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## **Self-esteem in action: from direct causality to motive and mediator of self-performative action**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last decade, self-esteem research has been in “crisis” due to the lack of strong, consistent correlations between self-esteem and behavioral outcomes. Some researchers have taken the lack of results to indicate that self-esteem is inconsequential in many important areas of life; however, a model of direct causality between a single, general, self-esteem trait and specific behaviors may be unrealistic. This paper develops a model that specifies some of the factors influencing self-esteem–motivated behavior. The model shows that an interaction between catalytic factors determines how self-esteem influences behavior; that is, what “self-esteem” actually “does”. By clarifying the different ways in which self-esteem affects behavior, the model shows that conceptualizing self-esteem as a single passive variable with linear causal influence on behavior is inadequate and misleading. The puzzling and contradictory results from self-esteem research are argued to be the consequence of the misconceptualization and subsequent reification of self-esteem. Because self-esteem and self-concept are inseparable, as one is an attitude towards the other, self-esteem–motivated behavior is always self-performative. Therefore, future research and theory of self-esteem in action should focus on how people, through self-performative actions, attempt to enact, maintain, or defend a desired identity.

*I purposefully stayed away from studying self-esteem per se because I felt that I did not understand it. No matter how much I read, I always had the sense that I did not quite understand what self-esteem really did, and I was never sure whether this reflected my own ignorance or widespread confusion in the field.*

Mark Leary (2003, p. 270)

In 2003, leading self-esteem researchers (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs) published a comprehensive review on self-esteem research. The review was followed by a popular science article by the same authors, with a title that reflects the implication of the review: *Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth* (Baumeister et al, 2005). In the review, the authors found few strong, consistent correlations between self-esteem and behavior, which could mean that self-esteem has less impact on behavior than previously thought in important areas of life such as academic and work performance, interpersonal relationships, and deviance (Baumeister et al, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Self-esteem research is an interesting case study for researchers interested in a new general psychology for several reasons. First, self-esteem research is one of the largest fields of research in the entire social sciences, in terms of the range of substantive fields it has been studied in, as well as the number of published articles on the topic,<sup>2</sup> and as continuous research tradition with over a century-long history.<sup>3</sup> Besides the sheer scope of the scientific research, self-esteem is arguably one of the most well-known and influential social science concepts outside academia, as evidenced by countless self-help books and school interventions aimed at raising self-esteem.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few exceptions. People who report high self-esteem also report higher life-satisfaction. They may also be more persistent and take more initiative and more risks (Baumeister et al, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Zeigler-Hill (2013) estimated 35 000 publications on the topic of self-esteem.

<sup>3</sup> The origin of the scientific study of self-esteem in psychology is commonly attributed to James (1890).

However, self-esteem research is also an excellent example of mainstream “*dust-bowl quantitative empiricism*” (Valsiner, 2014b) in psychology, because it presents an exclusive preference for reductionist quantitative empiricism, is strongly anti-theoretical, and largely ignores research from other disciplines on relevant socio-cultural factors (Scheff & Fearon 2004; Valsiner 2014a). Despite its scope and influence, self-esteem research has painted itself into a methodological and theoretical corner.

The lack of theoretical sophistication and over-reliance on (self-reported) correlational studies has led to an unfortunate reification of the measured variable in mainstream self-esteem research, with the measured variable being treated as a property or essence of the human mind, rather than a product of it (see Valsiner, 2014b; Strandell, 2016). By treating “self-esteem” as a distinct and inherent part of the mind, rather than an abstract concept denoting an outcome of processes, contemporary researchers have largely skipped over the theory stage. Theory has largely been reduced either to a short definition of self-esteem, or to attempts of fitting observations with evolutionary reasoning, instead of trying to figure out what we mean by “self-esteem,” why people intuitively believe it to be important, or detailing plausible mechanisms. Both these approaches to “theory” effectively maintain a view of self-esteem that through more or less implicit presumptions mimics the self-esteem as an independent variable of direct causality. For example, self-esteem is generally assumed to have a mass or volume (it can be high or low, much or little) and it is often thought of as a global trait, yet is assumed to directly impact specific, concrete behaviors.

