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Culture, Cognition and Behavior in the Pursuit of Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Self-esteem research, arguably the largest field of research in the history of social science, has devoted much of its efforts to the idea that self-esteem causes a broad range of behavioral and social problems, but has failed to produce strong, consistent evidence for most claims. However, this research has conceptual and methodological problems, including a limited understanding of the role of culture, and the assumption that global levels of self-esteem are the main causal mechanism of interest. This paper argues that self-esteem motivated behavior may be better understood as socio-culturally contextualized pursuits of valued identities, which are difficult to understand without considering their social and cultural conditions. Self-esteem therefore lies at the intersection of culture and cognition, and it is argued that an interdisciplinary approach to self-esteem pursuits could be beneficial. A way to reconcile constructionist views of identity with a cognitive self is then suggested and discussed. It is possible, by drawing on models of neurocognition, to think of a cognitive self as performed, context-dependent, and emergent rather than fixed, internal, and expressed. Finally, the paper discusses the social contingencies and consequences of self-esteem pursuits in relation to research issues such as aggression, stratification, crime, masculinity, and political attitudes.

Keywords: Cognitive sociology, Culture, Cognition, Self-esteem, Identity, Interdisciplinary theory

1. Introduction

The interaction between culture and cognition has long been a black box of human behavior, no doubt a consequence of the conventional compartmentalization of culture and cognition research in academia. In recent decades, however, some researchers have identified new ways of bridging this research. In particular, growing enthusiasm has followed DiMaggio's (1997) seminal paper on the prospect of a sociology of culture and cognition, and resulted in special issues of *Poetics* (Cerulo 2010a), the *European Journal for Social Theory* (Strydom 2007), and *Sociological Forum* (Cerulo 2014). These ambitions are fueled by the realization that “*the convergence of perspectives is too striking and the complementarity of research questions and research skills too fortuitous to let such an opportunity for multidisciplinary synergy pass unexploited*” (DiMaggio 2002:280). This paper will explore such an opportunity for synergy, using self-esteem theory as a case where the interaction of culture and cognition has been overlooked.

In contrast to traditional cognitive sciences,¹ dedicated to the universal aspects of cognition, a cognitive sociology highlights the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of cognition.² Cognitive sociology has largely focused on the relationship between culture and cognition, for example in the important theoretical and methodological implications of adopting a dual process view of culture (see Vaisey 2009). In the same vein, culture has mainly been represented by practice theories (in particular that of Bourdieu 1990) and toolkit theories (see Swidler 1986).

This paper deviates from the previous literature by introducing a constructionist perspective in cognitive sociology. Despite being highly influential in cultural sociology, constructionist views of culture in action have thus far been largely absent from the emerging cognitive sociology. At first sight constructionism may appear incommensurable

¹ Cognitive sciences here refer to disciplines such as cognitive psychology, neurocognition, and artificial intelligence research.

² “Cognition” is used in the broad sense of the cognitive sciences and includes intuition, automatic and sub-conscious processes and processes intertwined with emotions.

with the cognitive sciences, but this impression is perhaps more a symptom of what DiMaggio (1997:264) called different “modal intellectual styles,” frameworks, and terminology, than a symptom of fundamentally incompatible ideas.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore possible bridges between the constructionist notion of performed identities and cognition in self-esteem pursuits. There are three intentions behind this. First, to broaden the horizons of a sociology of culture and cognition. Second, to contribute to self-esteem research by showing ways in which socio-cultural factors mediate the relationship between self-esteem and behavior. Third, to show sociologists that the concept of self-esteem gives us access to a wealth of research that helps us to understand how emotion and cognition motivate the pursuit of certain identities. The paper approaches the unexplored opportunities of psychological self-esteem research, and treats this research as a case to be examined from a cognitive sociological perspective.

Self-esteem research has been a part of psychology for well over a century now. Its introduction is commonly attributed to William James (1890), who simply considered self-esteem to be the balance of one’s success divided by one’s pretensions. After an estimated 35 000 scientific publications on the topic (Zeigler-Hill 2013) since then, self-esteem research is arguably one of the largest research topics in the history of the social sciences (Scheff and Fearon 2004).

The notion of self-esteem has nonetheless received limited attention outside of psychology (Leary 2002). Yet self-esteem has often been thought to involve social achievements and judgments, and even James (1890) promoted the importance of recognition from others. Self-esteem is also closely related to, yet distinct from, many traditional sociological notions such as social capital and status, and concepts such as recognition (Honneth 1995) and the presentation of the self (Goffman 1959).

What makes self-esteem distinct from these sociological concepts is that self-esteem refers to and focuses on primarily mental processes, which in turn are intertwined with socio-cultural processes. In self-esteem research, the concept is commonly defined as *an evaluative attitude towards the self* (Rosenberg 1965). This puts the emphasis on cognitive and emotional aspects and situates self-esteem inside the mind of the actor. Self-esteem attitudes may of course involve one’s ideas about others’ evaluative attitudes towards

one's own self, attitudes one does not necessarily share, but the interpretation of the social relationship is mental. Self-esteem is treated here as an abstract category, encompassing different self-conscious emotions such as pride and shame (see Scheff and Fearon 2004), and their associated cognitive evaluation processes (see Tracy and Robins 2004). However, this micro-foundation in cognition and emotion does not make self-esteem less of a socio-cultural phenomenon in practice (see section 2).

