

# The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem

by R.F. Baumeister, J.M. Boden and L. Smart (and reviewed by William Robson)

Are you puzzled by the apparently-high self-esteem of many of the most anti-social students? Do you wonder why many educators relentlessly focus on self-esteem as the source of all good things? Then R.F. Baumeister, J.M. Boden, and L. Smart's 1996 "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem", *Psycho-logical Review* (the journal of the American Psychological Association), Vol. 103, No. 1, pp. 5-33 is for you! Bear with me while I quote the abstract (as an economist, I can testify there are professions where the standards for these things is equally bad).

"Conventional wisdom has regarded low self-esteem as an important cause of violence, but the opposite view is theoretically viable. An interdisciplinary review of evidence about aggression, crime, and violence contradicted the view that low self-esteem is an important cause. Instead, violence appears to be most commonly a result of threatened egotism — that is, highly favorable views of self that are disputed by some person or circumstance. Inflated, unstable, or tentative beliefs in the self's superiority may be most prone to encountering threats and hence to causing violence."

But it gets better. The authors lead off by noting that various synonyms for high self-esteem have much less positive connotations — pride, egotism, arrogance, conceit, narcissism, and sense of superiority, for example. They then discuss most accounts of the supposed connection between low self-esteem and violence (to do with terrorism, youth gangs, wife-beating, hate crimes, extreme over-reaction to challenges, and so on) showing that they are incoherent or inconsistent with evidence that the perpetrators saw themselves as superior to their victims. They then lead in to their main thesis.

"There are some bases for suggesting that egotism could lead directly to violence. People who regard themselves as superior beings might feel entitled to help themselves to the resources of other, seemingly lesser beings, and indeed they might even aggress against these lesser beings without compunction, just as people kill insects or mice without remorse....Also....egotists might be more likely to assume that they will win a fight, and so they would be more willing to start it. Our main argument, however, does not depict self-esteem as an independent and direct cause of violence. Rather, we propose that the major cause of violence is high self-esteem combined with an ego threat. When favorable views about oneself are questioned... or otherwise put in jeopardy, people may aggress... against the source of the threat." (p.8)

The next section lays out the theory behind their views in terms that unfortunately will tempt a lot of readers with a low tolerance for academic jargon to put the piece down. But they shouldn't! The authors proceed to summarize a huge amount of empirical work on, among other things: self-reported tendencies among criminals; group differences (men generally report higher self-esteem than women; inter-racial aggression tends to be correlated with relative opinions of worth; people under the influence of alcohol have higher self-esteem and are disproportionately represented in criminal acts); investigations of various individual crimes, including murder, assault, rape, domestic violence; youth gangs; torture (people being trained for torture are not generally inculcated with a sense of their inferiority to their intended victims!); wars; terrorism; and genocide. It's an impressive indictment.

For those who like not only to think but also to act, the authors offer some policy recommendations as well.

"If low self-esteem were really the cause of violence, then it would be therapeutically prudent to make every effort to convince rapists, murderers, wife beaters, professional hit men, tyrants, torturers, and others that they are superior beings. From our reading of the empirical literature, however, these people are often violent precisely because they already believe themselves to be superior beings. It would therefore be more effective to direct therapeutic efforts elsewhere (e.g., at cultivating self-control), and if any modifications to self-appraisals were to be attempted, then perhaps it would be better to try instilling modesty and humility." (p. 29)

POW! And to conclude....

"An uncritical endorsement of the cultural value of high self-esteem may...be counterproductive and even dangerous. In principle it might become possible to inflate everyone's self-esteem, but it will almost certainly be impossible to insulate everyone against ego threats. In fact...the higher (and especially the more inflated) the self-esteem, the greater the vulnerability to ego threats. Viewed in this light, the societal pursuit of high self-esteem for everyone may literally end up doing considerable harm." (p. 29)

So now you have some serious academic work (there is, of course, a blizzard of citations in the empirical section) to make you feel less insecure about your politically-incorrect observation that nasty people often seem unaware of their own nastiness, whereas nice people seem to be trying to improve themselves. And as for insight about why so many educators are all worked up about self-esteem — perhaps many of them are scared to tell ignorant, lazy, arrogant students the truth about themselves!

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