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Social approval and trait self-esteem[☆]

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Abstract

Interpersonal theories of self-esteem that tie self-esteem to perceptions of one's acceptability to other people suggest that self-evaluations should predict global self-esteem to the degree to which an individual believes that a particular attribute is important for social approval. In the present study, participants completed a measure of global self-esteem, rated themselves in five domains, and indicated how important those domains were for approval or disapproval. The results showed that, in four of five domains, the interaction between self-evaluations and the perceived approval-value of that domain aided in the prediction of global self-esteem. Generally, for participants who rated themselves positively in a domain, those who believed that the domain was important in affecting social approval or disapproval had higher self-esteem than those who did not believe it would influence acceptability.

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1. Introduction

Theories of self-esteem have been based on one of two fundamentally different assumptions about the essential nature of self-esteem. Traditionally, *intrapersonal* theorists have conceptualized self-esteem as a person's private self-evaluation. For example, James (1890) characterized self-esteem as the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions, a personal assessment of how well one is doing in areas that the

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individual regards as important. Humanistic approaches that dominated thinking about self-esteem in the middle of the 20th century likewise viewed self-esteem as a personal evaluation of one's goodness or worth. For example, Rogers (1959) proposed that self-esteem arises when people live congruently with their personal, "organismic" values. This view was echoed more recently by Deci and Ryan (1995) who argued that true self-esteem (as distinguished from contingent self-esteem) results when people behave autonomously in ways that are consistent with their intrinsic or core self. Bednar, Wells, and Peterson (1989) offered an alternative intrapersonal perspective suggesting that true self-esteem arises when people recognize that they are coping effectively with psychological threats.

Although intrapersonal perspectives are based on the notion that individuals' own self-evaluations are at the root of self-esteem, they do acknowledge that others' evaluations of the individual may also play a role. However, they diminish the importance of such interpersonal influences in one of two ways. Some theorists, including James, view interpersonal evaluations simply as one of many sources of information from which people derive their personal self-evaluations. Others suggest that interpersonal effects on self-esteem reflect a maladaptive reliance on the approval of other people, arguing that healthy self-esteem ought not to be influenced by what other people think of the individual but rather should emerge from personal judgments of one's own worth. As May (1983) remarked, "...if your self-esteem must rest in the long run on social validation, you have not self-esteem, but a more sophisticated form of social conformity" (p. 102).

In contrast to these intrapersonal perspectives, other theorists have conceptualized self-esteem explicitly in *interpersonal* terms. These theorists echo the symbolic interactionists' claim that the self is an inherently social construction that arises in the context of interpersonal relations (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1932). Interpersonal theorists conclude that people's feelings about themselves are—and ought to be—related to how they believe others evaluate them because subjective feelings of self-esteem provide information regarding one's standing in the eyes of other people or society at large. Three such interpersonal theories promote this theme: Dominance theory (Barkow, 1975) suggests that self-esteem reflects one's relative dominance in social groups, sociometer theory (Leary & Downs, 1995) proposes that self-esteem monitors relational evaluation (i.e., the degree to which one is valued as a relational partner by others), and terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) argues that self-esteem reflects the degree to which the individual meets cultural standards for being a good and worthwhile person.

These interpersonal theories propose that self-esteem is, by its nature, highly responsive to social feedback, at least within limits. From this perspective, such responsiveness is by no means a sign of dependency or dysfunction. To the contrary, self-esteem serves its evolved function, according to each of these theories, only if it is sensitive to feedback from other people. Although differing in specifics, interpersonal theories suggest that a person's level of self-esteem is a function of two factors. First and most obviously, self-esteem reflects a person's beliefs about his or her personal characteristics. Believing that you possess positive attributes ought to be related to higher self-esteem than believing that you do not possess positive

attributes or, worse, that you possess negative ones. But, what makes some attributes positive and others negative? The interpersonal perspectives suggest that believing one possesses certain attributes predicts self-esteem only to the extent that the individual believes that other people regard those attributes as important or valuable. Only by being responsive to social validation will self-esteem help to promote dominance (Barkow, 1975), foster acceptance (Leary & Downs, 1995), or lower existential terror (Solomon et al., 1991). Believing that one is an excellent hunter should not enhance self-esteem if one's reference group abhors hunting and believes that hunters are evil people. Thus, a person's self-beliefs regarding the degree to which he or she possesses a particular attribute should interact with his or her beliefs regarding whether others generally react approvingly or disapprovingly toward people who possess that characteristic. Put simply, high self-esteem should emerge to the extent that people believe that they possess characteristics that other people value.

Several lines of research support this argument. First, people respond to self-relevant stimuli consistently with the standards of whatever audience is salient in their minds at the time. People who are led to visualize others who are significant to them, or who are primed with subliminal images of such individuals, subsequently evaluate themselves in terms of those individuals' standards (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990; Baldwin & Holmes, 1987). For example, graduate students evaluated themselves less positively when primed with the scowling face of their department chair, and Catholic students evaluated themselves less positively when primed with the face of the Pope (Baldwin et al., 1990). As Baldwin and Holmes (1987) observed, "individuals process self-relevant information according to patterns established in the context of significant relationships" (p. 1096). These findings suggest that how people feel about themselves is influenced by their self-assessment on attributes that they assume are important to significant others.