The failure of mainstream self-esteem research to produce results reflects its theoretical and methodological limitations. A viable alternative conclusion to the review of Baumeister et al. (2003) could therefore be that the current anti-theoretical approach to self-esteem research, relying on self-reports and correlational measures, has failed to model the character of self-esteem and capture its role in behavior. It may be this approach to psychological research that is debunked by the review, rather than people’s intuitions about the importance of self-esteem. Alternative models should therefore be produced for those who still believe

that self-esteem is important (e.g., Crocker, Luthanen & Sommers, 2004; Scheff & Fearon, 2004; Swann, Chang-Schneider & Larsen McCarty, 2007; Strandell, 2016).

This paper develops a model in which self-esteem is understood as a collection of attitudes motivating self-performative actions, and therefore in the long run also identity-building (see Strandell, 2016). The purpose of the model is to specify the “causal mechanisms” of self-esteem; or, in other words, to show what self-esteem “does”. This model reaffirms the idea that self-esteem has important consequences in people’s lives, but emphasizes that a catalytic interaction of factors determines how self-esteem influences behavior in ways which a model of direct causality would fail to identify (see Groff, 2004, 2011; Mumford & Anjum, 2011; Valsiner, 2014c).

The model is developed in four stages. First, because self-esteem can relate to past, present or future self-constructs, a temporal perspective on the self (similar to Valsiner, 2013, 2014a) is used as a point of departure. In the second stage, performative action is located in the same temporal model between the current and the future self, while being informed by the past self. This section shows that there are several types of self-esteem–motivated behavior, which are always goal-oriented towards a specific self-construct, and therefore that a general “high” or “low” self-esteem could impact behavior in different ways. The third and fourth stages add cultural and social factors to the model and discuss how these factors critically mediate the impact of self-esteem on behavior.

In each stage, the catalytic interaction by which self-esteem motivates behavior is illustrated using examples of adolescent deviance. Adolescent deviance is one of the largest subfields of self-esteem research, and it is widely believed that self-esteem plays an important role in deviant behavior, despite limited correlational evidence of this (e.g., Baumeister et al, 2003).

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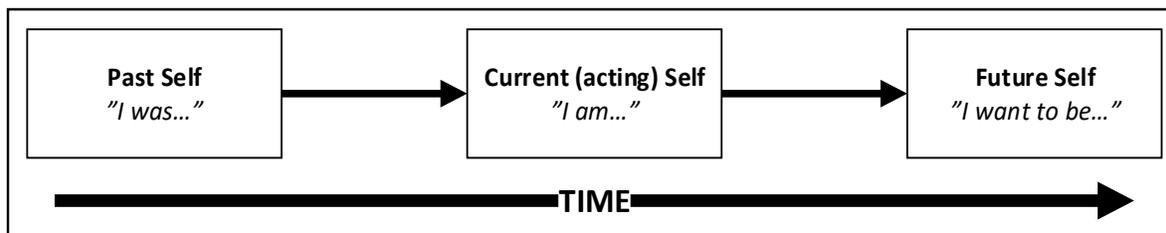
<sup>4</sup> Adolescent deviance research was a theoretically interesting subfield during the 1980s, but this does not seem have influenced contemporary self-esteem researchers. The works of Kaplan (1980, 1982) are excellent examples of theoretically sophisticated self-esteem research.

## **Temporal relations of the self**

Self-esteem is commonly thought to influence behavior through one of two broad types of mechanisms. The simplest way to distinguish between the two types of mechanisms is to identify them as either “push” or “pull” motivators. That is, either self-esteem is something we already possess from the past which pushes us towards an action, or it is something that we want in the future, which pulls us towards an action. Already, here we have identified two very different mechanisms by which self-esteem may influence behavior.

