Self-Esteem Research, Theory, and Practice

Toward a Positive Psychology of Self-Esteem

3rd Edition

Christopher J. Mruk, PhD

SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK
About the Author

Christopher J. Mruk, PhD, was trained in general learning and cognitive psychology at Michigan State University, where he received his undergraduate degree in 1971, and in humanistic clinical psychology at Duquesne University, where he received his graduate degree in 1981. His first clinical position was working in a closed inpatient psychiatric unit at Cottage Hospital in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, which led to supervising an outpatient heroin addiction treatment program in Detroit. From there, he became a therapist in a 24-hour comprehensive psychiatric emergency service in Lansing, Michigan, which was one of the nation’s first models recognized by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). He then provided a wide range of psychological testing and therapeutic services in various community mental health centers, which led to directing the Counseling Center at St. Francis College in Pennsylvania. After doing some private practice, he now works as a consulting psychologist to Firelands Regional Medical Center in Sandusky, Ohio. He is licensed as a clinical psychologist in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Dr. Mruk’s academic experience includes more than 20 years of teaching psychology and training mental health professionals. Currently, he is a full-time Professor of Psychology at Bowling Green State University Firelands College in Ohio, where he has received the college’s Distinguished Teaching and its Distinguished Creative Scholarship awards. His publications include a number of academically oriented refereed articles, several invited chapters, and Zen and Psychotherapy: Integrating Traditional and Nontraditional Approaches (Springer Publishing Company, 2003), a book that he authored with Joan Hartzell, RN, MA. Dr. Mruk may be reached at cmruk@bgusu.edu.
# Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii

Chapter 1 The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem 1
- The Central Issue of Defining Self-Esteem 8
- Types of Definitions 10
  - Self-Esteem as Competence 12
  - Self-Esteem as Worthiness 16
- Self-Esteem as Competence and Worthiness 19
- A Two-Factor Definition of Self-Esteem 23
  - and the World of Everyday Life 23
- A Phenomenological, Meaning-Based Approach 27
  - to a Two-Factor Definition 27

Chapter 2 Self-Esteem Research Problems and Issues 31
- Major Self-Esteem Paradoxes 31
  - Is the “Self” in Self-Esteem Primarily Psychological or Sociological? 32
  - Self-Esteem as a Trait versus a State 33
  - Is the Function of Self-Esteem a Motivational Need or a Calling? 34
  - Is Self-Esteem a Developmental Product or Process? 35
  - Is Self-Esteem an Independent or a Dependent Variable? 35
- Summation of the Paradoxes 36
- Problems with Assessing Self-Esteem 37
  - Measuring the Right Things 37
  - Dealing with Dynamic Factors 38
Contents

The Development of Norms 38
Self-Report Problems 39
Test Validity: A Question of Limits 40
Problems Generated by Using the Scientific Method 41
Methodological Diversity in Researching Self-Esteem 41
The Problem of Scientific Paradigms and Self-Esteem Research 46
Phenomenological Methods 48
Qualitative Advances in Researching Self-Esteem 51
Integrated Description 54
The Question of Validity and Researching Self-Esteem 56
Validity in Self-Esteem Research 58
Conclusion 61

Chapter 3  Major Self-Esteem Research Findings 63
Parental Factors 64
Genetics 64
Parental Support (Involvement) 64
Parental “Warmth” (Acceptance) 65
Parental Expectations and Consistency 65
Parenting Style 66
Birth Order 66
Modeling 67
Summary 67
Self-Esteem and Values 68
Social Values 69
Self-Values 69
Gender and Self-Esteem 71
Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Factors Affecting Self-Esteem 72
Cultural Orientation and Self-Esteem 74
The Sources of Self-Esteem 75
Acceptance versus Rejection 76
Virtue versus Guilt 76
Influence versus Powerlessness 77
Achievements versus Failures 78
Competence and Worthiness as the Sources of Self-Esteem 78
Paradoxes Revisited 80
The “Self” in Self-Esteem Is both Psychological and Sociological 80
Traits and States: Self-Esteem Types and Levels 82
Self-Esteem Functions as a Motivational Need and a Call 90
Self-Esteem as a Developmental Product and Process 92
Self-Esteem as a Variable? 94
“Good” Self-Esteem Assessment Instruments 96
Effective Self-Esteem Enhancement Techniques 97
Chapter 4  Major Self-Esteem Theories and Programs 107