Second, Harter and Marold (1991) reported that adolescents' feelings of self-worth are strongly related to their perceived competence in domains that they believe are important to their parents. This finding suggests that it is not just one's own judgment of the importance of particular characteristics that contributes to self-esteem but also one's assumptions regarding the importance that others place on them.

Third, an experiment by Jones, Brenner, and Knight (1990) revealed that successfully accomplishing certain goals may lower self-esteem when success results in disapproving reactions from other people. Conversely, failures may enhance self-esteem if other people react positively to the failure. Clearly, then, the reactions of observing audiences may override one's own self-evaluations of success and failure in affecting self-esteem.

Although suggestive, previous research has not explicitly addressed the relationship between people's beliefs about the degree to which others value certain attributes and their own trait self-esteem. There is ample evidence supporting the importance of acceptance and rejection for feelings of state self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), but less is known about the role of acceptance in individual differences in trait self-esteem. In one relevant study, trait self-esteem correlated strongly with people's beliefs regarding the degree to which they were generally accepted by other people (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

In the present study, participants rated themselves on personal characteristics and indicated the degree to which they believe that other people approve of those who possess these attributes and disapprove of those who do not. The characteristics chosen for examination—competence, physical attractiveness, material wealth, sociability, and morality—were meant to reflect potentially important determinants of personal and social esteem. Further, because we were interested in predictors of global self-esteem, the domains reflected broad categories that would seem to be important across many social situations and in many kinds of social groups.

We hypothesized that, among people who believe that a certain attribute is highly valued by others, more positive self-evaluations on the relevant attribute would be related to higher self-esteem. However, among people who believe that a certain attribute is less valued by others, self-ratings should be relatively unrelated to self-esteem. Such a pattern would be consistent with interpersonal models that tie self-esteem to other peoples' appraisals but less congruent with intrapersonal models that view self-esteem purely as a reflection of one's private self-evaluations.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 180 undergraduate students (90 men and 90 women), aged 17–22, who participated for credit in an Introductory Psychology course.

2.2. Materials

Participants completed a set of measures that consisted of questionnaires about their (a) beliefs about the extent to which five specific domains lead to social approval and disapproval, (b) beliefs about their own standing in these five domains, and (c) global trait self-esteem. These measures were part of a larger questionnaire package, with each measure separated from the others by at least two pages.

2.2.1. Social approval beliefs

We developed a self-report measure of the beliefs people have about the extent to which specific domains lead to social approval or disapproval. Respondents were asked to indicate on 12-point scales the degree to which they believe people are more approving and accepting of those who (a) are intelligent, competent, talented, and skilled, (b) are physically attractive, (c) have expensive material possessions, (d) possess sociable characteristics (such as those who are humorous, friendly, and nice), and (e) are moral and ethical (1 = *strongly disagree*; 12 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores reflect stronger beliefs that a high standing in a domain leads to approval and acceptance than a lower standing in that domain.

In addition to questions about their beliefs concerning the extent to which these five attributes lead to social approval, respondents also rated the degree to which not possessing these five characteristics makes a person more likely to experience

social disapproval and rejection. On 12-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 12 = *strongly agree*), respondents indicated the degree to which people are more disapproving and rejecting of those who (a) are not intelligent, competent, talented, or skilled, (b) are physically unattractive, (c) do not have expensive material possessions, (d) do not possess sociable characteristics (for example, who lack a sense of humor, are unfriendly and cold), and (e) are immoral and unethical. Higher scores reflect stronger beliefs that lacking these attributes leads to disapproval.

2.2.2. Self-ratings in each domain

For each of the five approval domains (i.e., competence, physical attractiveness, wealth, sociability, and morals), participants rated how they compared to their peers on 12-point scales (1 = *much less*; 12 = *much more*). Thus, higher scores indicate more positive self-evaluations in that domain. The correlations between these ratings can be seen in Table 1.

2.2.3. Global self-esteem

Participants completed the Fleming and Courtney (1984) self-regard subscale of the Self-Rating Scale. The self-regard scale consists of seven items (e.g., “Do you ever feel that you are a worthless individual?”) that assess global trait self-esteem (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$). Answers were given on a 7-point scale, and higher scores reflected higher global self-esteem. The self-regard scale has good validity as a measure of global self-esteem and correlates highly with scores on Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem inventory (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

2.3. Procedure

After signing an informed consent form, participants, in groups ranging from 10 to 40, completed the package of measures.