The idea that self-esteem is a cause and/or effect of socio-cultural processes, has been the basis of much empirical research. During its relatively long history, self-esteem has been thought to be involved, perhaps primarily, in many "social problems" (c.f. Mecca et al. 1989). However, despite sizeable research efforts, evidence linking self-esteem to specific behaviors remains limited at best, which has led some researchers to express skepticism about the causal capacity of self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 2003). It is important to note here that there are significant limits to mainstream self-esteem research. In addition to methodological and conceptual issues (c.f. Baumeister et al. 2003), most self-esteem research has neglected cultural and social aspects (Scheff and Fearon 2004), and has treated self-esteem as an intra-psychological phenomenon (Leary 2002). Furthermore, most of this research shares the problematic presumption that the central causal mechanism of self-esteem motivated behavior is a relatively stable global attitude, which can be described as a bi-directional vector or level (c.f. Hoelter 1986; Smelser 1989).

As Crocker and Park (2004) pointed out, it might be more fruitful to study what different people's self-esteem is contingent on and how they attempt to pursue those contingencies. In contrast to mainstream self-esteem research, research on the contingencies of self-esteem pursuits "*is still in its infancy*" (Crocker et al. 2004:174). A whole new range of questions opens up if we shift the focus from self-esteem as a vector-like trait before or after action towards what people believe they need to do to be persons of value. A cultural and sociological perspective must then be added in addition to the psychological to make sense of where people get their ideals from, how people's pursuits rely on a social reproduction of values, how environment and social interaction facilitate or hinder certain pursuits, and how people understand and evaluate their selves using cultural schemas.

This paper explores the relationship between self-esteem and behavior from an interdisciplinary perspective, and attempts to integrate individual desires to be a person-of-value with the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of pursuing those desires. The paper is divided into three parts. First, the state of self-esteem research and some of its major challenges are briefly reviewed. Next, this paper argues for a shift in focus towards the question of what identities people value and pursue, and how they try to enact them. This part also addresses the challenge of reconciling the cognitive self with a constructionist view of identity as performed. Finally, the socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of three distinct aspects of self-esteem pursuits are discussed in relation to both micro- and macro-level social problems.

2. The challenges of self-esteem research

Self-esteem, or the lack thereof, has been hypothesized to be involved in many social problems including prejudice, crime, violence, educational performance, alcohol and drug use, adolescent drinking and smoking, and adolescent engagement in early sex (c.f. Baumeister et al. 2003; Mecca et al. 1989; Mruk 1995; O'Brien et al. 2006). Despite the extraordinary number of studies, reviews have raised concerns about the weak, inconsistent, or nonexistent correlations between self-esteem and behavior, with few exceptions.³

Taken at face value, the lack of results mentioned above casts doubt on the causal capacity of self-esteem, which has led some authors to question the value of policy implementations and self-help literature intended to raise self-esteem (e.g. Baumeister et al. 2003). This conclusion suggests that theoretical and everyday intuitions about the importance of self-esteem have been wrong all along. The highly influential sociometer theory has, for example, taken such a position and argues that people are not concerned with self-esteem but with “relational value,” for which self-esteem is but a subjective

³ Possible exceptions include an increased tendency to take initiative, criticize group decisions, persist despite failure, and take risks (Baumeister et al. 2003).

gauge without consequences (Leary and Downs 1995; Leary 2005). In contrast to this perspective, other researchers maintain that “*self-esteem is of enormous importance in people’s lives*” (Crocker et al. 2004:174) and argue that presuming that self-esteem is without consequence would be premature. There is indeed reason to question how strong a conclusion we can draw from the current empirical data. An alternative interpretation to the lack of results is that self-esteem has been approached in limited ways.

2.1. *Methodological and conceptual issues*

Scheff and Fearon (2004) have, among others, criticized the widespread use of self-report measures of self-esteem as a methodological dead end that neglects implicit, emotional and social aspects. The most common instrument (Baumeister et al. 2003), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965), has ten items that in one way or another ask how the participants generally feel about themselves. However, simply asking people about their self-esteem is highly problematic. In addition to the common difficulties of self-report instruments, self-esteem is notorious for the arsenal of self-deceptive mechanisms people employ to create positive illusions for themselves (c.f. Taylor and Brown 1988). There is further reason to believe that even accurately reported self-esteem is significantly different from, or a partial aspect of, the evaluative attitudes people have towards themselves.

Self-esteem researchers have for some time differentiated between explicit (reported or rationalized) and implicit (intuitive or subconscious) self-esteem, which are likely to be relatively independent of each other (c.f. DeHart et al. 2006). If one accepts this uncontroversial differentiation, then self-report instruments do not measure self-esteem even if they were entirely accurate. Instead, they are instruments that measure explicit self-esteem, but not a totality of self-evaluative attitudes. Either way, post hoc accounts of oneself also lack the emotional component of attitudes that may be more prevalent in situ.

These self-reports may be more attuned to measuring self-esteem as an outcome or component of self-perception rather than as an affective motivator.⁴

Another issue is that self-report instruments are intended to measure global self-esteem, which is then tested for correlation with specific behaviors. It may not be reasonable to expect strong correlations from such a generic construct as global self-esteem, which is thought to influence a vast amount of behavior (Hoelter 1986; Smelser 1989). Domain-specific measures of self-esteem have indeed provided stronger correlations, and shown that people differ significantly in their contingencies of self-esteem (Crocker and Wolfe 2001).

