

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We explore gender differences in the importance of reflected appraisals, self-perceived competence, and social comparisons as sources of self-esteem. Gender differences are expected for several reasons: sex role socialization may lead men and women to develop abilities to exploit different sources of self-esteem; men and women may learn to embrace different criteria for self-evaluation; and opportunities to experience self-enhancement in various ways may be distributed unequally between men and women. We find that women attach greater importance to reflected appraisals than do men, and that men attach greater importance to social comparisons than do women. No difference is found for self-perceived competence. Men and women are also much alike, we find, in that reflected appraisals are the most important source of self-esteem for both groups, followed by self-perceived competence and then by social comparisons. These findings are interpreted in terms of compensation/availability dynamic that is hypothesized to underlie self-esteem formation. Some implications of this analysis for modifying identity theory are discussed.

Social psychologists have given much attention to reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons as sources of information about the self. Much less attention, however, has been paid to the relative importance of information from these sources. The impression thus created is that they are of equal importance in the formation of self-evaluations. Yet there are good reasons for expecting individual, situational, and group differences in the importance attached to these three sources. These differences merit exploration to reveal more clearly how self-evaluations are formed.

Some previous research supports the expectation of differences in source importance. In one study, Schoeneman (1981) found that college students ranked self-observations as their most important source of self-knowledge, followed by "feedback from others" and then by social comparisons. In another study, Schoeneman and his colleagues (Schoeneman, Tabor, and Nash 1984) found that children most frequently cited self-observations as their "very best" source of self-knowledge. Wells (1988) studied fluctuations in self-esteem in the daily lives of mothers and found significant contextual variation in the impact of various self-evaluative criteria on self-esteem. In a study of bridge players, Erickson and Tindall (1989) found that the significance of various bases of self-evaluation varied depending on network location. In a study of self-esteem in the workplace, Schwalbe (Schwalbe 1988; Schwalbe, Gecas, and Baxter 1986) found that most people cited self-perceived competence as the most important source of good feelings about themselves, that social comparisons were more important for managers and supervisors than for clerical and production workers, and that self-perceived competence was slightly more important for women than for men.

Not all of this research testifies directly to differences in the importance of sources of self-esteem, which is our concern here. Yet it generally supports the thesis of differential importance and also suggests other questions of interest to social psychologists. For example, what are the individual, situational, cultural, and structural variables that affect source importance? What are the consequences of differences in source importance for individuals, for interaction, and for the reproduction of social structure? We attempt to address some of these questions by focusing on gender differences in importance of sources of self-esteem.

The research reported here explores differences in source importance among a sample of 514 college-age men and women. Specifically, we look at differences in the importance attached to reflected appraisals, self-percep-

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tions of competence, and social comparisons as sources of positive self-evaluative information. We find that women attach more importance to reflected appraisals than men, that men attach more importance to social comparisons than women, and that men and women attach equal importance to self-perceived competence. We also find an overall pattern of gender similarity, however: for both men and women, reflected appraisals are the most important source of self-esteem, followed by self-perceived competence and then by social comparisons.

We interpret these findings in terms of a compensation/availability dynamic that we hypothesize to underlie self-esteem formation, and propose also that differences in source importance reflect a dimension of the social construction of men and of women as gendered beings. Although we do not frame our analysis in terms of identity theory, we attempt in our conclusions to show how a consideration of source importance can enhance identity theory's understanding of why people are committed to particular identities. We also offer a number of suggestions for further research on this aspect of self-concept formation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We have referred to reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons as the primary sources of information from which self-evaluations derive (for general discussions see [Gecas 1982; Rosenberg 1979]). Reflected appraisals are other people's reactions to us; our interpretations of these reactions being most consequential ([Cooley 1902] 1964, p. 184; [Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979]). Self-perceptions are observations of our behavior and its consequences. From these observations we make inferences about our abilities and proclivities ([Bem 1972]). Social comparisons involve using others as benchmarks for self-evaluation. We also learn about ourselves, in other words, by observing how we are similar to and different from others ([Festinger 1954]).