3. Results

Analyses were conducted using hierarchical multiple regression, with global trait self-esteem as the criterion variable. Self-ratings and approval-value were zero-cen-

Table 1
Correlations between self-ratings

	Competence	Physical attractiveness	Material possessions	Sociability
Competence	–			
Physical attractiveness	.37**	–		
Material possessions	.33**	.37**	–	
Sociability	.34**	.60**	.45**	–
Morality	.20**	.18*	.20**	.12

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

tered, and gender was dummy-coded before analysis. For each of the five domains, the main effects of self-rating in that domain, beliefs about the approval-value of that domain, and gender were entered in step 1 of the regression equation. In step 2, all two-variable interaction terms (the products of a participant's score on each pair of predictors) were entered, and in step 3 the three-variable interaction term (the products of a participant's score on all three predictors) was entered. To test the moderating role of disapproval beliefs, this procedure was repeated for each domain, substituting the measure of disapproval beliefs for approval beliefs. As the three-variable interaction was not significant for any of the analyses, results reported here collapse across gender.²

3.1. Competence

3.1.1. Approval beliefs

In the domain of competence, the main effect for approval beliefs was not significant ($t < 1$). A significant main effect of self-rated competence was found, $t(175) = 5.82$, $p < .05$, such that higher self-ratings of competence were related to higher global self-esteem. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction of self-evaluations by approval-value, $t(172) = 2.40$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2 for effect sizes). To examine the pattern of this interaction, conditional regression equations were calculated separately for participants whose beliefs about the approval value of competence fell -1 and $+1$ standard deviations from the mean. As can be seen in Fig. 1, for participants who believed that competence was very important for social approval, higher self-evaluations of competence were strongly related to higher self-esteem. However, for those who believed that competence was less important for approval, competence was less strongly associated with global self-esteem, $p < .05$. Thus, self-evaluations predicted global self-esteem much more strongly for participants who believed that competence increases approval from other people. The simple slopes for the low approval value, $t(172) = 3.37$, $p < .05$, and the high approval-value, $t(172) = 5.60$, $p < .05$, regression lines are both significantly different from zero.

3.1.2. Disapproval beliefs

The main effect of disapproval beliefs was not significant ($t < 1$).³ The interaction between competence and disapproval beliefs was also not significant ($t < 1.7$).

² An overall main effect of gender was found such that men had significantly higher self-esteem than women. Only one measure revealed a significant two-variable interaction with gender. Specifically, men's ratings of their own competence were more strongly tied to self-esteem than women's, although both men's and women's self-esteem increased in correspondence with higher ratings of competence.

³ Main effects for self-evaluation are the same for both approval and disapproval analyses. Thus, the main effect for self-evaluation is not reported again in the disapproval sections of the analyses.

Table 2

Effect sizes (R^2 -change) for approval by self-rating and disapproval by self-rating interactions

	Approval	Disapproval
Competence	.025	.012
Physical attractiveness	.018	.004
Material possessions	.021	<.001
Sociability	.002	.016
Morals	<.001	.004

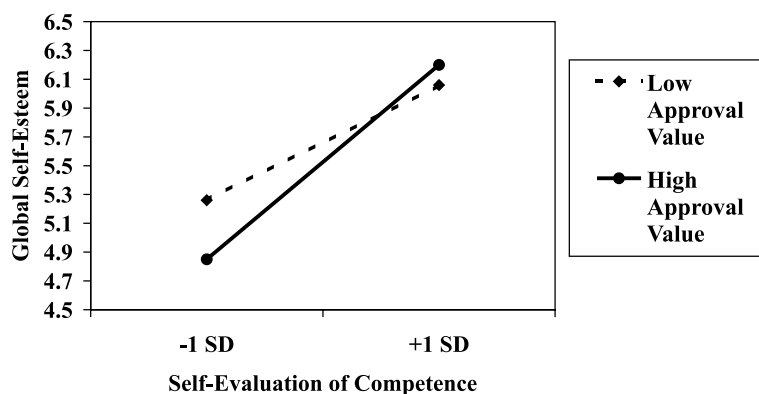


Fig. 1. Global self-esteem as a function of self-evaluations of competence and the belief that competence leads to approval.

3.2. Physical attractiveness

3.2.1. Approval beliefs

In the domain of physical attractiveness, the main effect for approval beliefs was not significant ($t < 1$). A significant main effect of attractiveness was found, $t(175) = 6.36$, $p < .05$, such that participants who rated themselves as more physically attractive had higher global self-esteem. However, this effect was also qualified by a significant self-evaluation by approval-value interaction, $t(172) = 2.03$, $p < .05$. As the conditional regression lines in Fig. 2 show, self-ratings of attractiveness were more strongly related to self-esteem for participants who believed that attractiveness is important for social approval than for participants who rated the approval-value of attractiveness lower. The simple slopes for the low approval-value, $t(172) = 2.43$, $p < .05$, and the high approval-value, $t(172) = 4.92$, $p < .05$, regression lines are both significantly different from zero.

3.2.2. Disapproval beliefs

The main effect of disapproval beliefs, and the interaction between competence and disapproval beliefs, were not significant (both $ts < 1$).

