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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.

  “Hot”

  “Not”

- 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.

- 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).

• Clear relationship between self-esteem and happiness and life satisfaction.

• Prospects for self-esteem interventions.
References