By implication, reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons are all potential sources of self-esteem, a positive affective response to the self deriving from beliefs that one is competent and moral ([Rokeach 1985; Schwalbe 1985; Vallacher 1980]). More specifically, self-esteem would tend to arise from others' expressions of liking and approval, from perceptions that one's behavior reflects competence and moral worth, and from favorable comparisons with referent others ([Rosenberg 1979; Wells and Marwell 1976]). For ease of expression we can refer to such experiences as "sources of self-esteem." More precisely, however, reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons should be viewed as sources of self-evaluative information from which feelings about the self arise.

Identifying potential sources of self-esteem is only a first step toward describing the dynamics of self-esteem formation. These dynamics operate at the interpenetrating levels of cognition, interaction, culture, and social structure. To understand self-esteem formation thus requires understanding how people generate information about themselves, how they perceive and process this information, and how the results of this cognition yield affective responses to the self. A smaller piece of the puzzle concerns how and why differences arise with respect to the importance attached to various sources of self-esteem.

Why should any such differences exist? Personality can be invoked as one possible answer. Differences in individual needs and dispositions might produce differences in sensitivity to various sources of self-evaluative information. For example, a strong need for approval might increase sensitivity to reflected appraisals (cf. [Hewitt and Goldman 1974]); a strong need for achievement might increase sensitivity to self-perceptions of competence (cf. [Deci 1975; Langer 1983]); a lack of tolerance for ambiguity might increase sensitivity to social comparisons (cf. [Elliot 1979; Festinger 1954]). Yet this is not a satisfying way to explain differences in source importance because it amounts to trying to explain one set of personality differences in terms of another. Little explanatory ground is gained by this "character structure" approach.

Another possibility, then, is to consider learned abilities to generate esteem-enhancing information. We presume here that people are generally motivated to maintain and enhance their self-esteem ([Greenwald 1980; Jones 1973; Kaplan 1975]), that doing so requires skill ([Goffman 1959; Tesser and Campbell 1983]), and that people will tend to employ the esteem-enhancing skills they have mastered. People

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1 Although we give primacy to the self-esteem motive in this analysis, we do not claim that it is the only
thus should tend to attach greater importance to esteem sources that they have learned to exploit. For example, polished interactional skills might increase the importance of reflected appraisals. Mastery of a craft or a sport likewise might increase the importance of self-perceptions of competence or of social comparisons (cf. Suls and Mullen 1982).

Source importance also might vary simply as a matter of culture. This is to say that members of a community will share and transmit ideas about what constitutes competent and moral behavior under a variety of circumstances. These ideas are translated into criteria for self-evaluation. Members of a community thus learn what others expect of them and what they should expect of themselves; they learn not only what will produce favorable reflected appraisals but also how to appraise themselves (Felson 1981). The culture of a group thus tells its members whether they should stake their self-esteem upon, say, achieving spiritual growth or upon making money.2 Communities also are likely to prescribe different criteria of self-evaluation for different members, thereby engendering variation in source importance in another way as well.

Finally, source importance might be affected by source availability. We regard availability as structurally determined—that is, as determined by the macro patterns of action and interaction that characterize a society. These patterns, which assimilate people differently on the basis of ascribed status characteristics, both create and limit chances for receiving positive reflected appraisals, performing competently, and making favorable social comparisons. For example, to derive self-esteem from competent performance, people must have chances to engage in valued, challenging activities of some kind (Gecas and Schwab 1983). If few or no such chances exist, self-perceived competence may diminish in importance as these people focus on other, more readily available, sources (cf. Harter 1986, p. 156). This argument assumes both a self-esteem motive and a compensation/availability dynamic, about which we will say more later.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM SOURCES

The notion that the male self is rooted in instrumental action whereas the female self is rooted in relationships has become almost commonplace (see e.g., Block 1983; Chodorow 1978; Douvan and Gold 1966; Gilligan 1982; Lyons 1983; McGwire 1984). It is not clear, however, exactly what these alleged differences in the roots of the self mean for the importance attached to various sources of self-esteem. One might expect that if women value relationships more highly than men, they also might value reflected appraisals more highly. In contrast, if men value instrumental action more highly than women, they also might value self-perceptions more highly.