Traditional Theoretical Approaches 108
The Jamesian Tradition 108
The Social Learning Tradition 109
The Humanistic Tradition 112

Contemporary Empirically Based Approaches 115
Seymour Epstein’s Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory 115
Susan Harter’s Developmental Approach 118
An Existential View: Terror Management Theory 120
The Evolutionary Approach: Sociometer Theory 123

Summary of Findings about Theories 127

Major Self-Esteem Enhancement Programs 127
Frey and Carlock: Eclectic Variations on a Humanistic Theme 128
Increasing Self-Esteem Behaviorally: Pope, McHale, and Craighead 131
Bednar, Wells, and Peterson: Enhancing Self-Esteem Cognitively 135
Harter’s Developmental Approach 141
A Note on Burns’ Ten Days to Self-Esteem 144
Summary of Findings about Enhancement Programs 145

Chapter 5  A Meaning-Based, Two-Factor Theory of Self-Esteem 149

The Function of Self-Esteem as Meaning Making 149
The Basic Types of Self-Esteem 151
Low Self-Esteem 152
High Self-Esteem 153
Worthiness-Based and Competence-Based Self-Esteem 154

Refining the Types: Integrating Levels of Self-Esteem 156
Levels of Low Self-Esteem 159
Levels of Worthiness-Based Self-Esteem 160
Levels of Competence-Based Self-Esteem 163
Levels of High or Secure Self-Esteem 165
Contents

The Development of Self-Esteem 169
  Childhood “Precursors” of Self-Esteem 169
  Middle Childhood and the Emergence of Self-Esteem in Adolescence 170
  Self-Esteem in Adulthood 172
Reexamining the Link between Self-Esteem and Behavior (Co-Constitution) 180
  Co-Constitution: A Phenomenological Alternative 181
  Co-Constitution and Stability versus Change 185

Chapter 6  A Two-Factor Self-Esteem Enhancement Program 187
  Enhancing Self-Esteem in the Group Setting 188
    Week 1: Focusing Phase 190
    Week 2: Awareness Phase (Appreciating Self-Esteem) 197
    Week 3: Enhancing Phase (Increasing Worthiness) 202
    Week 4: Enhancing Phase (Increasing Competence) 208
    Week 5: Management Phase (Maintaining Self-Esteem) 213
    Week 6 (Optional): Follow-Up Session 218
  Enhancing Self-Esteem in the Individual Setting 219
  Validity Revisited 222

Chapter 7  Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology 227
  Self-Esteem and the Original, Humanistic Positive Psychology 229
    The New Positivistic Positive Psychology 232
      Basic Ideas 232
      Core Themes 233
      Applied Focus 234
  Similarities and Differences between the Two Positive Psychologies 234
  Humanistic Response 237
  Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology 240
    Self-Esteem, Authenticity, and Positive Psychology 243
    Self-Esteem and Applied Positive Psychology 246
    A Final Point 254

APPENDIX  Self-Esteem Enhancement 5-Week Program 257
  References 271
  Index 285
Preface

The third edition of this book is different from the other two. In fact, I talked with Sheri Sussman, my perspicacious editor at Springer Publishing Company, about whether it should be given a new title to reflect that fact. She said that in some ways the book is a defense of self-esteem and could well be titled differently to reflect that, but that we needed to think about it. In the end, the structure of the book seemed to be consistent enough among all three editions to warrant using the original title, but with the addition of a subtitle to reflect the new focus on positive psychology. Chapter 1, which still concerns defining self-esteem, is almost completely rewritten. It no longer needs to focus on justifying self-esteem as a balance of competence and worthiness because now I can show how this two-factor approach constitutes a legitimate tradition in the field. Instead, it is important to present new work of this type, its major authors, their crucial findings, and how such an approach is superior to defining self-esteem in terms of either competence or worthiness alone. Chapter 2 remains largely focused on methodological issues facing self-esteem work. However, it now includes new material about a more sophisticated way of understanding the self. Chapter 3, which concerns updating research findings, received extensive revision because so much has happened in the field during the past few years. For example, I have added nearly 150 new references to the book.