Let us use two examples of commonly proposed mechanisms of adolescent deviance to illustrate why this distinction problematizes a linear model of causality. In one case, a pupil with high self-esteem may attempt to provoke a teacher by breaking rules because he or she possesses the self-esteem to oppose the teacher’s authority. In another case, a pupil with low self-esteem may do the same thing without feeling particularly confident, but because breaking the rules could be a means of boosting self-esteem, for example by impressing peers. Both are plausible scenarios, and if they occur in the same sample they would produce weak or inconsistent correlations between a measure of general self-esteem and deviance. This would not, however, mean that self-esteem is unimportant, but that it is a motivational mechanism that people may act upon in different ways.

Starting with the broad distinction between push and pull mechanisms, which are temporally situated in different sides of the present, we require a model of the self in which the current self relates to a past (established) self and to imagined future selves. From such a model, we can specify how self-performative actions are derived from a past self or oriented towards a future self.



**Figure 1.** Self in irreversible time (adapted from Valsiner, 2014a).

In Figure 1, the agentic current self defines itself in relation to past experiences and future goals, creating a sense of continuity and stability of the self (Valsiner, 2014a). Much like self-esteem, the self is not a pre-existing property or entity of the mind, but a continuously constructed product of it.<sup>5</sup>

### **Self-performative actions**

The idea that people care about their self-esteem and are highly motivated to pursue higher self-esteem is less controversial and better supported empirically than ideas about what self-esteem does (see for example Bushman, Moeller & Crocker, 2011; Crocker & Park 2004; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim & Kasser, 2001). We do not know why people desire self-esteem itself. Perhaps it is an evolutionary mechanism, as the sociometer theory proposes (see Leary, 2003); but the origin of the self-esteem motive is less important here than its role in behavior.

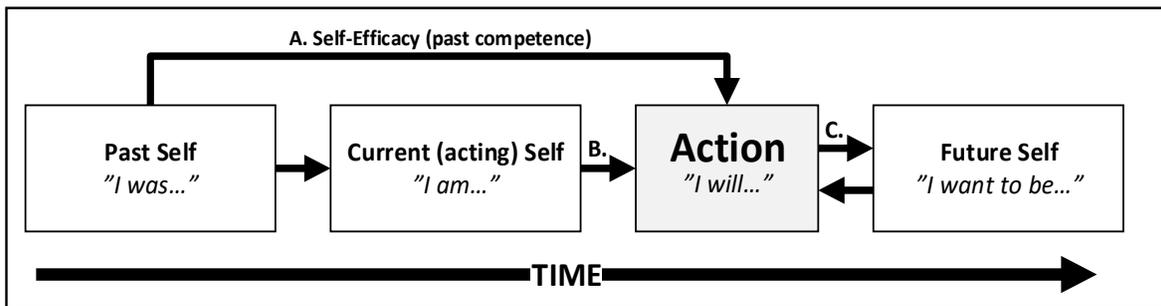
The desire for self-esteem is less puzzling if we take a closer look at what we mean by self-esteem. The most common definition of self-esteem is that it is *an evaluative attitude towards the self* (Rosenberg, 1965). This means that one cannot separate self-esteem from self-concept, since self-esteem is an attitude to a specific self (see Swann et al, 2007). Therefore, self-esteem is tied to the (attempted, successful, or anticipated) enactment of a certain

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<sup>5</sup> Viewing the self as continuously constructed is compatible with as diverse perspectives including the schematic view in neurocognition and post-structuralist performance theory (see Strandell, 2016).

identity. In other words, when we say that people desire self-esteem, they simply desire to be a valued person in the broadest possible sense.

Thus, how we derive self-esteem can vary significantly (see also Crocker et al, 2004); but since values are abstractions for something desirable, a valued self is per definition simply a desirable self. Wanting to pursue a desirable self is not so puzzling. Imperative to understanding self-esteem as a motivator is understanding how and what people try to become, maintain, or avoid being. This introduces goal-oriented<sup>6</sup> action as an essential component of the model.