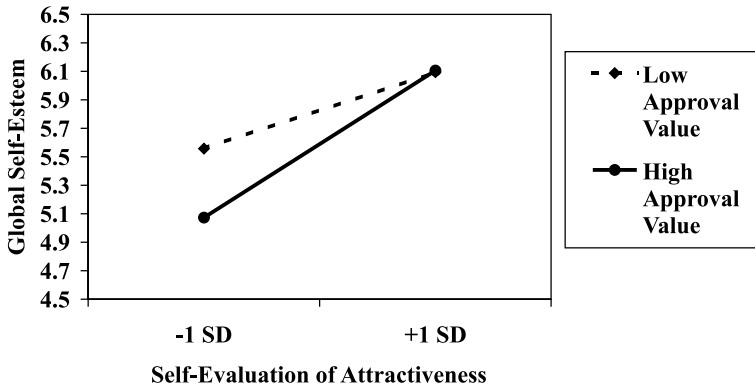


Fig. 2. Global self-esteem as a function of self-evaluations of attractiveness and the belief that attractiveness leads to approval.

3.3. Material wealth

3.3.1. Approval beliefs

In the domain of material wealth, the main effect for approval beliefs was not significant ($t < 1$). A significant main effect of wealth was found, $t(175) = 4.92, p < .05$, such that participants who rated themselves as more wealthy had higher global self-esteem. However, this effect was also qualified by a significant self-evaluation by approval-value interaction, $t(172) = 2.11, p < .05$. As the conditional regression lines in Fig. 3 show, self-ratings of wealth were more strongly related to self-esteem for participants who believed that wealth is important for social approval than for participants who rated the approval-value of wealth lower. The simple slope for the low approval-value regression line was not significantly different from zero, $t(172) = 1.65, ns$. The slope for the high approval-value regression line was significantly different from zero, $t(172) = 4.31, p < .05$.

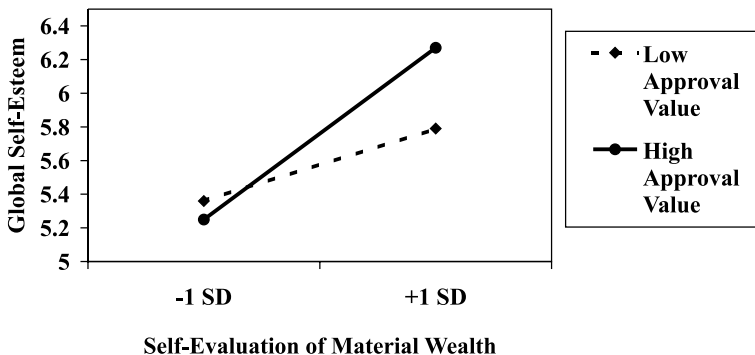


Fig. 3. Global self-esteem as a function of self-evaluations of wealth and the belief that wealth leads to approval.

3.3.2. Disapproval beliefs

The main effect of disapproval beliefs, and the interaction between wealth and disapproval beliefs, were not significant (both t s < 1).

3.4. Sociability

3.4.1. Approval beliefs

In the domain of sociable characteristics, a significant main effect of approval beliefs was found, $t(175) = 2.84, p < .05$. The belief that possession of sociable attributes is important for approval was related to higher self-esteem. Self-rated sociability was also related to self-esteem, $t(175) = 5.92, p < .05$. Participants who rated themselves as more sociable had higher levels of self-esteem. The interaction between self-evaluations of sociability and approval-value did not reach significance ($t < 1$).

3.4.2. Disapproval beliefs

A main effect of disapproval beliefs was not found ($t < 1$). A marginally significant interaction was found between self-evaluations and the belief that possessing sociable attributes leads to disapproval, $t(172) = 1.89, p = .06$. As can be seen in Fig. 4, for participants who believed that a lack of sociable characteristics is tied to disapproval, higher self-evaluations were strongly related to higher global self-esteem. However, for those who perceive sociability to be less important for disapproval, self-evaluations were less strongly associated with global self-esteem. The simple slope for the low disapproval-value regression line was marginally significant, $t(172) = 1.96, p < .06$. The simple slope for high disapproval value was significantly different from zero, $t(172) = 4.93, p < .05$.

3.5. Morality and ethics

3.5.1. Approval beliefs

In the domain of morality, a significant main effect of approval beliefs was found, $t(175) = 2.75, p < .05$. The belief that being moral is important for approval was

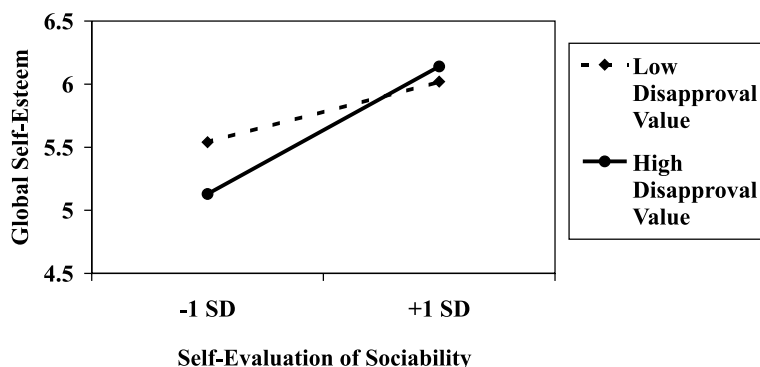


Fig. 4. Global self-esteem as a function of self-evaluations of sociability and the belief that lacking sociable attributes leads to disapproval.

related to higher self-esteem. Self-ratings of morals were also related to self-esteem, $t(175) = 1.97$, $p = .05$. Participants who rated themselves as more moral had higher levels of self-esteem. The interaction between self-evaluations of morals and approval-value did not reach significance ($t < 1$).