The first and largest portion of Chapter 4 has received considerable revision, mainly because it concerns major theories of self-esteem and several new ones that have appeared in the recent past. Some of them, such as Terror Management Theory and Sociometer Theory, are exciting and represent huge theoretical advances even in a field as old as this one. Chapter 5, which presents my own theory of self-esteem, is largely the same.
However, due to the stunning work of Susan Harter, I have been less concerned with the early development of self-esteem in childhood and more concerned with its management in adulthood. This progress is reflected in a new chart on how self-esteem is lived over time. The only things that are new about Chapter 6, which concerns the self-esteem enhancement program, are a few new research references on its efficacy and some additional material (which I find exciting) on how to apply the program in the individual setting. The new Chapter 7 aims at taking the field of self-esteem in an important direction: right into the new positive psychology. Thus, it begins by comparing the original humanistic positive psychology with the emerging positivistic positive psychology and ends with attempting to show how self-esteem should occupy a prominent place in the new one, just as it does in the older version.

Over the years, I have come to find that good therapists of all ilk have some important things in common and that no discipline is big enough to do it all alone. Thus, as before, this edition is oriented toward both academic and clinical audiences, especially those from counseling, education, nursing, psychology, and social work. Academics and researchers will probably find Chapters 2 through 5 most interesting because they cover research and theory. Clinicians are likely to find themselves drawn more toward Chapters 4 through 6 because they address how self-esteem works in relation to problems of living and how to help people deal with them more effectively. Chapters 1 and 7 should be of equal interest to both groups because defining self-esteem may be the most crucial issue in the field right now, and the relationship between self-esteem and the new positive psychology could become the most important one for the future. Finally, it might be helpful to say a word about writing style. Moving all the way from research, through theory, and then to practice is an unusual approach in this field, as most of its books emphasize only one, or sometimes two, of these themes. However, as a clinician, I know that the best practical tools come from a good theory, and as an academician I have learned that the best theory comes from good research, so for me, there is no alternative. Consequently, I try to find a “middle path” in style and tone that is compatible with key expectations of both audiences. Because the approach covers a lot of ground, I try to proceed in a logical, systematic fashion: from research issues and findings, through theory, to practice, and beyond to new issues with which the field must deal.
Naturally, it takes more than one person to write a book, even though most of the credit (or blame, as the case may be) falls on the author. First and foremost, of course, is Marsha, my wife, who has had the patience to put up with my odd hours while writing. I owe her a vacation of her choice for tolerating an author-in-residence yet again. As always, thanks to my original family, consisting of Steven, Veronica, and Joseph Mruk, my brother, mother, and father, respectively; my second family, which includes Dee Mruk, Tina Bradshaw, and Pam and Curt Pawloski; and my married family, especially Virginia, Carl, and Sylvia Oliver.

Friends who helped during the process this time include Bob Noe, as well as Frank and Mary Ann Salotti, Joan Hartzell, JoEtta Crupi, Mia Bartoletti, Tony Barton, Connie Fischer, and Scott Churchill. Karen Page Osterling, my colleague at work, friend outside of it, and personal copy editor for both of my books in all their editions, has done much writing with me over the years. I am sure her presence can be detected in the book if one looks closely enough, and always for the better. Finally, I would like to mention Will Currie and the staff at the library of Bowling Green State University Firelands College who were all more than helpful in finding sometimes obscure references. They also offered warm hospitality as I often read, wrote, and sipped tea in the back area of the stacks.

I am grateful to the staff of Springer Publishing Company for their interest and help over the past decade of work together. This time, Sheri Sussman gets special thanks for carefully listening to the idea of a third edition and helping to realize the project. Dr. Ursula Springer, who stands as something of a David facing the Goliath of gigantic for-profit publishing houses in her dedication to bringing scholarly work to psychology, nursing, and related fields, deserves special recognition. Dee Delassandro,
who encouraged me to set up my first self-esteem workshops while director of the counseling center at St. Francis College, and Jack Howard, who helped me see the importance of self-esteem long ago, are also worthy of mention. Special thanks goes to Alison Trulock of Graphic World Publishing Services for her dedication to high-quality work. Last, but closer to first than least, it is important to thank clients and students who are now too many to name, for without them there would be nothing to say nor any reason to say it.
Introduction

Perhaps the most important question to ask about a third edition is why should anyone invest the time and energy to read or to write one? Of course, the most common answer is to update and expand a particular body of work or line of thought. That rationale was certainly true of the second edition, which was aimed at adding more recent research findings and defending the concept of self-esteem against the onslaught of criticism that arose in response to what is commonly referred to as the self-esteem movement. However, this third edition has different origins.