**Figure 2.** Goal-oriented action between the current and the future self.

Figure 2 adds the action to the temporal model between and relative to the current and the future self, but also as informed by the past self. Because self-esteem is tied to establishing a desired self, the goal of self-esteem-motivated action is always self-performative in some sense. Performative is used here in the post-structuralist sense, to highlight that “the self” is performed—or *achieved through successful enactment*. Self-performative actions include any action with implications for who we are, including what sometimes is called self-presentation or identity-management, self-construction, and semiotic sign-making (where the

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<sup>6</sup> Goal-oriented actions should not necessarily be understood as rational or consciously deliberate, but as actions with a certain purpose.

self is a sign), as well as technologies of the self (see Musaeus & Brinkmann, 2011, Valsiner, 2013).

In other words, the self is a product of what we do (see Valsiner, 2013, 2014a), and self-esteem is tied to whether we do it successfully. In this stage of the model, there are three ways in which self-esteem is related to performative action-goals, specified in Figure 2 as relationships A, B and C.

### *Relationship A: past self → action*

The first relationship (A) in Figure 2 is between the past self (“*I was...*”) and action (“*I will...*”). Past experiences of self-performative actions influence current actions either indirectly by informing the current self-construct (“*I am X because I did Y*”), which in turn sets up the starting point for future desires (“*I am X but would rather be Z*”, see also relationship C), or by informing us directly of our competences and capacities based on past experiences (“*previously I tried being X by doing Y, which failed, making me feel ashamed. It is unlikely that I will succeed in doing X today, either.*”).

Some theorists have stressed that evaluative attitudes towards the self can be related to either the competence or the worth of the self (see Branden, 1995; Bosson & Swann, 1999). Relationship A is here similar to the notion of self-efficacy, or competence, although competence may in turn be value-laden. In relationship A, “self-esteem” is a push-motivator in the sense that past experiences reflect or form a sense of capacity, which is used to determine whether the present action is within reach of the current self.

We can use a single example from adolescent alcohol research to illustrate all different types of relationships in Figure 2. Underage drinking is a common problem in Scandinavia, and research shows that in lower ages of adolescence, relatively high alcohol consumption is used as a way to perform a mature and competent self (see Demant & Järvinen, 2006). In relationship A, put into terms of past competences, we can imagine a teenager who feels confident in his or her capacity to drink more than his or her peers due to successful past

experiences using alcohol (and so “has” “high self-esteem”). It can also be the other way around of course: bad experiences of the capacity of the past self to handle alcohol may institute fear and hypergeneralized<sup>7</sup> affective distress (i.e., “has” “low self-esteem”). This, in turn, may motivate various circumvention strategies, actions, or excuses to avoid alcohol consumption without implying immaturity (see Valsine, 2014a).

### *Relationship B: current self → action*

In relationship B of Figure 2, evaluative attitudes to the current self directly influence present action-goals. Here, it may be more appropriate to talk about self-worth than competence. Although one may certainly have generalized ideas about the abilities of the current self, competences are often specific and therefore related to specific experiences in the past, while self-worth may be a kind of hypergeneralized affect towards broad, abstract, characteristics of the self. The current self is of course a continuity of a past self, but it is often the self-worth of our current selves which we relate to present actions (unless the action is remembering or narrating the past). In relationship B, between the current self (“*I am...*”) and action (“*I will...*”), self-worth motivates or constrains action as the person deems him or herself worthy of something, such as pursuing a certain education (“*I am...talented*”) or a romantic partner (“*I am... attractive*”).