A related presumption is that self-esteem is thought to operate as a one-dimensional scale, or as a volume (i.e. high or low; more or less), which is assumed to be the causal mechanism of behavior. It is, for example, commonly assumed that low self-esteem may lead to deviance (Baumeister et al. 2003; Gecas and Burke 1995). But even if levels of self-esteem are meaningful abstractions of general tendencies, the causal interaction between different levels of self-esteem and behavior is likely complex and indirect, and so measures cannot be expected to yield strong and consistent results (Crocker and Blanton 1999; Smelser 1989). To illustrate: if some individuals with low self-esteem use deviant behavior to boost self-esteem (c.f. Kaplan 1982), for example by impressing peers or illegally attaining status items, then “successful deviance” would increase self-esteem. Depending on this coping strategy’s “success,” self-esteem levels may remain low, reach average levels, or it might even reach above average levels. Consequently, one cannot expect correlations between low self-esteem and deviance to be strong or consistent.

The problem of correlating general levels of self-esteem with specific behaviors has also been observed in empirical research. For example, high self-esteem has been correlated with both high and low levels of cheating on tests (Lobel and Levanon 1988), and with both bullying and defending victims of bullies (Salmivalli et al. 1999). Such

⁴ This is not to say that self-report data is irrelevant for self-esteem research, but that there are significant limits to the theoretical generalizations possible from negative results.

mixed results suggest that there are significant unobserved mechanisms between actual behavior and different levels of self-esteem. Therefore, there are large gaps left in our knowledge of how self-esteem translates into behavior, and at this point it may be premature to assume that self-esteem is irrelevant.

2.2. *Limits of monodisciplinary evolutionary approaches*

Sociometer theory is the spearhead of a quest by some self-esteem theorists to find an evolutionary function for self-esteem, based on the presumption that the concept of self-esteem is a universal entity that must have a reproductive advantage (Leary and Downs 1995). There is little doubt that self-esteem involves evolutionary advantageous cognitive functions, such as the need to belong, or the automatic monitoring of one's social standing and emotional distress in case of social threat (see Leary 2005)

However, it may be unwarranted to expect to find a specific, delimited function which corresponds to a highly abstract and culturally specific construct such as self-esteem. Pursuing this sort of function risks reifying the idea of self-esteem as universal and promotes a monodisciplinary psychological approach to culturally contingent behavior. As demonstrated by Heine et al. (1999), the idea of self-esteem is not universal but rather culturally specific, and this specific way of understanding the self and the need for high self-esteem seems to be fairly recent (Baumeister 1987). Furthermore, contrary to basic emotions, self-conscious emotions do not have discreet, universally recognized facial expressions, which strongly suggests a high degree of cultural plasticity (Tracy and Robins 2004).

Since self-esteem as a concept and self-conscious emotions are culturally contingent it follows that, although evolutionary functions may play an important role, an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes an interaction of culture and cognition is necessary to fully understand self-esteem. As a final point, it is likely that survival-oriented stimulus-appraisal-affect models are too simplistic for self-conscious emotions, which require relatively complex cognitive processes (Tracy and Robins 2004).

2.3. *Culture in cognition*

Despite the recognition that culture determines what it means to be a person of value, even from evolutionary theorists (c.f. Leary and Downs 1995), few attempts have been made to use theories and research of culture in self-esteem research. It is easy to illustrate the necessity of incorporating a conceptualization of culture that can account for heterogeneous cognitive content, such as ideas and values, in self-esteem research. Imagine a male bodybuilder on a competition stage, and then imagine a male high-fashion model on a catwalk. Both individuals represent an ideal of male appearance since they both made it to the stage, yet the two ideals are remarkably different and were pursued in very different ways. If pursuing such ideals is motivated by a desire for self-esteem, it is of primary importance to understand how and why these specific ideals were pursued. It is not difficult to see how cultural ideas of what makes an esteemed self may be more important than levels of self-esteem for the specific behavioral outcomes.

In addition to defining ideals, culturally reproduced knowledge and ideas about the self and the world are critically involved in beliefs about what pursuits are viable, as well as in evaluations of the self. The emotional significance of an event for the self depends on cognitive attributions of causation, beliefs about how the world works, of who or what caused the event to happen, and whether it was due to some special circumstance, or due to a permanent trait of the self (Tracy and Robins 2004). These attributions employ cultural schemas of causality.

The apparent paradox that African Americans, a socially disadvantaged group, report slightly higher self-esteem than European Americans is a good empirical example of how cultural knowledge affects cognition. To determine the cause of others' discrimination, people deploy socio-culturally reproduced ideas of how the world works, and whether stigmatization affects self-esteem negatively depends on whether the discrimination is understood as justified and deserved, or as prejudiced and without any legitimate basis (Crocker and Blanton 1999).

In contrast to the relatively high self-esteem of African Americans, obese individuals often share resentment towards obesity with those who stigmatize them, presumably because they share similar cultural ideas and values about obesity (Crocker and Blanton 1999). Another excellent example of the importance of culturally contingent cognitive

content lies in the relationship between gender-conformity and self-esteem, which have paradoxically been both positively and negatively correlated. Good and Sanchez (2010) have shown that the relationship in practice depends on whether one attributes one's own conformity to autonomous internal motivation or to external pressure from others. The "paradox" of African Americans' reported self-esteem and the mixed correlations with gender conformity hint at how important cultural ideas are to cognitive outcomes, and imply that self-esteem research may have focused excessively on levels of self-esteem.