3.5.2. Disapproval beliefs

A main effect of disapproval beliefs was found, $t(175) = 2.01$, $p < .05$. The belief that being moral is important for avoiding disapproval was related to higher self-esteem. The interaction between morals and disapproval beliefs was not significant ($t < 1$).

3.6. Ancillary analyses

As discussed earlier, success in a domain that is disapproved of by others should be associated with lower self-esteem. This hypothesis is difficult to test directly with our data because, on average, participants rated all five of the domains as at least “somewhat” important for acceptance. However, because the domain of material wealth was rated as the least important domain for being accepted by others, a sizeable minority of participants disagreed with the notion that wealth was important for acceptance. We selected this minority ($n = 42$) for further analysis. We reasoned that those at the high end of this new distribution (i.e., near the neutral point) should believe that wealth has little consequence for acceptance. People at the low end of this new distribution may well represent those who believe that having wealth actually impairs acceptance. Thus, being poor should actually lead to higher self-esteem for this second group. We tested this hypothesis in the wealth domain with the same three-step regression procedure as in our earlier analyses, predicting self-esteem from self-ratings of wealth and the belief that being wealthy leads to acceptance.

In this analysis, neither the main effect for approval beliefs, $t < 1.6$, nor the main effect for wealth, $t < 1.1$, was significant. However, a significant self-evaluation by approval-value interaction, $t(36) = 2.47$, $p < .05$ was found. As the conditional

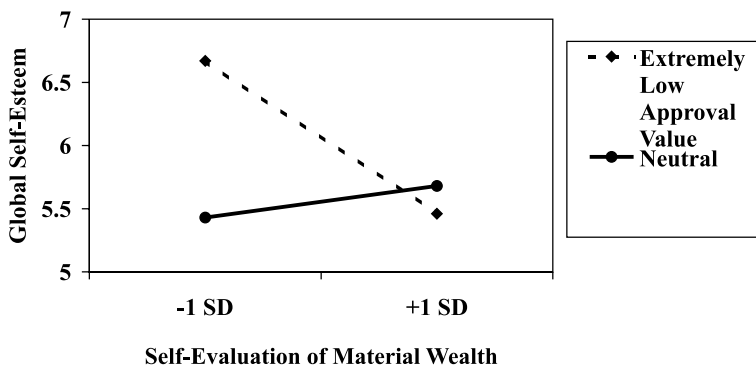


Fig. 5. Global self-esteem as a function of self-evaluations of wealth and the belief that wealth leads to approval for participants who do not believe wealth leads to acceptance.

regression lines in Fig. 5 show, the relation of wealth to self-esteem depended on these participants' beliefs about the approval-value of material possessions. For those who believed that wealth was mostly unrelated to acceptance, more wealth was not significantly related to higher self-esteem ($t < 1$). However, for those who were in extreme disagreement with the notion that wealth is related to acceptance, more wealth was related to marginally *lower* self-esteem, $t = 1.87$, $p = .08$.

4. Discussion

Our results show that high self-esteem involves more than simply believing that one possesses positive characteristics. In four out of the five domains, the highest self-esteem was reported by individuals who not only viewed themselves positively in the domain but who also believed that the domain had important ramifications for winning others' approval or avoiding others' disapproval. Participants who believed that they were competent, physically attractive, or wealthy had higher self-esteem if they believed those attributes lead to approval than if they did not. Participants who rated themselves highly on sociable characteristics had higher self-esteem if they believed people were generally rejecting of those who lacked such characteristics than if they did not. These patterns were obtained even though the predictive power of private self-evaluation alone in each domain was statistically controlled via the regression analysis. Thus, as interpersonal approaches to self-esteem suggest, self-esteem depends strongly on how people believe their attributes affect other people's appraisals of and reactions to them.

Interestingly, the strongest effects were found for the domain of competence. On its face, competence seems like the hallmark of autonomy. Intrapersonal theories of self-esteem suggest that the feelings of efficacy that arise from competence are the basis for independence and stable feelings of self-worth (e.g., Bednar et al., 1989; Deci & Ryan, 1995; James, 1890). Nevertheless, in the domain of competence, prediction of global self-esteem was especially improved by considering participants' beliefs about the effects of competence on interpersonal approval. That is, higher self-esteem was realized when competence was viewed as a basis for *interdependence* rather than independence. This result is complimented by Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) finding that those who base their self-esteem more strongly on achievement also tend to base their self-esteem more strongly on approval from others. Both results support Baumeister's (1989) claim that efforts to be competent often reflect a socially motivated desire to obtain approval and other social benefits.