Let us return to our underage Scandinavian drinkers. A concrete example could be a teenager who already considers him or herself to be mature, or perhaps believes others to have that impression. He or she has “high self-esteem”, which negates the need to drink in the present moment. The other way around, we can imagine a teenager whose low self-esteem specifically entails a sense of being less mature than others, thus impelling the teenager to drink more than everyone else, or perhaps entirely avoid drinking situations and thus accept a lower self-value than his or her peers. Note that, once again, drinking, or not drinking, is

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<sup>7</sup> See Branco & Valsiner (2010), and Valsiner (2012 & 2014a) for discussions about hypergeneralized affect.

not directly caused by trait self-esteem. Instead, self-esteem is a desired outcome of the behavior.

Relationships A and B are both traditionally seen as “push”-motivators originating from the self-esteem the person already has prior to the action. However, as stated by Valsiner’s (2014a, p.265) 4<sup>th</sup> axiom of cultural psychology, this does not imply that action is “caused by past events, but [that it is] organized by intentional efforts to move towards some future goals” such as attaining or protecting self-esteem. Prior experiences set the stage for how people attain future goals, rather than determine them. Understanding self-competence or self-worth as a direct cause of a certain behavior neglects the crucial process by which self, context and goals interact in performative actions.

In the earlier example, where a “low self-esteem” teenager uses deviant behavior to improve self-esteem, it can perhaps be argued that linear causality could apply (low self-esteem → action). However, teenagers with “normal” or “high” self-esteem may, under some conditions, pursue the very same deviant action with the same purpose, to impress peers, and boost their self-esteem so they feel good about themselves. In contrast, people may try to protect their self-esteem against threats whether they have high or low self-esteem. Therefore, prior self-esteem may not even be relevant, despite the action being self-esteem-motivated. Neither is it the case that the action necessarily has an outcome that influences future self-esteem, as the motivator here is the desire for self-esteem. This leads us to relationship C.

### *Relationship C: future self ↔ action*

Relationship C, in which the action relates to the future self, is perhaps the most obvious relationship in a model centered on the pursuit of self-esteem through self-performative actions. However, the relationship is bidirectional, as shown in Figure 2. On the one hand, action temporally leads to a future self, as people use actions when attempting to perform as or realize a desired self (Action → outcome: “*I will do X because I want to become Y*”). On

the other hand, viable future selves, (“*I want...*”) also determine actions (“*Because I want Y, I will do X*”). The viability of the future self, and the expectation that a certain action will generate a desired self, constrain the actions available in the present.

The way that possible actions determine future selves is perhaps more evident if one considers that self-performances most often rely on previous performances as a part of a long-term project of identity-building. People invest in their identity through previous actions that enable, or partially allow, them to become someone else at a later point in life. Thus, the actions people can take in the present moment are, while directed at the future, not only constrained by the ways in which one creates or moves toward the desired the future self. For example, to become a doctor he or she would have to invest in a certain education that enables the future self to be a doctor. However, those studies also make it more difficult to pursue, say, a military career and become a general because of the years invested in a medical education (we return to this in the next two sections).

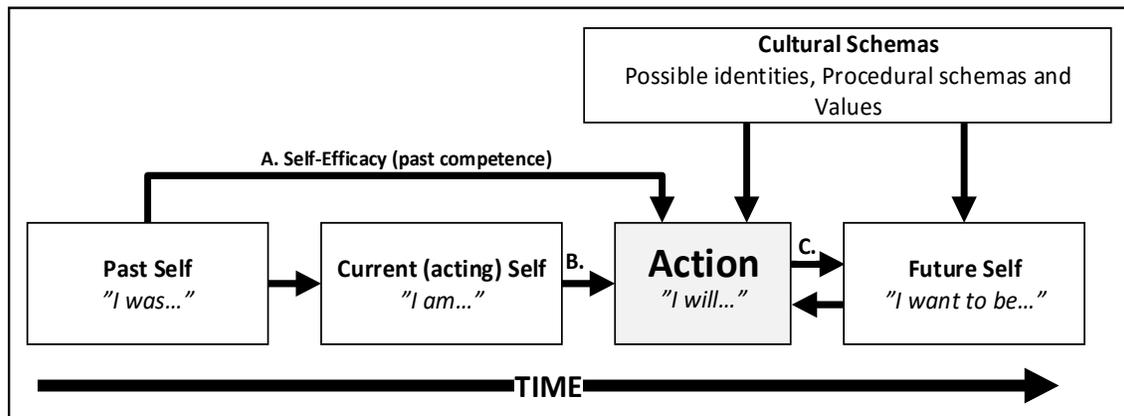
In the concrete scenario of underage drinkers in Scandinavia, the desired future self, to be considered a mature and competent person, could be the outcome of drinking (i.e., a self-esteem motive). If the teenager believes that this is possible for him or her, based on previous successful experiences of drinking (relationship A, past self), our teenager may decide to drink heavily. On the other hand, if another teenager is convinced that others see him or her as less mature than they are (i.e., the current self) there may be little point in drinking as the current self may constrain possible future selves. Drinking heavily could, for someone who is perceived as immature, be perceived as “trying too hard”.

