Theoretical Definitions

Self-esteem gives rise to many problems in research due to its subjective nature. These inconsistencies are mainly due to the difficulty of conceptualizing or defining the term. “Self-esteem” is continually revealing itself under different definitions and implications.

Gail McEachron (1993) defines self-esteem as the “judgment one makes about their self-concept. “Self-concept” refers to the attributes one has. McEachron (1993, p. 67) supports this definition with the work of Dr. Morris Rosenberg whom defines self-esteem as the “attitude one holds toward themselves as an object (McEachron, 1993, pg. 8-9).” In short, Dr. Morris believed that self-esteem was measurable via assessing a subject’s attitude about themselves as a “thing.”

On the other hand, a second definition of self-esteem is the ratio of one’s successes over their pretensions or failures. McEachron (1993) references James William’s work to explain. This definition of self-esteem requires the researcher to define “success.” For the purpose of this paper we will stick to William’s definition of success used in the development of this definition of self-esteem: an achievement one makes in an area considered to be of importance to the person whose self-esteem is being measured. The failures must also be in an area of equal importance to the subject. Therefore, this definition can be understood as the ratio of successes of importance to failures of equal importance.

Additional definitions of self-esteem include the theory of “libidthal cathexis” and the theory of “self-dynamism.” Libidthal cathexis refers to the successful fulfillment of desires held by the super ego (Jackson, 1984). The ability or inability to fulfill these desires determines one's self-esteem. The idea is that individuals whom are able to satisfy their
super ego will possess a higher self-esteem than those whom cannot. Secondly, self-dynamism is a “relatively enduring configuration of energy which manifests itself in characterizable processes in interpersonal relations” (Sullivan & Mullahy, YR, p. 128). This definition emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships regarding the development of self-esteem.

**Operational Definitions**

Despite the numerous theoretical definitions of self-esteem, there are only a minute number of operational definitions used today. The most common is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale measures self-esteem via a survey. Every answer on the survey is assigned a point value with more points being rewarded for answers demonstrating high self-esteem and vice versa. The subject’s survey is scored and the subject is placed into a category. For example, some categories might be high self-esteem, average self-esteem, below average, or critical.

The other operational definition used today is less sophisticated. It employs the use of an interview that asks similar questions that would be used on a self-esteem survey. While conducting the interview, the researcher is observing nonverbal cues such as eye-contact, smiling, fidgeting, and hand-wringing. The researcher counts the number of times they observe these and other behaviors to determine self-esteem (Jackson, 1984).

A related operational definition is “The Body-Esteem Scale” (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). This scale does not directly measure self-esteem but rather uses a point scale like the one used with the Rosenberg scale to determine the esteem one has towards their bodily appearance by assigning questions a category such as “sexual attractiveness” to survey questions.
Comparison and Recommendations

The theoretical definitions discussed prior can be classified into two camps. The first of which is a general, broad definition open to interpretation. These definitions have a wide range of applications and can be used relatively easily. The biggest drawback of these definitions is that they tell us little about the meaning of the phenomena. Rather, these definitions seek to merely define.

The second camp consists of more specified definitions. These definitions allow for an easily defined operational definition and a very clear way of indicating self-esteem or the lack thereof. However, these definitions tend to be complicated and results are less reliable due to the subjective nature of “success” and “failure”.

Researchers should use the definition that most completely defines self-esteem in a way that all test subjects can understand. For this reason, self-esteem as defined by McEachron (1993) is recommended as the most comprehensive and understood definition and also as the most applicable.

The operational definitions of self-esteem tend to fall into the same to camps. The behaviors observed during an interview fall into the first camp while the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Body-Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) fall into the second.

The negatives regarding the interview approach is record-ability. It is difficult to record observed behaviors as a numeric measurement. Also, extraneous variables are more likely to interfere than in other operational definitions. For example, the subject may have looked down because a question evoked a strong emotion or memory rather than due to
lack of self-esteem. On the other hand, the interview allows for a more in-depth understanding of the test subject.

Both the Rosenberg scale and the body-esteem scale provide a way to concretely measure and record self-esteem or body-esteem, respectively. There is only one way to understand and read both scales, thus allowing for more reliable results. The Rosenberg scale also measures self-esteem more completely than the body-esteem scale. The body-esteem scale is only obliquely related to the self-esteem because in reality it measures the esteem one has for their own body.

Operational definitions should be concrete and easily recordable. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) is the most concrete way of measuring self-esteem because it is not open for interpretation—there is only one way to use the Rosenberg scale. In conclusion, theoretical and operational definitions need to be chosen based on their completeness, understandability, and record-ability.
References