In only one of the five domains, sociability, did the belief that a high standing on the characteristic helps *avoid disapproval* moderate the effects of self-evaluations on global self-esteem (albeit marginally). Why should this be? We believe that the answer may lie in differences in the social norms applicable to the various domains. Given that most people are not extraordinarily competent, highly attractive, or enormously wealthy, people may not consider these characteristics to be normative. As a result, although being unusually competent, attractive, or rich may lead to increased approval, these dimensions are not the basis for rejection of others. Certainly, few

people could manage to avoid rejection if these were the applicable criteria. Instead, possessing such attributes should act as a “bonus,” leading to more approval. Indeed, occasions when an individual comes across a particularly competent, attractive, or wealthy person seem especially memorable. In contrast, society seems to expect its members to be reasonably sociable as a basic element of interpersonal functioning (Goffman, 1959). Occasions when one must deal with a socially undesirable person seem more notable than when one meets a person who interacts appropriately and adroitly. Because sociability is more of a “requirement” for everyday interactions, failure to possess sociable attributes might lead to disapproval and rejection more than possessing such attributes facilitates approval and acceptance. As a result, self-esteem is tied to beliefs that lacking sociable attributes fosters rejection. This interpretation is buttressed by the suggestion that two fundamental human motivations are agency and communion (Digman, 1997; Paulhus & John, 1998). Agency has been linked to a need for power or “getting ahead” (Paulhus & John, 1998), involves striving for status (i.e., approval), and seems to be reflected in competence, attractiveness, and wealth. Communion has been linked to society’s socialization process (Digman, 1997) or “getting along” (Paulhus & John, 1998), involves striving for belongingness (i.e., avoiding disapproval), and seems to be reflected in sociability. Elsewhere we have suggested that agency strivings are linked to higher levels of self-esteem as those with higher self-esteem have largely satisfied their communion motives (Leary and MacDonald, *in press*).

Interestingly, past research has suggested that rejection may affect self-esteem more strongly than acceptance. For example, Leary et al. (1995) found in their experimental work that being excluded from a group led to decrements in self-esteem, while inclusion in such groups did not raise self-esteem. However, in the present work, we found that approval beliefs were tied to self-esteem in three domains, while disapproval beliefs were involved only once. This seeming inconsistency may be accounted for by differences in the nature of the two studies. Consider that the presence of politeness and other social norms means that truly feeling accepted by another person requires a number of trials in which displays of acceptance go beyond social niceties. On the other hand, such norms make rejection easily noticeable in the early stages of social interaction. In the Leary et al. studies, participants were accepted or rejected by people who they had only just been introduced to. Thus, rejection feedback would be highly meaningful (Snapp & Leary, 2001) while acceptance feedback would not. In the present work, participants rate stable traits such as competence and attractiveness that can be counted on to affect acceptance and rejection over long periods of time. Thus, such traits are likely to influence long-term acceptance from others, and thus self-esteem.

Although in most domains the relationship between self-evaluations and self-esteem increased with the degree to which participants believed that the domain was associated with approval, positive self-views in each domain were associated with slightly higher self-esteem even for those participants who believed the domain was relatively less important for approval. This pattern could be interpreted as an indication that positive self-evaluations alone promote higher self-esteem regardless of their implications for approval and disapproval as the intrapersonal perspectives

suggest. However, as shown in Table 3, participants who rated the approval-value of the domains as relatively low did not generally indicate that these domains were *unimportant* for approval. Rather, compared to other participants, they simply believed these domains were *less* important. Indeed, virtually all participants indicated that competence, attractiveness, and sociability were at least somewhat important for approval. The median score for the approval-value of competence was 9 on a 12-point scale (with 95% of participants agreeing that competence leads to approval to some extent), the median for the approval-value of attractiveness was 10 (with 98% of participants agreeing that attractiveness leads to approval to some extent), and the median score for the disapproval-value of social desirability was also 10 (with 98% of participants agreeing that lacking sociable characteristics leads to disapproval to some extent). Thus, even participants who scored in the lower ranges of these distributions tended to indicate that these domains were moderately important for approval. Generally, it appears that participants who believed that a high standing in a domain was moderately related to approval realized moderate self-esteem benefits if they evaluated themselves positively. Those who believed that a high standing was strongly related to approval and evaluated themselves positively realized high self-esteem benefits. Even in the domain rated least important for social approval, material wealth, the majority of participants (76%) indicated that it was at least somewhat important for approval. However, the sizable minority of people who evaluated material wealth as not leading to acceptance did allow us to look at a situation where success may be perceived as bringing rejection. Specifically, these results suggested that among those who believed that being wealthy hinders acceptance, participants without wealth had marginally higher self-esteem than those with wealth.