As the above example shows, a complex interaction of past, current and future selves influences our actor's behavior, yet it should also be apparent that “self-esteem” is a very important motivational factor in all these cases. “High” or “low” self-esteem, a general evaluative attitude towards the self, do not determine whether teenagers drink. It is a question of where they are and what they want to be.

Self-esteem makes more sense as a motivator of self-performative, goal-oriented, action, than as a variable. Furthermore, “self-esteem” is a broad umbrella term for a range of motivational attitudes with different relationships to the self.

## The role of culture

Culture constitutes yet another set of catalytic factors which critically mediate self-esteem–motivated behavior in multiple ways. In a broad view, cultural schemas include all kinds of knowledge, values and ideas. These schemas are social representations that the actor has not constructed from scratch based on personal experience, but which people nonetheless rely on when interpreting, defining, anticipating and organizing action. Cultural schemas thus provide frameworks, or rulesets, for how to pursue self-esteem.



**Figure 3.** Cultural mediators of goal-oriented action.

Although culture is in many ways involved at every stage in this model, including the past and the current self, it directly mediates the present action and the desired future self, as shown in Figure 3.

Imagined future selves and ideas about ways to pursuit them are derived from cultural knowledge about things that one has not yet experienced (Frye, 2012). Three types of cultural

schemas are particularly important for self-esteem–motivated action: possible identities, procedural schemas and values. Identity schemas cover all kinds of imaginable future selves provided through social representations. The possible future selves imaginable provide a limited set of culturally defined action-goals, while procedural schemas are roadmaps of how to get there. Socially provided procedural schemas are learned beliefs about how the world and people work, and tell us what actions are necessary to successfully become a certain person (see Frye, 2012). Procedural schemas range from ideas about causality and behavior in the immediate situation to step-by-step plans for long-term identity building. Culturally provided beliefs about human behavior and causality are also important to self-evaluative attitudes because peoples’ inferences about who or what is responsible for an outcome often determine whether a person feels pride or shame about it (Tracy & Robins, 2014). Finally, culture provides us with systems of values, which in self-esteem–motivated pursuits are used as evaluative standards that attribute positive or negative associations to both actions and identities. The distinction is important, because an action may be negatively valued while the identity performed by the same action is positively valued, or the other way around.