3. From having to pursuing self-esteem

Re-thinking the relationship between self-esteem and behavior requires a shift in thinking, given the issues discussed in the previous section, from the current focus on the level of self-esteem one "has," to a focus on the desire for self-esteem. Instead of starting out with global levels of trait self-esteem as the main focus of interest in relation to behavior, it may be more productive to study *how* people pursue self-esteem, and *what* they seek to become by doing so (see Crocker and Park 2004 for a similar argument). This section departs from the self-esteem motive and argues that self-esteem is primarily involved in behaviors that are identity-constructive, since desire for positive attitudes towards oneself requires successful enactment of an esteemed self. To better understand this, I argue that a performance-theoretical approach to self-esteem pursuits may be advantageous, but only if it can be reconciled with a notion of an inner cognitive self.

3.1. Self-esteem as motivator of identity management

Contemporary research supports James' (1890) original claim that people are strongly motivated to pursue self-esteem. Bushman et al. (2011) have, for example, concluded that American college students prefer self-esteem boosting activities over their favorite sexual activity, their favorite food, receiving a paycheck, or seeing a best friend. Sheldon et al. (2001) found the impact on self-esteem to be the strongest predictor of whether people found an event satisfying or not. This is perhaps not surprising, as two of the few strong correlations of self-esteem include a .47 correlation ($n=13118$ across 31 countries) with life

satisfaction (Diener and Diener 1995) and a $-.66$ correlation with depression (Leitzel 2000).⁵

The object of the self-esteem motive is per definition to achieve or enact a certain esteemed self, or identity. Establishing an esteemed self-representation is necessary for positive self-conscious emotions (Tracy and Robins 2004), which in turn are a strong source of motivation, for example, in social interaction (Leary 2007). It has previously been argued that self-esteem may be a central mechanism in identity-formation (c.f. Abrams and Hogg 1990; Burke and Cast 2002) and that the self-esteem motive may be the central source of behavioral motivation (Crocker et al. 2003; c.f. Kaplan 1982), but not in conjunction with identity theories used in the sociology of culture with the ambition of bridging divergent disciplines and fields of research.

In order to understand what people believe they “*need to be or do to have value and worth as a person*” (Crocker et al. 2004:174), which motivates the pursuit of self-esteem, we need a framework of concepts which emphasize (1) the enactment of identities through behavior, (2) *becoming*, rather than *being*, esteemed, and (3) that self-esteem pursuits and self-conscious emotions are contingent on meeting certain culturally defined criteria. The constructionist notion of performativity provides a good starting point as a such framework for understanding self-esteem pursuits. Performance theory puts emphasis on peoples’ attempts at becoming someone; it asserts that identity (and thus, self-esteem) is not something which is expressed from inside, but enacted in behavior (c.f. Butler 1990).

To say that identities are performative has two simultaneous meanings which are both highly relevant for understanding self-esteem pursuits: (1) identities are performed much in the same sense actors perform roles, and (2) this enactment can be ascribed a degree of performance (e.g. efficiency), in relation to certain socio-culturally defined criteria of identities and of success. Performance theory could in turn benefit from employing the desire for self-esteem as a motive for performances. This is not entirely straight forward,

⁵ A recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies indicates that low self-esteem precedes depression (Sowislo and Orth 2013).

however, as performativity usually refer to external bodily action and social interaction while neglecting the role of cognition in self-construction.

3.2. *Reconciling a constructionist identity with the cognitive self*

A major challenge to an identity-performance approach to self-esteem is the apparent incompatibility of identities as enacted by performative actions, and an inner cognitive self. Performance theorists reject the idea of a stable inner self, as “*identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results*” (Butler 1990:25). The self, however, is a fundamental part of self-esteem, and cognition is necessarily involved in self-evaluation, especially in the absence of physical others. Furthermore, both the self and self-esteem have some degree of stability over time (c.f. Demo 1992), which means that people carry some kind of tendency with them from one performance to another. I argue that a constructionist view of identity is not incommensurable with a cognitive self and cognitive dispositions and that this apparent incompatibility can be overcome by employing parallel distributed processing -models of neurocognition (see for example Smith 1996).

For clarity of argument, we must distinguish between two distinct phenomena referred to as “self.” (1) *Self-awareness* is the experience of being a person, including the experience of a coherent, situated, and stable first-person perspective and the experience of agency, as well as the capacity to differentiate oneself from the surrounding world. (2) *Self-schemas* (sometimes self-concept or self-representation), on the other hand, are cognitive models of the self, which can be used as objects of reflexive, conscious, cognition or as mechanisms for the sub-conscious processing of self-relevant information. Self-schemas model the unique properties of the self and may include for example traits and dispositions, roles, its history and relationships, the own body, and attitudes.

By making this distinction, and viewing self-schemas as learned knowledge, identity and self overlap. Although some authors would argue that the self has a “*central quality that distinguishes self from identity*” (Owens and Samblanet 2006:227), the self-schema and identity are treated here as equal in cognition. There is an ongoing debate in neurocognition on whether there is some kind of fundamentally unique nature to self-

schemas, but recent research suggests that self-schemas operate like any other cognitive schema (Apps and Tsakiris 2014; Legrand and Ruby 2009). If this is the case, and the self does follow the same mechanisms as other schema, then constructionist and neurocognitive views of the self have more in common with each other than what meets the eye, perhaps even more than with a stable and central traditional psychological self.

