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Testing causal relationships between self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem

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Sociometer Theory

- Leary & Baumeister (2000)
- Functional, evolutionary explanation of self-esteem.
- Self-esteem functions as an interpersonal monitor of:
  - the quality and quantity of existing relationships,
  - perceived eligibility for relationships,
- and motivates us to act accordingly.
Attractiveness and Self-Esteem

• Self-perceived attractiveness (SPA) positively correlates with self-esteem in both sexes. (e.g. Nell & Ashton, 1996)

• Especially strong relationship in women.
Direction of causation?

- Correlational data is consistent with Sociometer theory ("bottom-up").
- However data can also be explained by "top-down" theories (e.g. Brown et al. 2001).
- Studies showing that there is little relationship between self and other rated attractiveness (e.g. Diener et al, 1995) suggest against Sociometer theory.
- Need for experimental studies to examine direction of causation.
Manipulating self-perceived attractiveness

- Studies 1 & 2 attempted to manipulate SPA in women to examine whether this has a knock-on effect on SE.
- Attractiveness contrast effect: Women who are exposed to pictures of highly attractive others report lower levels of self perceived attractiveness than those exposed to unattractive others (Want, 2009).
Studies 1 & 2: Methods

• Female participants asked to rate attractiveness of (study 1; n = 128) or compare own attractiveness to (study 2; n = 137) “hot” or “not” pictures.

• Completed a variety of subsequent measures of SPA and SE.
Summary of Results

• No initial differences in SPA between groups.
• After the comparison task, participants in the “Not” condition rated themselves as significantly more attractive than those in the “Hot” group.
• No group differences on any self-esteem scales or subscales.
• Does SE affect SPA? (Study 3)
Study 3: Method

• 2 groups: +ve / -ve manipulation (Riketta & Dauenheimer, 2003).

• 76 female participants asked to complete a “reaction time” test.

- Fixation Prime (60 ms) Mask (60 ms)
- Respond: Left / Right

• Then complete SE manipulation check and a measure of SPA.
• Participants in +ve condition reported significantly higher subsequent levels of both SE \((d = .50)\) and SPA \((d = .39)\).
Conclusions and Future Research

• Results support a “top-down” perspective on the relationship between self-perceptions and self-esteem (Brown et al, 2001).

• Future studies on implicit manipulations of SPA and implicit measures of self-esteem.
Implications and Applications

- Effects of media images on self-perceptions and self-esteem.
- Controversy over relationships between self-esteem, academic and job performance, antisocial and criminal behaviour (Baumeister et al. 2003).
- Prospects for self-esteem interventions.
References