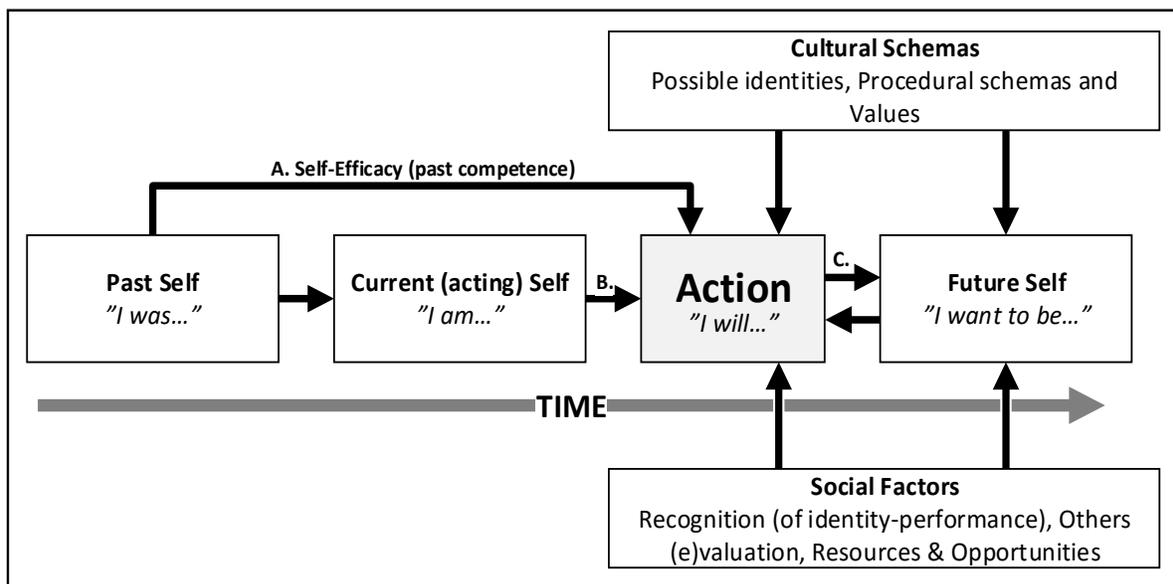
We can imagine another deviant teenager, this time one who repeatedly skips class, is falling behind and eventually starts failing classes. High or low self-esteem cannot be said to cause this behavior. However, if our teenager perceives education as irrelevant for a desired future identity (say, as a professional musician), going to classes will feel like a waste of time because the actor does not esteem whatever may come out of education. The entire concept and viability of being a professional musician are an identity-schema provided by culture. Going to class will appear meaningless because education has a) little or no inherent value for the pursuit of self-esteem, b) is unrelated to the desired future identity as a musician and c) nothing about going to school would lead to becoming an esteemed musician.

In this case and many others, procedural and value schemas are at the center of the pursuit of self-esteem. Our teenager may believe that it is viable for him or her to try to become a successful musician through other means (such as staying at home to practice). Whether this

is the case is irrelevant. What is important is that the action strategy is meaningful “from the position of the meaning-maker” (Valsiner, 2014a, p.264).

### The role of social factors

The final stage of the model adds social factors other than culture to the catalytic complex of self-performances. These social factors include socially available resources and opportunities for action, and the recognition and (e)valuation from significant others of performances (Strandell, 2016). As with cultural schemas, such social factors do not exert direct causality but is a part of the catalyzing context in which people organize intentional behavior (see Mumford & Anjum, 2011; Valsiner, 2014a).



**Figure 4.** Social and cultural mediation of self-performative action.

The most obvious social factor in self-esteem might be the expectations of others’ (e)valuation of an action or a future self. While other people’s (e)valuations are informed by cultural schemas, they are also physical people with a specific relationship to the actor, which

influences their attitudes and reactions to the self and its potential. In other words, whether others share a certain generalized value with the actor may or may not be relevant, because their (e)valuation is mediated by the nature and history of the relationship between the evaluator and the actor. Thus, a generally positively valued action or identity can nonetheless be negatively received if the relation between the actor and the other is hostile, or contextualized by external concerns (such as, for example, a competition between the two).

Recognition of a performance should be differentiated from its (e)valuation. Other people can recognize a performance without esteeming it (e.g., if you achieve something that everyone else has already done), or esteem an identity without recognizing its performance (e.g., “Everyone thinks musicians are cool, but you are not a 'real' musician simply by owning a guitar”). But even when others do not value an identity, recognition may be important to the actor because it verifies the successful enactment of an identity.