It is long since established that cognitive schemas, such as knowledge and memories, are not entities that lie dormant in the mind as “*stored-like items buried in a time capsule*” (Smith 1996:901), but are actively re-constructed every time they are recalled (see Bartlett 1938). So-called “connectionist” or “parallel distributed processing” models have further enhanced our understanding of how specific schemata are constructed through the spread of activation across neural networks (c.f. Smith 1996). In these models, the spread of activation which forms meaningful pattern stems from cues in ongoing experiences (e.g. context, sensory perceptions, and thoughts), leads to a flow of neural activation. The direction and final pattern of this flow is mediated by a neurocognitive make-up primed by previous experiences (i.e. through increased strength of connections and lowered node threshold levels).⁶ Each node in these networks represents a single bit of information, the smallest building block of schemas, which is meaningless by itself. When the spread of activation forms a pattern, however, a meaningful schema is constituted. The patterns that form a schema are not delimited by the shape of the network and do not take a pre-determined shape with clear boundaries, but are prototypical in character and may shift with the flow of activation from interconnected clusters. Consequently, a cognitive schema exists in its specific form only in the moment it is used, and as a product of a (re-)constructive, contextually situated process.

The input of the context is vital in determining how the specific schema is constructed as cues from the context provide the initial points of activation in a network, and cognition is therefore always situated and context-dependent (Cerulo 2010b; DiMaggio 1997;

⁶ Compare with “comparative/normative fit” and “personal readiness” in self-categorization theory (Turner and Onorato 1998).

Lizardo and Strand 2010; Vaisey 2013). This context of cognition is socio-culturally organized in multiple ways, including the structure, function and esthetics of the physical environment, networks of social relationships, institutionalized practices, and so on.

To illustrate the influence of context on cognition: by walking into (or even thinking of) a gym in Copenhagen, you are likely to activate (i.e. reconstruct) roughly similar schemas for understanding how the space works as you would at a gym in London. This happens because the neural network receives similar patterns of input cues from the institutionalized environment and practices that gyms share (e.g. dumbbells, exercise machines, people doing crunches, fitness-symbols). The context is thus an important source of stability over time (DiMaggio 1997). Since schemas reflect patterns repeatedly observed in the environment, stable socio-cultural institutions provides stability to the repeated reproduction of certain schemas, including self-schemas⁷.

Since past and present socio-cultural influence crucially influence the shape of schemas, and which schemas is activated at any time, it is difficult to overstate the importance of culture and context. Although basic neurological functioning, such as associative learning mechanisms, may be universal, the mechanisms of cognition are shaped by and enacted in culture-specific contexts.

3.3. *An emergent self*

Observing one's own behaviors and actions is a vital source of input for constructing self-schemas (c.f. Apps and Tsakiris 2014; Turner and Onorato 1998; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981). This is consistent with the central proposition of performance theory: that identities are enacted by performative actions. However, by drawing on cognition research the notion of performativity can also be extended to view cognitive processes as performative since processes like expectations, attributions, and comparisons influence the enacted self-schema. As we have seen in the case of race and gender, attributions of causation are

⁷ This account of fits well with the idea that self-esteem stability is at least in part a product of environmental stability (c.f. Demo 1992).

crucial to self-understanding and evaluation (Crocker and Blanton 1999; Good and Sanchez 2010), and should be considered an active part of self-construction. Once again, imagine a bodybuilder posing on a stage (a performative act) who now receives a negative rating from the judges (a co-performative act). This might interpellate a self-schema of a failed body builder. However, cognitive actions, such as remembering previous success or attributing the bad rating to biased judges, can intervene to maintain a positive attitude towards the self.

In conclusion, it is possible to conceive a cognitive self that is compatible with constructionist performance theories, and to combine constructionist and self-esteem research as long as cognitive schemas are considered constructed. This process-emergent self fulfills the need for stable tendencies of enactment due to (1) stability of the context, and (2) experience-shaped neurological mediation of activation. We might say that “the self,” as a singular, discreet, and definitive entity, emerges and *exists only at the moment of interpellation*; it is constituted by a pattern of neurological activation, which is a function of input from the physical and social context as well as from self-performative behavior and cognitions, mediated by experience-primed neurocognitive dispositions.

4. Socio-cultural contingencies and consequences of self-esteem pursuits

This part explores how self-esteem pursuits are entangled in social phenomena and also mediated by them through exemplifying and discussing some socio-cultural contingencies and consequences. For these purposes, we can distinguish between three analytically distinct aspects necessarily involved in the pursuit of self-esteem: *self-performances*, *identity investments*, and the *reproduction of cultural schemas*.⁸ Note that this is an analytical distinction between three aspects that overlap in practice; people often perform a certain self at the same time as they reinforce an identity and reproduce cultural schemas.

⁸ DiMaggio (1997) suggested the term *cultural schema* to denote the smallest unit of analysis in research on culture. The term has a special appeal for interdisciplinary ambitions, because it is analogous to the *cognitive schema*.

4.1. *Self-performances, interaction, and recognition*

Self-performances refer to any act, behavioral or cognitive, which in the immediate moment and context interpellates a self-schema, with or without intention, audience, or successful enactment of a desired identity. The relevance of specific performative acts for self-esteem varies between individuals (Crocker et al. 2004) and cultures (Heine et al. 1999), but any self-esteem contingent action is likely to be strongly motivated by a desire to achieve or avoid self-conscious emotions.