One potential finding in support of the intrapersonal perspective was the lack of a significant interaction between self-ratings and approval beliefs in the moral domain. A supporter of the intrapersonal view might argue that morals represents the domain that should be least tied to social acceptance (given that morals are typically viewed as a strongly internalized set of standards), and thus provides evidence that feelings of self-esteem can emerge from purely personal realms. This argument, however, falls short on two fronts. First, as can be seen in Table 3, the moral domain was not evaluated by our participants as the least important for social acceptance. The material wealth domain was rated less important than morals, but still yielded the predicted interaction. Second, self-evaluation of morals was by far the weakest predictor of

Table 3
Means and standard deviations for approval and disapproval beliefs

	Competence	Physical attractiveness	Material possessions	Sociability	Morals
Approval	9.12 (1.67)	9.75 (1.39)	7.74 (2.14)	10.41 (1.12)	8.16 (1.81)
Disapproval	8.36 (1.75)	9.06 (1.71)	7.17 (2.16)	9.57 (1.28)	8.27 (1.83)

Table 4

Predicting global self-esteem from self-ratings in the five domains entered simultaneously

	β	<i>p</i> value
Competence	.27	.001
Physical attractiveness	.19	.01
Material possessions	.15	.08
Sociability	.13	.09
Morals	-.02	.77

global self-esteem among the five domains of self-evaluation (see Table 4). Although believing oneself to be moral and ethical did significantly predict self-esteem on its own, when entered simultaneously with the other four domains, self-evaluation of morals was the only domain not to independently predict self-esteem, even marginally, as indicated by its semi-partial correlation.⁴ This finding suggests that morals predict global self-esteem only to the extent that there is shared variance with the other, more interpersonal domains. From an interpersonal perspective, it does not seem so surprising that morals are a weak predictor of self-esteem overall. In fact, standing by one's morals may often put the individual in conflict with others. Thus, moral behavior has the potential to undermine social acceptance, and consequently self-esteem. So, although the failure to find the predicted interaction in the moral domain was unexpected, the failure of morals to independently predict global self-esteem is even more difficult to explain from the intrapersonal perspective.

Our findings are consistent with Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) proposal that people differ in their "contingencies of self-worth"—the domains of "outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem" (p. 594)—and that events that are relevant to a particular person's contingencies have a greater impact on self-esteem than events that are irrelevant. As Crocker and Wolfe would predict, self-esteem in the present study was related to people's beliefs that they possessed particular important attributes. However, our interpretation of this pattern differs in emphasis from theirs. Sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995) suggests that contingencies of self-worth are fundamentally contingencies of relational value. That is, the domains that are relevant to a person's sense of self-worth are those on which he or she has staked his or her relational value and social acceptance by significant others. People differ in the degree to which they believe that their relational value is predicated upon their appearance, social desirability, possessions, competence, social skill, morality, and so on. Events that have implications for a person's contingencies of relational value thus affect their self-esteem most strongly. Of

⁴ In a similar analysis predicting self-esteem with approval and disapproval beliefs instead of self-evaluations, only the belief that sociability leads to acceptance significantly predicted self-esteem. Those who believed more strongly in a sociability-acceptance link were more likely to have higher self-esteem. This was true whether approval and disapproval beliefs were tested separately or together. This data argues against the notion that self-worth that is "contingent" on acceptance ultimately undermines self-esteem through conditional self-acceptance. Instead, it suggests that recognizing the importance of one's level of sociability pays off because acceptance really is so important for self-esteem, as hypothesized by sociometer theory.

course, over time, people may internalize these contingencies of relational value so that their self-esteem is affected by events that don't actually have relational consequences in a particular instance. Nonetheless, even these seemingly intrapsychic contingencies of self-worth are ultimately rooted in social acceptance and rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary et al., 1995).

As with any correlational study, determining the direction of causality is impossible, and alternative explanations can be offered. For example, an advocate of the intrapersonal perspective on self-esteem might suggest that people with high self-esteem protect their self-worth with self-serving beliefs about the social value of their strengths and weaknesses. That is, they may defend their high self-esteem by assuming that their strengths are valued and their weaknesses are unimportant to other people. People with low self-esteem, on the other hand, may not have such defenses in place. Such an interpretation would mean that, for high self-esteem people, self-evaluated merit in each of our five domains should be strongly related to beliefs about the acceptance value of that domain, but this would not be true for low self-esteem people. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, in a few cases the relation between self-beliefs and acceptance-beliefs was significantly stronger for high than low self-esteem people. However, the pattern of results suggests that more than self-serving biases is at work. First, the hypothesized strong relation between self-evaluations and acceptance-beliefs for people with high self-esteem did not occur. Only one of 10 correlations for high self-esteem people reached significance, suggesting that people's ratings of what domains are interpersonally important were not due simply to their

Table 5
Within-domain correlations between self-ratings and approval beliefs (self-esteem scores based on a median split)

	Competence	Physical attractiveness	Material possessions	Sociability	Morals
HSE	.22*	.17	-.02	.08	.15
LSE	-.03	-.16	-.07	-.05	.03
<i>z</i> score of comparison, <i>p</i> value	1.67, <i>p</i> < .05	2.20, <i>p</i> < .05	.46, <i>ns</i>	.86, <i>ns</i>	.80, <i>ns</i>

* *p* < .05.

