

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, “Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science” offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Let’s Hear a Good Word for Self-Esteem

by David G. Myers

[Orth, U., & Robins, R. W. \(2014\). The development of self-esteem. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 23\(5\), 381–387. doi: 10.1177/0963721414547414](#)

At the pivotal center of our universe is our sense of self — our self-awareness, our self-identity, our self-monitoring, our self-control, and our self-esteem. No surprise, then, that at the center of social–personality psychology is the exploration of “self.” Since 1970, the number of articles having to do with the “self” has soared from 1,543 articles to 28,319 in 2013, according to information retrieved from PsycINFO.

Self-esteem — a subjective sense of one’s self-worth (as distinct from narcissistic feelings of superiority and entitlement) — correlates with good things, including emotional well-being, persistence on difficult tasks, and school achievement. But is high self-esteem the horse or the cart? Does self-esteem protect us from depression and encourage a venturesome spirit? Or does it merely reflect reality — is it a *result* of our surmounting challenges, or perhaps a gauge that reads the quality of our relationships (Baumeister, 2006; Dawes, 1994; Leary, 1999; Seligman, 1994, 2002)?

Researchers have argued the liabilities of excessive positive self-regard — of “unrealistic optimism” (Shepperd, Klein, Waters, & Weinstein, 2013), of blindness to one’s own incompetence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), of the perils of self-serving bias and self-importance (Myers, 1980; Twenge, 2006, 2013), and of “the dark side of self-esteem” (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2009). As APS William James Fellow Roy Baumeister (2001) explained, “Conceited, self-important individuals turn nasty toward those who puncture their bubbles of self-love.”

In response to the self-esteem curmudgeons (including yours truly), Ulrich Orth and Richard Robins (2013), in an earlier *Current Directions in Psychological Science* article, explained that low self-esteem *predicts* vulnerability to depression. Now, in their 2014 article — which is a model of clarity and accessibility to undergraduate readers — they ask more broadly, “Is self-esteem consequential — does it influence important life outcomes?”

Their answer from studies that followed lives through time is “yes”: “Self-esteem is predictive of a person’s success and well-being in important life domains.” Self-esteem predicts future marriage satisfaction, social network size, physical and mental health, and job success and satisfaction; and it does so even after controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, and intelligence. (Perhaps the brief “self-affirmation” interventions that have boosted the school grades of at-risk youth [Cohen & Sherman, 2014] also have boosted their self-esteem.)

One qualification: If one controls for a long enough list of factors that covary with self-esteem, including depressive tendencies, one can squeeze the blood out of the self-esteem predictor. That’s because some variables, such as depressive tendencies, mediate the causal effect of low self-esteem on, say, substance abuse. To offer a parallel example, researchers have noted a correlation, across individuals, between religious engagement and happiness and health (Myers, 2000). But would the correlation remain if one controlled for social support, self-control, meaning, hope, and other variables associated with religious engagement? Likely not, because religious engagement is a package variable. Even a hurricane loses its causal efficacy once one controls for its associated wind, rain, and storm surge.

Given the psychological significance of self-esteem, one wonders — and instructors can ask of their students:

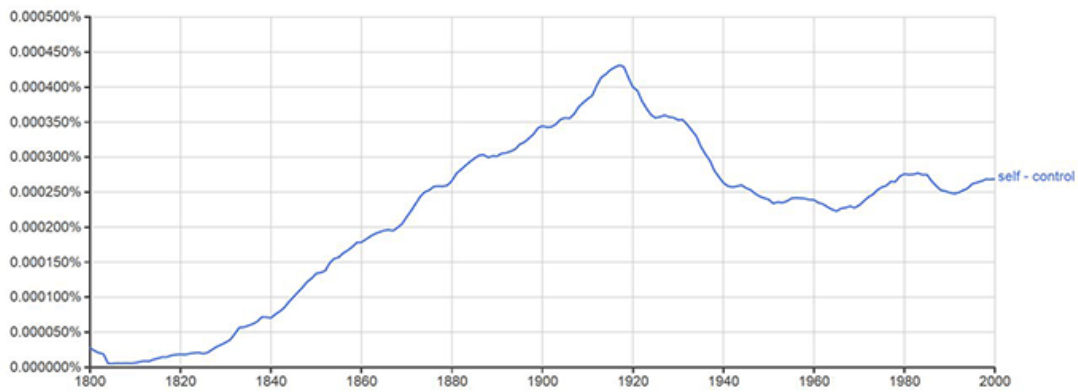
- “*Why* does self-esteem predict future life success and well-being?”
- “Would you expect people’s self-esteem scores to vary strongly with how things are going (like mood), or to be stable (like intelligence) across life’s temporary ups and downs?”
- “What would you suppose: In the long run, does human self-esteem tend to rise and decline across the lifespan? If so, what might you expect to be life’s relative low and high points?”

Orth and Robins focus on the latter two questions, noting that self-esteem is stable. Its variation among people is about three-fourths attributable to an enduring trait and only one-fourth to state variation and measurement error. They report that as people mature, their self-esteem fluctuates less and less. And they show, with a simple figure, that self-esteem tends to increase from late adolescence to mid-life, and then to taper off (albeit less among individuals who maintain their health and wealth in later life).

Their article inspires a tangential exercise that could, as a side benefit, illustrate the increasing availability of big data sources. In class, visit [www.books.google.com/ngrams](http://www.books.google.com/ngrams), and search Google’s more than 5.2 million digitized English books for the proportional occurrence of various self-related words over time.



**Figure 1. The proportional occurrence of the word *self* in a corpus of books published in English between 1800 and the present. Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, [books.google.com/ngrams](https://books.google.com/ngrams)**



**Figure 2. The proportional occurrence of the word *self-control* in a corpus of books published between 1800 and the present. Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, [books.google.com/ngrams](https://books.google.com/ngrams)**



**Figure 3. The proportional occurrence of the word *self-esteem* in a corpus of books published between 1800 and the present. Source: Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, [books.google.com/ngrams](https://books.google.com/ngrams)**

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