Self-performances are often a part of social interaction, and self-esteem has been shown to be strongly influenced by, for example, social exclusion. It is closely connected with a desire to be positively judged by others, even for individuals who claim that this is not the case (c.f. Leary 2005). Beyond conveying direct judgment of others' performances, people actively co-perform each other's identities (again, compare with actors on a stage) by supporting or preventing performances.

Finally, social interaction is important for self-esteem because social recognitions of performances provide validation of their success, irrespective of observers' value judgments. The distinction between what other people value and what they recognize is critical to understanding self-esteem. Crocker et al. (2004) divided self-esteem contingencies into internal and external sources of esteem, such as virtue contra others' approval. Only external sources of esteem may rely on the value judgments of others, but I argue that both internal and external self-esteem sources rely on others' recognition of performances. From a performance perspective, where the self is not given prior to performances, recognition may serve as a source of external, "mind-independent" feedback or verification of one's performances (c.f. Burke and Cast 2002; Mead 1934).

Thus, even if other people do not share one's esteem of a certain virtue, one may still depend on feedback from the recognition of others to be sure of *being* such a person that conforms with said value. Simply put, if other people always seem genuinely unconvinced of one's character it might get difficult to maintain such a view of oneself. As Mead (1934:68) put it, "we are unconsciously addressing ourselves as others address us," a claim that goes beyond value judgments. As a source of performance verification, social recognition may also be important for self-esteem in private as a consequence of people's ability to view themselves through the eyes of generalized others. A cognitive schema of a

generalized other (c.f. Mead 1934) may be used to simulate others' evaluations of self-performances, and thus provide external self-verification even in private (c.f. Berg 2008).

Studies of misrecognition of self-performances indicate the importance of recognition and its role in self-esteem-related behavior. Maass et al. (2003) told heterosexual men that their results on a personality test were typical of the female distribution. The test subjects were subsequently much more likely than the control group to sexually harass a female chat-user in a rigged task. Two factors significantly increased this effect: if the subject had previously self-identified as masculine, and if the female chat-user was presented as a feminist and ambitious professional. Another study found that while heterosexual men who publicly violated gender norms reported heightened discomfort and showed decreased implicit self-evaluations, this effect could be negated if they afterwards communicated a heterosexual identity to their audience (Prewitt-Freilino and Bosson 2008). These studies indicate the close and complex relationship between self-performances and others' recognition. They suggest that people may attempt to manage self-esteem threats by re-performing a desired self, sometimes through aggressive behavior, instead of ignoring the misrecognition. Consequently, because of the importance of recognition the possibility of pursuing self-esteem will depend on the relationship and interaction between performer and observer (Weisbuch et al. 2009). It is not difficult to imagine how a popular high school student may find it easier to gain recognition for a particular performance than a bullied student would.

4.2. Identity investments and the reproduction of disadvantage

Rawls (1971) argued that self-esteem is one of the foremost goods that a just society should distribute equally, but in practice are the possibilities to pursue self-esteem unequally distributed throughout societies. This is not to say that levels of self-esteem are unequally distributed in a predictable way, but that the specific ways in which one may become a person-of-value are significantly influenced by one's social position (c.f. Crocker and Blanton 1999). This is not simply a matter of immediate self-performances, but to a large extent a question of available resources and opportunities.

The ability to enact a certain self relies on prior *investments* that enable or support certain self-performances. Economists Bénabou and Tirole (2011) used the term *identity investments* to designate acts of long-term identity-construction. People build their identities over time, which is to say that they prepare for certain performances, for example, through educational attainment or by displaying what may appear to be irrational behavior to maintain or reinforce an identity, for example as trustworthy, which necessitates consistent display of loyalty even at one's own expense. In the context of this paper, identity investments are the things people do to make certain performances possible or easier, and some performances would be impossible or difficult without them, such as becoming a doctor without the right education.

The notion of identity investments adds both a long-term temporal perspective to performative acts, and the insight that the social environment does not only provide values and norms, but also resources and opportunities that differ in character and the possibilities they confer. To understand how the general desire for self-esteem is linked to specific behaviors, I argue that we should include “economist” view on the relationship between past investments and current possibilities. Not only does this perspective tell us something about why people do specific self-performances, it also shows that the pursuit of self-esteem involve long-term efforts, of doing things today to enable tomorrow's esteemed self, which further highlights the complex relationship between self-esteem and behavior. The emphasis on investments and resources also brings attention to the fact that resources and opportunities are socially distributed in unequal ways, which can be expected to influence how the desire for a valuable self plays out in actual behavior.

Bénabou and Tirole's (2011) research is particularly concerned with situations where people reproduce disadvantaged identities⁹ and reject beneficial alternatives because of

⁹ The pursuit of self-esteem is not only costly for the socially disadvantaged. Pursuing external contingencies of self-esteem in particular, with a concern for the how the self is interpreted by others, may for example lead to vulnerability to depression (Sargent et al. 2006), heavy episodic drinking (Moeller and Crocker 2009), and hurt personal relationships (Crocker and Canevello 2008, Moeller, Crocker & Bushman 2009).

prior investments in the disadvantaged identities. For example, significant amounts of non-transferable resources invested in a disadvantaged identity may lead people to keep investing in the disadvantaged identity to justify their previous investments, despite marginal returns. This is not only a matter of the non-transferability of these investments, but also of maintaining self-esteem and esteem for viable future selves. Pursuing an alternative identity could devalue the current, old or future self enough to trigger anxiety or at least diffuse demotivation. Such a shift of ideals may also require learning new skills and lifestyles, which may appear risky or difficult and thus threaten one's self-esteem with the risk of failure and shame.