Over the past few years, the approach to the research, theory, and practice of self-esteem presented here seems to have generated some interest. Sometimes, for instance, I would see reference being made to it in a number of professional articles. Various Web sites started to refer to the model of self-esteem being developed here. Then, the self-esteem matrix appeared in college texts. More important, major researchers in the field also seemed to take notice. One of them, Michael Kernis (2006), went so far as to invite me to write a couple of chapters for a book he is authoring that I believe is sure to be a classic in the psychology of self-esteem.

Just then, I was also in a position to take a sabbatical from Bowling Green State University Firelands College, where I work as a professor of psychology, and was in need of a project to work on during that period. At the same time, I started to explore Romin Tafarodi’s work. Between Kernis’ new material on optimal self-esteem and Tafarodi’s two-factor approach, I realized that there is an entire line of research and theory on the psychology of self-esteem into which my more phenomenological work could fit and make a contribution, particularly in terms of enhancing self-esteem. That moment brought with it a breath of fresh air and renewed inspiration.
For the next several months, I read more than 2,400 pages of new self-esteem work and also explored related material on what is being called “positive psychology.” When Jim Smith, the dean of my college at Bowling Green State University, asked my wife, Marsha, how I was doing on sabbatical, she said with a smile and laughter, “I don’t know. He never comes out of his study!” I’ve certainly not heard the last of that comment, but during that time I saw a number of things that would influence the design of the third edition. First, although I had feared that the field of self-esteem would only be damaged by the devastating popular and professional criticisms continually being leveled against it during the 1990s, self-esteem survived as a viable topic. Moreover, that onslaught, which was well deserved in more than one way, seems to have forced the field to look at itself anew and with a more demanding eye. The result seems to be that the psychology of self-esteem has matured since the last edition, to the point where it is once again thriving with new ideas, theories, and research. Thus, in part, the third edition was necessary because the older ones were simply out of date in ways that could not be ignored.

The other thing that I found during this time is that the field is now facing a new kind of challenge or danger. I was in the audience when the new vision of positive psychology was presented to the general membership of the American Psychological Association. Having been trained in humanistic, as well as traditional, empirical psychology, I was thrilled to hear so many familiar themes being revitalized and believed that psychology was finally getting on the right track again. After reading the new studies and literature on this version of positive psychology, however, I soon realized that self-esteem was not a major part of it. I think that is a terrible mistake and decided it was necessary for someone to demonstrate how self-esteem is and should be an important part of any positive psychology, whether conceived in the twentieth century by the humanistic perspective or in the new millennium by a more traditional approach to psychology. Thus, the new edition includes a seventh chapter, instead of the previous six, dedicated to this issue.
The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem

One of the most striking things about the field of self-esteem is its vitality and resilience as a topic for social scientists and clinicians alike. For example, if history is an indication of the significance of a phenomenon, then self-esteem easily stands out as an important subject. After all, William James (1890/1983) first introduced the topic more than a century ago in what is often regarded as the first American textbook on psychology, which makes self-esteem one of the oldest themes in social science, at least in this country. In addition to historical depth, the breadth of a topic, or how much attention it receives, is another good indicator of vitality. Even a cursory database search of PsychINFO will reveal that in the time between James’ work and this investigation, scholars, researchers, and practitioners have written more than 23,215 articles, chapters, and books that directly focus on self-esteem as a crucial factor in human behavior. The fact that the number seems to grow substantially each time the database is updated further supports the claim that self-esteem is a basic, if not fundamental, topic in the social sciences. In fact, Rodewalt and Tragakis (2003, p. 66) stated that self-esteem is one of the “top three covariates in personality and social psychology research,” along with gender and negative affectivity. The ability to endure controversy is another good indicator of importance, and self-esteem appears to be resilient in this regard as well. Indeed, we shall see that work on self-esteem is characterized by a diversity of opinion strong enough to generate a lively and continuing exchange among researchers, theorists, and laypeople alike. Self-esteem is one of those rare topics for which controversy, even heated controversy, only seems to stimulate more interest in the subject over time. When all things are considered, then,
self-esteem certainly seems to warrant additional attention as we move into the twenty-first century.