Previous research has not borne out these expectations unequivocally. Evidence that reflected appraisals are more important to adolescent girls than to boys can be found in Rosenberg and Simmons (1975; see also Rosenberg 1986). In reviewing evidence pertinent to gender differences in depression, Nolen-Hoeksema (1990, pp. 149–51) likewise concludes that women are more reactive than men to evaluations by others. Among high school seniors, however, Hoelter (1984) found no significant gender differences in the overall impact of reflected appraisals on self-evaluations, although girls were affected more strongly by the appraisals of friends, whereas boys were affected more strongly by the appraisals of parents. Among a small sample of college students, Schoeneman (1981) found no gender differences in the importance ratings given to “feedback from others” as a source of self-knowledge.

As for self-perceptions, Schwalbe, Gecas, and Baxter (1986) found that in the workplace, women placed more importance on
self-perceived competence than did men. Similarly, Alpert-Gillis and Connell (1989) found that in academic work, self-perceived competence was a better predictor of self-esteem in girls than in boys. O'Leary and Hansen (1984) noted, however, that the strength of men's motivation for achievement is influenced strongly by the presence of others; this finding implies that it is not achievement per se which is so important to men, but the positive reflected appraisals which achievement produces (see also Hoelter 1984, p. 260).

Thus the picture so far is complex and inconsistent (cf. Whitley 1983). It seems reasonable, however, on the basis of our previous arguments, to expect some differences to exist for the following reasons:

- Gender socialization may shape personality needs and facilitate development of particular esteem-enhancing skills;
- Culture prescribes different criteria for self-evaluation for men and for women; and
- The roles into which men and women are channeled may offer unequal opportunities for deriving self-esteem from various sources.

Thus we view gender as an important analytic variable because it represents distinct patterns of experience. Yet these patterns are complex, containing room for vast diversity in detail. Individuals therefore will always be affected by them in ambiguous ways, as previous research has shown. We take this ambiguity and the equivocality of previous research as grounds for proceeding in an exploratory fashion. We hope thus to identify promising directions for further studies of the processes whereby key status variables—race, class, and gender—come into play in the formation of self-evaluations.

### METHOD

#### Sample

Data for this study derive from questionnaires administered to 514 undergraduates in introductory sociology courses during spring 1988 at a medium-sized state university in the upper Midwest. Students were offered extra credit for participation, though this offer did not significantly affect participation rates. After explanation of the study's purposes and assurance of anonymity, few students chose not to fill out a questionnaire. The resulting sample was 52 percent male and 48 percent female, with a mean age of 20.0 years.

#### Measures

Our interest was in documenting differences in the importance of reflected appraisals, self-perceived competence, and social comparisons as sources of self-esteem. This can be done in at least two ways. One is to provide subjects with experimentally manipulated information from these sources and then to assess the effect of each source on global self-esteem. Source importance then is assumed to be indicated by the size of the effect. This method presents two problems: 1) there may be no effects to measure—and hence no apparent differences in source importance—if individuals are resistant to having their self-esteem manipulated in an experiment; and 2) it is virtually impossible to ensure that self-relevant information from different sources is presented with equal force, thus making it unclear whether source importance or presentational force is causing differences in effects.

Another method is to ask subjects to rank the importance of various sources of self-esteem. A potential problem with this method is that people may not know how important various sources of self-esteem are to them. Nonetheless it seems reasonable to suppose that when people are presented with alternatives in questionnaire format, they can distinguish between sources which usually affect them powerfully and those which do not. This is the approach used here. We believe that it also has the advantage of facilitating exploration of a wider range of information sources, because any source can be called to mind with a sentence.

Accordingly we used nine items developed for a previous study of source importance in the workplace (see Schwalbe et al. 1986). Each item referred to an experience that normally would be a source of self-esteem.

Three items referred to reflected appraisals:
having others think of you as a good person; getting praise from someone like a teacher, boss, parent, or older sibling; and having your friends, co-workers, or teammates recognize that you've done a good job. Three items referred to self-perceived competence: getting a lot of work done; solving a challenging problem; and recognizing you've done a good job, even if no one else does. Three referred to social comparisons: doing a better job than someone else at something that is important to you; thinking about how your skills and abilities compare to those of other people your age; and thinking about how well other people your age perform tasks that you must also perform.