The desire for self-esteem may therefore be a motivational mechanism involved in the (re)production of disadvantaged identities that people are unwilling to forgo, especially with insecure, difficult, or limited opportunities for change. As a concrete micro-level example, consider an obese individual who manages his or her self-esteem by adopting a non-judgmental attitude towards unhealthy food. What may appear as a simple choice in the present moment to change one's habits is actually entrenched by previous actions that limit who one can become and what kind of self-esteem one can viably pursue. It is impossible to simply choose to perform an esteemed self contingent on a fit body without having one, and to be able to satisfy the self-esteem motive would require much effort and long term investments. However, valuing a fitness ideal enough to pursue it would also devalue the own body and consequently cause inescapable anxiety about the body. Furthermore, suddenly saying that healthy eating and exercise are important puts one's past character, habits, and justifications in a very bad light.

This is not to say that it is impossible to change, but that it would require much motivation and sufficient coping strategies to deal with the demotivation and anxiety of starting off with a negative self-value. Such an individual would have to struggle with not only limited opportunities to feel good about the self, but would likely be plagued by a strong negative attitude towards the self. Furthermore, the prospect of changing one's body to conform to fitness values would require a tremendous long-term investment of time and effort. Such an investment may be experienced as a highly demotivating, long-term and difficult, challenge compared to limited effort of rejecting fitness, and maintaining a non-judgmental attitude towards one's established habits; a much more attractive way to

manage self-esteem in the short term. The argument here is not that people always make a rational choice about these things, but rather an emotional weighting of anxiety, risks and viable futures.

The need to be esteemed and recognized by others is also important for the kind of identity that people come to invest in. With substantial investments in a secure but disadvantaged self-esteem contingency valued by peers, people may refrain from opportunities for social mobility, or even destroy them (Bénabou and Tirole 2011). For example, low educational achievements by some African-American students have been attributed to viewing educational effort as a part of “acting white” (see for example Austen-Smith and Fryer 2005). “Acting white” means to invest in and perform a “white identity,” of which educational efforts may be a part, which simultaneously devaluates the “black identities” of one’s peers if these are constructed in contrast to “acting white.” In response, one’s peers may not recognize any value in the educational effort, or even ascribe it negative value, as a social sanction against disloyalty, or to maintain their own self-esteem.

The desire for an esteemed self may thus be involved in the reproduction of segregation, as all social groups can be expected to reproduce identities and values that are relatively easy to maintain given the available resources and opportunities. This argument can be further extended to criminology through individual strain theory (Agnew 2001). When a discrepancy between available means (i.e. resources/opportunities) and culturally prescribed goals (i.e. valued identities) occurs, people tend to seek out alternative means to reach those goals, including crime and deviance. If an individual lacks resources or opportunities to pursue self-ideals in socio-culturally encouraged ways, for example due to structural discrimination or social stratification, then that individual is left little choice but (1) to change the means, by acquiring the necessary resources in illegitimate ways, or (2) change the goals to fit the available resources and opportunities by pursuing a deviant identity of a subculture which values the resources or investments already possessed (see Kaplan 1982 for a similar argument). Thus, the relationship between means and goals is not one-directional. The limited set of resources and opportunities available, may lead individuals towards certain ideals rather than others, to avoid the anxiety of self-

devaluation and seek alternative opportunities for self-esteem, at least if they are not heavily invested in and dependent on their previous identity.

Different identities have different characteristics and criteria, which may have consequences for how they are pursued or maintained. In an ethnographic study of street culture in Copenhagen, young immigrants from discriminated groups have been shown to harness respect through performing a “violence capital,” constructed as expressions of a personal trait (Kalkan 2015). An identity based on personal traits largely lacks a supportive social structure—contrary to, for example, a professorship, which is supported by a heavily institutionalized environment—and must therefore be constantly re-performed to be perceived as an actual personality trait. Such a self-esteem contingency is what has been called *fragile self-esteem*, which has often been considered a trait just like self-esteem levels, but may perhaps be better understood as a characteristic of the self-esteem contingency that one pursues.

Fragile self-esteem has been empirically linked to defensiveness and may, in combination with high explicit self-esteem, lead to aggression and even violence as a response to identity threats (Baumeister, et al. 1996; Sandstrom and Jordan 2008). In the study of Copenhagen street culture, this was commonly the case if people felt disrespected; if someone questioned another’s masculinity, an important source of esteem, then the only viable response was often to re-assert a masculine identity through aggression (Kalkan 2015).¹⁰

In the case of street culture, we thus have two viable explanations for “unprovoked” violence where self-esteem is a central mechanism. Firstly, violence may in itself be self-performative, and an identity investment (i.e. building a “violence capital”) motivated by a desire for esteem (i.e. “respect”). Secondly, threats that devalue important but fragile identities may be met with “self-defensive” violence. It is therefore important for researchers of violent subcultures to consider the role of self-esteem contingent identities,

¹⁰ Compare with Prewitt-Freilino and Bosson (2008) in section 4.1.

and it is important for researchers of aggressive individuals or groups to consider the criteria of self-performances and the role of recognition.