Table 6
Within-domain correlations between self-ratings and disapproval beliefs (self-esteem scores based on a median split)

	Competence	Physical attractiveness	Material possessions	Sociability	Morals
HSE	.11	.05	.08	.16	.06
LSE	-.07	-.15	-.04	-.17	-.01
<i>z</i> score of comparison, <i>p</i> value	1.19, <i>ns</i>	1.33, <i>ns</i>	.79, <i>ns</i>	2.20, <i>p</i> < .05	.46, <i>ns</i>

self-evaluations in those domains. Second, the correlation between self-ratings and acceptance value in the material wealth domain for high self-esteem people is not significantly different from that for low self-esteem people. This is despite the fact that predicted results were obtained in the material wealth domain. The wealth domain seems to be the most objective of the five, and thus least open to the kind of defensive distortion involved in self-serving biases. Still, even in this domain, self-esteem increased with wealth only among those who believe having possessions brings acceptance from others. This finding suggests that, although there may be some defensive processing at the root of our findings, it cannot account for all of the results. Another potential criticism of the ability of the present work to suggest a causal connection between acceptance and self-esteem is that participants did not have an opportunity to indicate the personal importance of each domain. Although this is true, and a potential liability, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) note that, "Weighting self-evaluations by importance seldom improves prediction of global trait self-esteem" (p. 601). However, in our first attempt to do so, weighting self-evaluations by approval-value did improve the prediction of self-esteem.

Future research on the relation between self-evaluations and self-esteem should consider three issues. First, methods designed to examine direction of causality would clearly be beneficial. Although interpersonal theories of self-esteem suggest that self-evaluations and the perceived approval-value of those attributes are causally linked to global self-esteem, the present data do not allow us to rule out alternative causal relationships or the possible influence of an unmeasured variable. Because trait self-esteem is not very susceptible to short-term change, experimental methods present challenges for this area of research. One possibility is to focus on measures of state rather than trait self-esteem, manipulating both self-perceptions in a domain and the perceived approval-value of that domain in a controlled study. Alternatively, to examine causal relationships with trait self-esteem itself, longitudinal methods seem to offer the best approach.

Second, future research would benefit from studying domains with a wider range of perceived approval-value. It would be interesting to uncover stronger evidence that people who are successful but who perceive that success in that domain leads to disapproval experience relatively high or low self-esteem (Jones et al., 1990). More evidence that success in socially disapproved areas is related to lower self-esteem would support the suggestion that perceptions of the approval-value of personal attributes are an important contributor to global self-esteem.

Third, researchers may wish to explore the potential implications of our findings for modifying self-esteem. Traditionally, theorists have suggested that in order to raise people's self-esteem, their self-attitudes must change, particularly self-attitudes involving competence and autonomy. However, research has consistently shown that it is very difficult to induce low self-esteem people to accept positive feedback about themselves (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998; Swann, 1996). Not only is self-doubt cognitively accessible to low self-esteem people (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), suggesting that their negative self-beliefs are strongly held and resistant to change (Petty & Krosnick, 1996), but low self-esteem people may be hesitant to let go of their unflattering self-views because those self-perceptions are a dependable

part of their identity (Swann, 1996). Our results suggest that one may be able to sidestep the difficulty of changing the self-beliefs of people with low self-esteem by persuading them that their existing attributes are valued by other people. This approach avoids challenging a low self-esteem person's deeply held self-doubts, while still putting indirect change pressure on their network of self-relevant attitudes. That is, the persuasion attempt can focus on a low self-esteem person's beliefs about what is important for approval, beliefs that may be weaker, and thus more malleable, than self-attitudes. Furthermore, because low self-esteem people are prone to self-doubt, they may readily accept that their perceptions of what leads to approval are erroneous. Interestingly, this approach would turn what has typically been regarded as a weakness of people with low self-esteem into an asset. Contrary to the traditional notion that self-esteem that is based on others' opinions does not lead to lasting feelings of self-worth, perceptions of others' opinions may be used to augment the positive impact of stable, pre-existing self-views.

Some readers may object that we have painted too strong a contrast between intrapersonal and interpersonal approaches to self-esteem. After all, long-standing discussions of the relationship between the so-called private and public selves have typically concluded that self-evaluations and social evaluations are intimately intertwined and, possibly, inseparable (e.g., Baumeister, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1987; Leary, 1993). Yet, theories of self-esteem have tended to take a strong stand regarding whether people's feeling about themselves are fundamentally rooted in personal, self-evaluations or in the social judgments of other people. Although by no means the last word on this question, the present findings appear to be more congruent with perspectives that link self-esteem to individuals' beliefs about how they are regarded by other people.

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