The cue question for these items was “How important is this experience when it comes to feeling good about yourself?” Subjects were asked to respond on a four-point Likert-type scale (slightly important, somewhat, very, and extremely important). We used principal-axis factor analysis with a varimax rotation as a check on the validity of the items. The analysis produced a three-factor solution in which the reflected appraisal and the social comparison items formed two distinct factors, as expected. Although one item (“recognizing you’ve done a good job, even if no one else does”) did not load on any factor, the other two self-perceived competence items (“getting a lot of work done” and “solving a challenging problem”) formed a distinct third factor (loading > .40). In addition to the face validity of the items, we thus have some further evidence that they reflect the constructs they are intended to.

We created indexes of source importance by summing item scores. The internal reliabilities of the reflected appraisal and the social comparison indexes were within the range of acceptability (for both, alpha = .67). Because one self-perceived competence item did not load with the other two, the internal reliability of this index was very low (alpha = .41), suggesting that this source of self-esteem has a multidimensional structure which needs further exploration. To maximize use of available information, however, we retained all three items in the index (a two-item version of the index produced no differences in results). We obtained further information about source importance by asking participants to state which of the nine sources was most important to feeling good about themselves.

Because this approach focuses on sources of good feelings about oneself, we are not measuring the importance of these experiences for self-deprecation or their actual impact on self-esteem. These items elicit subjective assessments of the importance of particular kinds of reflected appraisals, self-perceptions of competence, and social comparisons as sources of self-esteem. They clearly do not exhaust the range of possible sources of self-esteem in a person’s life, but they can provide an outlined (if not a detailed) picture of differences in the importance attached to common sources.

RESULTS

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show ANOVA results comparing men and women on the three source-importance indexes. Table 1 shows that women as a group attached somewhat greater importance to reflected appraisals than did men. The difference in mean index scores is small but significant (F = 5.06; p < .05). Table 2 shows the results for the importance of self-perceived competence. Here no substantial or significant differences appear. In Table 3, however, we see evidence of differences in the importance that men and women attached to social comparisons. Men as a group attached more importance to social comparisons than did women (F = 12.06; p < .001). Regression analyses (not reported here) showed that gender remained an important predictor of the importance of these sources when age, race, and family income were taken into account.

any of the self-perceived competence index items, although women more often chose “recognizing that you’ve done a good job, even if no one else does” as their most important source of self-esteem (see Table 4).

A regression equation using race, gender, age, and family income to predict the importance of reflected appraisals showed significant effects for gender (beta = -.11, t = -10.6; race ([1 = nonwhite, 0 = white], beta = -.08, p < .05), and age, beta = -.13, p < .01). Being nonwhite (N = 24) and being older thus diminished the importance of reflected appraisals when gender also was taken into account. For this equation, R^2 = .04 (F = 5.33, p < .001). A similar equation showed that gender was a significant predictor (beta = .14, p < .01) of the importance of social comparisons.
Table 1. Analysis of Variance for Importance of Reflected Appraisals, by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean*</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean F-Ratio |
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>13.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.68 5.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>1382.31</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1395.98</td>
<td>513</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Hypothetical index range = 0-9; actual range = 1-9.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance for Importance of Self-Perceived Competence, by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean*</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>1.45</td>
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Source | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean F-Ratio |
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.81 .890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>1040.12</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1041.93</td>
<td>512</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Hypothetical index range = 0-9; actual range = 1-9.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis showed both gender differences and gender similarities. Men and women differed in that women attached slightly more importance to reflected appraisals, whereas men attached more importance to social comparisons. Yet the two groups were remarkably similar in that the largest proportions of both groups cited the same reflected appraisal and self-perceived competence items as most important to feeling good about themselves. Also, the same overall pattern of source importance was evident among both men and women: reflected appraisals were most important, followed by self-perceived competence and then social comparisons. These findings can be interpreted in light of our initial theoretical arguments.

We proposed that people will attach greater importance to those sources of positively valued information which are most readily available and most exploitable. Thus it may be that reflected appraisals are somewhat more important for women because women learn to value sociability and relationships

Table 3. Analysis of Variance for Importance of Social Comparisons, by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean*</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>1.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean F-Ratio |
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>42.46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42.46 12.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>1799.16</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1841.62</td>
<td>512</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Hypothetical index range = 0-9; actual range = 1-9.