What accounts for such vitality in a psychological topic? Perhaps it is that self-esteem is one of those few dimensions of behavior that stretches across the full spectrum of human existence that creates so much interest for such a long time, much like the topics of personality or identity. At one end of the human behavioral continuum, for instance, low self-esteem is often mentioned in regard to various mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and learning problems. We can also find self-esteem more toward the middle of the spectrum in terms of many of the more ordinary problems of living, including difficulties dealing with failure, losses, and other setbacks that are sure to challenge most of us during the course of our lives. Finally, self-esteem is also found at the other end of the continuum because it is often talked about in relation to such things as being mentally healthy, successful, living effectively, and even the “good life.” In light of such a rich historical and contemporary context, the first question to ask of new work in the area, let alone a third edition, could be a rather poignant one: Why is there a need for more work on self-esteem given all the attention it has received to date, and what can be gained by the individual reader, researcher, or practitioner by taking the time to become familiar with it (Aanstoos, 1995)?

The answer to this question is the central aim of this book, which involves presenting, supporting, and advancing an integrated, systematic, two-factor approach to self-esteem research, theory, and practice. However, the nature of such a query is such that it must be addressed before proceeding any further, so let us consider a brief response to it, one that may be further developed as we proceed. Succinctly stated, there are at least three good reasons to continue the pursuit of self-esteem and each one of them is discussed throughout this chapter. First, today, self-esteem may be more important for individuals and the society in which they live than ever before, especially in terms of what is typically described as “self-regulation” and “quality of life.” Second, the research and ideas that historically characterized this field have undergone a striking period of rapid growth and severe critique. This re-examination of self-esteem is beginning to result in the development of more sophisticated research, more comprehensive theories, and more effective tools for enhancing self-esteem. Finally, new influences, such as the advent of positive psychology, are beginning to affect the field in ways that must be examined and understood to make sense of the changing face of self-esteem in modern psychology. It is helpful to elaborate each of these three points to clarify what they mean before we venture into this rich and vibrant field any farther.

In whatever way one defines self-esteem, and we will take on this important task in the course of this chapter, it is usually understood as
something that is especially meaningful to the individual. Whether self-esteem has to do with an abiding sense of worthiness as a person or the experience of being able to solve problems competently, or both, self-esteem is intensely personal, in part because it says something about who we are and how we live our lives. One reason to continue to study it, then, is the hope that understanding self-esteem will help us to learn things about ourselves: important things, such as who we are as unique individuals and how we are faring in life in terms of the meanings of our actions, our short- and long-term goals, our relationships with others, and the direction in which our lives are heading. Another thing that makes self-esteem especially significant may also be that it is one of those rare human qualities that is active in both negative and positive situations, experiences, and states of being, making it relevant to a wide range of behavior. Reading any list of characteristics commonly associated with low self-esteem clearly makes this point. For example, Leary and MacDonald noted that,

People with lower trait self-esteem tend to experience virtually every aversive emotion more frequently than people with higher self-esteem. Trait self-esteem correlates negatively with scores on measures of anxiety (Battle, Jarrat, Smit & Precht, 1988; Rawson, 1992), sadness and depression (Hammen, 1988; Ouellet & Joshi, 1986; Smart & Walsh, 1993), hostility and anger (Dreman, Spielberger & Darzi, 1997), social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Santee & Maslach, 1982; Sharp & Getz, 1996), shame and guilt (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), embarrassability (Leary & Meadows, 1991; Maltby & Day, 2000; Miller 1995), and loneliness (Haines, Scalise & Ginter, 1993; Vaux, 1988), as well as general negative affectivity and neuroticism. (Watson & Clark, 1984) (2003, pp. 404–405)

In all fairness, it is necessary to point out that we will see some authors who report that low self-esteem does not necessarily lead to such forms of human misery. Instead, low self-esteem is seen as the result of adopting certain self-protective strategies that limit reductions in self-esteem (Snyder, 1989; Tice, 1993). But it is still acknowledged that low self-esteem has its costs, such as missed opportunities or lack of spontaneity. Even more to the point, it is difficult to dismiss the fact that low self-esteem has been identified as either a diagnostic criterion for, or associated feature of, some 24 mental disorders in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), according to O’Brien, Bartoletti & Leitzel (2006).