4.3. *Reproduction of cultural schemas*

Some self-esteem researchers are now studying domains of self-esteem contingency (Crocker et al. 2003) which vary between individuals and may better account for behavior than global self-esteem. Besides showing that different individuals seek self-esteem in different areas of life, the notion of contingency also puts emphasis on the criteria of successful self-esteem pursuits. The specific self-esteem performance criteria in any of the seven domains identified by Crocker et al. are, however, as diverse as culture is heterogeneous. Self-esteem contingent on “approval of others,” for example, could lead to entirely opposite behavior depending on who is seeking whose approval. Thus, considering the specific criteria and logics of culturally reproduced identities is necessary to fully understand self-esteem, and an interdisciplinary approach may therefore be required.

The pursuit of self-esteem is not only contingent on a personal performance capacity, recognition, available resources, and prior investments, but also on the reproduction and established legitimacy of *cultural schemas*. These schemas constitute possible identities, define their criteria, and ascribe some identities more value than others. Similar to identity investments, cultural schemas are key mechanisms in the pursuit of self-esteem since they define possible self-performances and their evaluation. However, contrary to investments or performances, cultural schemas are not individually achieved or maintained; while these schemas are essential for the possibilities of individual self-esteem pursuits, their power is collectively reproduced.

Since individual self-esteem relies on the continued collective reproduction of supra-individual schemas, it is likely that the self-esteem motive is involved in reproducing self-relevant cultural schemas without directly performing a certain self. Given that one’s self-esteem relies on certain schemas, their reproduction is a matter of indirect personal importance, which should make acts that reproduce or defy important schemas feel either appealing or repulsive (i.e. threatening). Shifting cultural schemas related to important

identities are therefore likely to induce some degree of affect, although perhaps not in the intense personal sense of self-conscious emotions such as pride or shame.

Because of the tendency of identity investments to develop into escalating commitments (Bénabou and Tirole 2011), people may become highly dependent on the reproduction and recognition of very specific cultural schemas. We can consequently expect similar reactions (intense emotional discomfort) from highly invested individuals in response to societal change as with other types of self-esteem threats, although without explicit self-relevant cognition. This is sociologically relevant since the only way to fight such threats, beyond denial or aggression towards implementations of change, is to engage in collective political action.¹¹ It is likely that self-esteem motives are important in the development of reactionary political attitudes, especially against progressive liberal politics which threaten to erode traditional societal values, as the emotional component develops into a political rationale such as racist or anti-feminist discourse (c.f. Kimmel 2013).

5. Conclusions

The theoretical arguments explored in this paper concur with the conclusion of Crocker et al. (2004). Over a decade later, research on self-esteem pursuits is still in its infancy, and it remains premature to assume that self-esteem is irrelevant for behavior. Self-esteem is arguably important in both individual behavior and social phenomenon, but the relationship between self-esteem and behavior could be better understood through interdisciplinary efforts that focus on the pursuit of self-esteem. The ways in which people pursue self-esteem appear to be highly influenced by socio-cultural factors—perhaps more so than by global levels of self-esteem—which are as of yet largely unexplored.

As for policy implications, this paper agrees with Baumeister et al. (2003) in that the widespread efforts to boost self-esteem levels through self-help, therapy, or policy are not scientifically well supported by theory or data; not because self-esteem is unimportant, but

¹¹ Studies have interestingly shown political conservatism to protect (explicit) self-esteem, see, for example, Van Hiel and Brebels (2011).

because global levels of self-esteem appear to be of limited importance to specific behavioral outcomes. There is little reason to target low self-esteem specifically, or to attempt to manipulate self-esteem levels in any other way, in order to prevent social problems. However, policy interventions that target risk groups to facilitate opportunities and resources for self-esteem pursuits in socially endorsed ways may very well be warranted. Assuming that everyone is strongly motivated to pursue self-esteem, it is possible to harness that desire in productive ways.

In terms of research recommendations, this paper concurs with Scheff and Fearon's (2004) call for more basic explorative and theoretical research. The need for further research is particularly salient in three areas: (1) critical examination of the concept of self-esteem and the presumptions of researchers, (2) theoretical research on the relationship between cultural and cognitive schemas, and (3) empirical research on the social and cultural contingencies and consequences of self-esteem pursuits, such as studies on the different types of resources available to different individuals and of how these resources are put to use. An example of an intriguing question here is whether limited opportunities or resources for self-esteem pursuits may play a role in depression, given its close relationship with low self-esteem (Leitzel 2000), and, if so, in what ways are the social environment and cultural context responsible for limiting these pursuits?

The synergic possibilities of converging research on culture and cognition are indeed "too fortuitous" to be left unexploited (DiMaggio 2002), and the unexplored opportunities available are seemingly many. This paper has addressed converging notions of construction in cognition and in culture as such an opportunity, where an interdisciplinary understanding of the self is possible, with the hopeful ambition of showing that self-esteem research is useful in constructionist research, and the other way around. While self-esteem researchers have much to gain from sociologists and other researchers of culture, the opposite is equally true; self-esteem provides a powerful motivator for actions with social consequences. This paper has shown that it is possible, not to mention beneficial, to construct bridges between widely different traditions such as neurocognition and post-structuralism, or fields such as self-esteem research and political attitudes research. If 21st-century social science can become truly cumulative, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary, a bright future with great advances might be within reach.

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