* p<.001.
Table 4. Identification of Self-Esteem Sources as Most Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Percentage “Most Important”</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (N = 266)</td>
<td>Women (N = 248)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having others think of you as a good person (RA)</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a lot of work done (SPC)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing better than anyone else at something that is important to you (SC)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving a challenging problem (SPC)</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting praise from someone like a teacher, boss, parent, or older sibling (RA)</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about how your skills and abilities compare to those of other people your age (SC)</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing you’ve done a good job, even if no one else does (SPC)</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having your friends, co-workers, or teammates recognize that you’ve done a good job (RA)</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about how well other people your age perform tasks that you must also perform (SC)</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All reflected appraisal items</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All self-perceived competence items</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All social comparison items</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.01.

more highly than men. It also may be that college women, like women in general (Booth 1972; Swain 1989), have more intimate and more emotionally supportive friends and more highly polished social skills than college men, and thus also may have advantages of availability and skill with regard to generating positive reflected appraisals. Reflected appraisals nonetheless are of foremost importance to men as well, but this phenomenon would seem to be an effect of life stage and of context because reflected appraisals were less important than self-perceived competence in a sample of predominantly middle-aged workers (Schwalbe et al. 1986).

Men appear consistent, however, in placing more importance on social comparisons than do women. This may simply be one consequence of socialization into a competitive masculine world characterized by extremes of inequality (Pleck 1981). If this is so, then socialization to masculinity would seem to produce an insidious link between the self-esteem motive and inequality. Men not only tend to stake their self-esteem on location in a status hierarchy, but also may be more likely to create such hierarchies in order to satisfy their needs for self-esteem. If this interpretation is correct, it suggests a way of seeing how the socially shaped self acts in turn on society and contributes to its reproduction.

Our findings about differences in the importance of social comparisons should be qualified by noting again that all the comparisons mentioned in our measurement items concerned some kind of performance. Thus we cannot say that comparisons involving physical attractiveness, kindness, or cooperativeness might not be more important for women.

Two final qualifications concern our sample and our cross-sectional data. Because of the age, race, and class homogeneity in our sample, we could not reliably determine the effects of these variables or their possible interactions with gender. The generalizability of our findings thus is quite limited. A more diverse sample is necessary to test our argument that both culture and position in the social structure can affect source importance and source availability. Our data also are limited in their bearing on the more processual aspects of our theoretical argument. As we suggest below, two tasks for future research are to explore contextual variations in source importance and to follow changes in source importance over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, we want to consider briefly some theoretical and practical implications of this
line of inquiry and to suggest an agenda for further research.

Implications for Identity Theory

Among sociological social psychologists, identity theory has come to be widely used to make sense of self and society relationships (e.g., Burke 1981; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Serpe 1982). Our own perspective has much in common with identity theory, in terms of both origins and concerns. We have not used identity theory, however, because we believe that in its current formulation it slights the problem of motivation and underplays the agency of the individual actor. Nonetheless our analysis is compatible with and potentially complementary to identity theory. Specifically, we think our analysis of self-esteem source importance can help to make better sense of why people are committed to particular identities, and how these identities in turn become salient.

According to identity theory (Serpe 1987, pp. 44–45; Stryker 1980, pp. 59–62), commitment to an identity depends on two things: the number of relationships a person has that are premised on the identity, and the strength of the good feelings that are derived from the activities and relationships the identity affords. Commitment thus is a consequence of the extensiveness and emotional intensiveness of the social relationships that are premised on playing a particular role and adopting the associated identity. Identity theory then holds that the more strongly committed a person is to an identity, the more salient the identity will become in that person’s hierarchy of identities. This means that the identity is more likely to be invoked in more situations; it becomes more central to and more defining of who and what a person is. In this way the structure of the self is viewed as deriving from a person’s location in a larger societal pattern of role relationships.