Furthermore, “others” may refer to concrete individuals or groups, to whom the actor has a specific relationship and desires esteem from (e.g., a professor's grade may be crucial for a student's academic self-esteem). However, “others” can also refer to what Mead (1934) called “generalized others”—the expectation of what people in general (or “anyone”) might value or recognize. If Mead and the other symbolic interactionists were right, generalized others might in some cases be the most important relationship to self-esteem, because the opinions of “people in general” can provide feedback on performances unbiased by individual personality or relationship history.

Finally, any model which seeks to fully understand self-esteem–motivated behavior must consider how socially available resources and opportunities enable or constrain behavior (Strandell, 2016). The past self in a sense can be a psychological “resource” of confidence in one's ability; but social resources refer to external capital such as physical, monetary or relational resources. Socially provided “opportunities”, on the other hand, refer to the socio-culturally shaped physical environment (such as a school), social relations (such as a job offer from a relative), or opportunities provided by social institutions (such as having the right education).

Much like cultural schemas, social factors critically influence how self-esteem can be pursued, by modifying the “*I want...*” and “*I will...*” with considerations of what “*I could...*”. Let us use a final example of deviance to illustrate this. Imagine a teenager with strong self-confidence based on past experiences of success (“high self-esteem”). This teenager desires a future self as someone important, say a doctor or a lawyer, and will work hard in school if school seems like a viable route to the esteemed future self (a strong self-esteem motive).

Now imagine that this teenager is a member of a socially-disadvantaged group, such as a discriminated immigrant minority. This may severely limit the socially available opportunities and resources available. Our ambitious teenager could experience recurring discrimination from teachers (never receiving recognition or esteem), lack the educational resource of educated parents proficient with the language, be bullied by other pupils at school, and be surrounded by social representations of his or her own ethnicity as “second-class citizens.” In this scenario, the teenager may, irrespective of “had” self-esteem (be it of worth, competence or motivation), end up in a criminal street gang because it offers opportunities of recognition and esteem without a constant struggle against unfair odds (see Kalkan, 2016). Joining the gang is thus an effective circumvention strategy where someone, whose possibilities of pursuing self-esteem in a normative way are blocked or limited, rejects one desired future identity and adopts another that is within reach (see Valsiner, 2014a).

## **Conclusions**

Self-esteem research has hit a standstill, not because self-esteem is unimportant in people’s lives, but because mainstream self-esteem research has been theoretically and methodologically impoverished.<sup>8</sup> The model presented here is far from a complete and operationalized alternative, but its purpose is argumentative. Throughout this paper it has

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<sup>8</sup> See Scheff & Fearon (2004) and Swann et al. (2007) for additional discussion.

been argued that self-esteem must be re-thought, and must move from a view of self-esteem as a passive variable towards seeing self-esteem as a product of the mind.

Self-esteem is not an entity that makes people do things, but a motivator involved in multiple ways in goal-oriented, self-performative actions. Self-esteem–motivated behavior can relate to the past, current, or future self. In addition, it can be defensive or constructive, be concerned with value or competence, and can be about your or others' esteem of your own self. Self-esteem–motivated behavior is therefore highly complex and difficult to assess using correlational measures (especially single-variable correlations).

To understand what people do because of self-esteem, it is therefore necessary to understand what identities people want to enact or maintain, and how they do it. Self-performative actions are in turn contextualized by cultural beliefs and expectations of social recognition and (e)valuation (or lack thereof). Furthermore, self-performative actions require access to socially-distributed resources and opportunities, and may be dependent on previous investments in long-term identity-building.

Because of the catalytic factors involved and the multiple ways in which self-esteem can relate to behavior, it is imperative that future self-esteem research specifies the type of motivational mechanism “self-esteem” refers to, and that a theoretical model of human action informs the methodological approach. Self-esteem cannot be separated from self-performative actions, so any mechanism of self-esteem must be understood as a means by which people try to establish an identity.

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