Moreover, if it is true that at least 15 percent of Americans meet criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition in a given year (Regier et al., 1993) and if it is true that self-esteem is involved in many other less
severe conditions, then it stands to reason that self-esteem is of considerable social significance, too. This aspect of low self-esteem is put into even greater relief when we remember that most people who suffer mental disorders are also connected to many others through families, friendships, and other relationships. The result is that low self-esteem probably touches most of us either directly through personal experience or indirectly through such things as rising insurance premiums or tax dollars spent on mental health services. Finally, if self-esteem does span a continuum as was mentioned earlier, then it may also tell us something about how life is lived at the other, healthier end and the positive psychology that addresses it.

In addition to the meaning of self-esteem at the lived level of everyday life, a second reason for taking another look at self-esteem concerns several events that seem to be creating important changes in the field. One of them, for instance, involves challenging basic assumptions of self-esteem work in a way that is giving rise to substantial growth in research and theoretical activity. Although the historical roots of self-esteem run deep and long, until the 1960s they were relatively quiet and, at times, almost hidden. After James, self-esteem appeared to recede from the academic stage, only to be taken up by psychodynamic theorists and clinicians, most notably Alfred Adler (1927) and Karen Horney (1937). No doubt, much of the low profile that self-esteem occupied in social science during these middle years had to do with the dominance of behaviorism, which eschewed such phenomena as consciousness and instead focused on the observable (Harter, 1999; Mruk, 1999).

However, a sudden eruption of interest in self-esteem and related phenomena occurred in the mid-1960s, somewhat analogous to what biologists call the “Cambrian Explosion,” which is a segment of geological time when life suddenly diversified into many forms all over the planet. For self-esteem, this period was led by such figures as Stanley Coopersmith (1959, 1967), who began to look at self-esteem from a learning theory perspective and in the laboratory. Carl Rogers (1951, 1961) explored self-esteem from a humanistic perspective and created considerable interest in its therapeutic possibilities, as well as how genuine self-esteem facilitates living a healthy, authentic, or optimal existence. Around that time, Morris Rosenberg (1965) developed a 10-item, easy-to-administer self-esteem survey that became the “gold standard” for self-esteem research. Indeed, it may have been used in as much as a fourth of all the considerable research that exists on self-esteem today (Tafarodi & Swann Jr., 1995). Finally during this rather amazing period in the development of the field, Nathaniel Branden (1969) introduced self-esteem to popular culture through his best selling book, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. All of these things and more occurred in just
a 10-year period, and their impact was so great that it is still reverberating throughout the field today.

During the late-1980s to mid-1990s, two converging forces worked together to push the social significance of self-esteem into a much larger social arena. One of them originated with a group of academicians and politicians in California who emphasized to the general public the possibility of a link between individual self-esteem and major social problems, such as substance abuse, welfare, and teen pregnancy. As Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos said,

The well-being of society depends on the well-being of its citizenry. . . .
The more particular proposition that forms our enterprise here is that many, if not most, of the problems plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society. (1989, p. 1)

Perhaps in response to the zeitgeist of the time, maybe as a result of the high profile from which this group benefited, or simply because it seemed to make so much “common sense,” this position generated a broad base of political and social support. For the first time, self-esteem work received considerable financial backing. Like never before, interest in self-esteem made its way to other parts of society, particularly into the educational setting (Beane, 1991; Damon, 1995). At the same time, self-help and popular psychology markets got aboard the self-esteem bandwagon and spread interest in the topic to even wider social arenas, including the media. The result of such a concatenation of events was a dramatic rise in programs aimed at enhancing self-esteem in primary school systems and a significant increase in the number of books and discussions on self-esteem throughout the nation. In short, the large but once quiet field of self-esteem achieved social significance through what is now commonly known as the “self-esteem movement.”

However, popular interest is a double-edged sword. In addition to obvious benefits, such as more research funding and more people working in the field, bringing a scientific concept to the public forum can also result in negative forms of attention. The most important of these appears to have been a second, countervailing, social force operating on self-esteem during this period that took the form of a backlash against the topic. Early signs of what might be called “self-esteem bashing” or even an “anti-self-esteem movement” began to appear in social commentaries with eye-catching titles such as, “The Trouble with Self-Esteem” (Leo, 1990) or “Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good” (Krauthammer, 1990) that appeared in popular weekly news magazines. Such criticism of self-esteem spread to various segments of the popular media during the remainder of the 1990s (Johnson, 1998; Leo, 1998). However, a more