This formulation can be improved, we think, by considering more explicitly the interaction between self-concept motives and social structure. Our approach has been to give a central place to the self-esteem motive and to a compensation/availability dynamic. In this view, commitment to an identity is seen as growing out of an individual’s experience of its value for generating positive self-evaluative information in a variety of contexts. People will be committed, in other words, to those identities which they have used successfully, and can continue to use, to generate positive self-evaluative information from the sources that are most important to them. Commitment to an identity therefore will depend not only on the extensiveness or intensiveness of network involvements, but also on whether or not those involvements facilitate the generation of self-esteem from especially valued sources.

This reformulation also holds that the likelihood of an identity’s being invoked (its salience) is not determined by commitment alone. Taking source importance into account suggests that salience will depend also on what kind of self-evaluative information can be generated by invoking a particular identity in a particular situation. If one identity offers possibilities for generating positive reflected appraisals, and another offers the possibility for generating what might be more highly valued self-perceptions of competence, the latter identity is more likely to be invoked situationally regardless of how globally committed a person might be to the former. In our view, then salience is seen most accurately as a function of the interaction between source importance, people’s esteem-enhancing skills, the identities that others allow them to adopt, and the contexts to which they have access in everyday life.

Identity theorists would argue that people are committed to their gender identities because so many of their most important relationships are premised on those identities. The more such relationships we have, and the more important they are to us, the more strongly committed we will be. Identity theory also would maintain that commitment to gender identities depends on people’s perceptions of the relative costs and benefits of embracing or rejecting those identities. We agree. In fact, our data suggest that the importance which many men and women place on reflected appraisals will bind them firmly to traditional gender identities, as long as they believe that rejecting those identities will evoke negative reactions from others.

We would add to this argument the suggestion that perceptions of identity costs and benefits also are shaped by knowledge of one’s esteem-enhancing skills, of possibilities for adopting other identities, and of one’s preferences for particular kinds of self-evaluative information. This point implies that we are bound to our gender identities not
only because of the relationships predicated upon them, but also because of how we learn to value and derive self-esteem from particular sources.

Some Practical Implications

Source importance also can be regarded as an independent variable affecting well-being. If we assume that situations establish a background against which the struggle for self-esteem takes place, and that people differ with regard to the values and skills which determine the likelihood of successfully maintaining self-esteem in any given situation, then the importance of the fit between source importance and source availability is clear. A bad fit—a mismatch between source importance and source availability—is likely to diminish self-esteem: This idea of fit between source importance and availability may offer some insight into how psychological distress can arise in the workplace and in personal relationships.

Consider, for example, a person for whom reflected appraisals are most important as a source of self-esteem but whose new job demands isolated task performance and provides few opportunities for interaction. Although the compensation availability thesis predicts an eventual turning to other sources of self-esteem, the potential for distress in the process of adjustment is clear. Closer matching of person with job, in terms of self-esteem needs and source availability, could minimize this sort of distress. Consider also mismatches in intimate relationship. A partner who attaches great importance to self-perceived competence (derived, say, from getting a lot of work done) may have difficulty in appreciating the other’s need for frequent and intense interaction from which positive reflected appraisals can be derived. Both partners thus may find the other less than fully sympathetic to and supportive of their particular needs for self-affirmation. In such instances, knowledge about differences in source importance may provide helpful insights to guide therapy or attempts at self-transformation.

Directions for Further Research

We see this work as valuable for expanding a line of inquiry, making a case for its importance, and linking it to extant theoretical and practical concerns. Although no doubt we have raised more questions than we have answered, we hope we have shed some light on a largely neglected topic in the social psychology of self-concept formation.

In conclusion, we offer a set of suggestions for further work on this topic: 1) refinement of measures of self-esteem source importance; 2) replication of the present study with a larger and more diverse sample; 3) exploring the importance of various sources of self-deprecation, which may not be the same sources that are important for self-enhancement; 4) examining the importance of social comparisons on nonperformance dimensions; 5) documenting variations in source importance across contexts such as work, home, and sports; 6) documenting variations in source importance across ethnic, racial, and economic groups; 7) studying changes in source importance as individuals move from context to context throughout the lifespan; 8) examining the effects on individual well-being of good matches and of mismatches between source importance and source availability; 9) pursuing a further integration of ideas about source importance with identity theory; and 10) conducting experiments to measure the actual, differential impact on self-esteem of information from reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons.

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