

# Self-esteem as a social dilemma

**JOACHIM I. KRUEGER**

**R**EMEMBER the clairvoyant who said to the other clairvoyant, "You're doing great. How am I doing?"

Self-esteem is rather like that. Our sense of self-worth depends, in part, on what others say to us and how they treat us. According to one theory, we are equipped with a sensor that measures social acceptance. Like a thermometer responding to heat, this "sociometer" responds to social signals indicating whether others approve of us and include us in their groups and cliques. There are surely other sources of self-esteem, such as a job well done or drugs that boost serotonin levels in the brain; but social acceptance looms large.

It makes you worry. It is nice to be accepted and loved, but it is disconcerting to be at the mercy of the opinion of others. So why not do it yourself? Boost your self-esteem, and other good things will follow. This has been the message of the self-esteem movement for almost 20 years. And it has not fallen on deaf ears. Amazon.com offers 3,187 titles on self-esteem, which is more than it offers on happiness itself (2,755 titles), but far less than it offers on sex, love or war. Many books are of the self-help variety, suggesting various practices and techniques to boost self-esteem.

Much of this advice is reason-

able, such as the idea of taking responsibility for your actions, treating others with respect, or setting attainable goals. The social aspect, treating others with respect, primarily seems to bolster their self-esteem, and only loop back to you if they reciprocate. As the second clairvoyant might have replied, "Thank you. You are doing great, too."

The effect on the self is indirect. You can't just sit and psych yourself into high self-esteem. You need to give to others what you'd like them to give to you. Making the mercury rise in someone else's sociometer (with hopes of reciprocation) is the opposite of what many self-esteem movers have been saying, namely that you can't love others if you don't love yourself.

Perhaps it is fairer to say that you can't love yourself if you don't love others. Imagine a whole group of seers who can affirm (or bash) one another, but who lack insight into themselves ("You're doing great; how am I doing?") Can this group realize the greatest good for the greatest number of seers?

Suppose one of them is selfish. Happily accepting the affirmations from his colleagues, he does not reciprocate. Not only does he save the effort of stroking other egos, he also notices that his own sociometer rises a little higher than those of the others. He may even find the

difference itself pleasurable. This fellow has reason to think that he rose to the top of the status hierarchy, a seer of seers as it were. His friends (if we can still call them that), may be aware of these turns of events and withhold additional approval.

The outcome is a grouchy group of seers, trapped in a social dilemma. They'd be a happy bunch if they all approved of one another, but he who withholds approval is happier than the others.

Perhaps self-esteem is a self-limiting commodity. As not everyone can be richer or smarter than average, not all can feel as good about themselves as they would like to. As long as approval by others matters, some will receive less than others, and there will be variation in self-esteem.

Many of those on the lower rungs of the esteem scale are motivated to climb. Some succeed by kick-starting reciprocal social approvals or by completing jobs worth doing. Rising up, they create a social mobility of self-esteem, and the question "And how am I doing?" remains worth asking.

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