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Miranda Klosterman

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Self-Esteem and Relationship Perception

Miranda Klosterman

Mentor: Elizabeth Pascoe Ph.D., Psychological Sciences

Abstract: Fluctuations of state self-esteem, in-the-moment self-esteem, may influence our perceptions romantic relationships in either a positive or negative light. This research, using a subliminal priming task, aimed to test whether manipulation of state self-esteem would cause a significant difference in either relationship satisfaction or, if single, relationship perception. We expected individuals that had their self-esteem positively primed would have higher relationship satisfaction or relationship perception. We also expected a similar relationship for those who had their self-esteem negatively influenced. Some strong correlations were found between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction that leave implications for further research on this topic.

Keywords: *global self-esteem, relationship perception, romantic relationships, state self-esteem*

Romantic relationships seem to be predominant in today's culture. If we take a look at our society and what is advertised, it would seem that love and romance are what most people are searching and longing for in their lives as well as something people value highly. The media also seems to promote relationships. In many movies, relationships are often the main focus. To those who are single, it may suggest that being in a relationship is very desirable and might encourage those individuals to jump into them. However, individuals who are involved in relationships may see the events in movies and the media differently; for example, media break-ups and infidelity may suggest that there is always something better. If romance and love are so central to our society, why are there so many failed relationships? What causes some people jump out of relationships so quickly and others not so much?

As research on romantic relationships has increased, scientists have studied what factors might contribute to what ends or causes low satisfaction in relationships. However, existing research leaves many questions which have yet to be investigated. For example, existing research has yet to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and perceptions of romantic relationships involving romantically unattached individuals. Existing research on self-esteem and relationship perception has not yet deciphered whether self-esteem influences relationship views

or vice versa. The study proposed here will investigate these ideas using experimental methodology in an attempt to unravel the causal direction.

One factor that might affect our relationship perceptions is self-esteem. Fluctuations of in-the-moment self-esteem, also described as state self-esteem, may cause us to question our current relationship status, whatever it may be, and influence us to view romantic relationships in either a positive or negative light. This research aims to test whether manipulation of state self-esteem can cause a significant difference in either relationship satisfaction or, if single, relationship perception. Existing research has already linked self-esteem levels to individuals' current relationship satisfaction. However, much of the existing research measures self-esteem globally, meaning the consistent self-esteem throughout one's life, and categorizes people as having either low or high self-esteem as a whole. Those levels of self-esteem are then typically compared to relationship satisfaction.

The current research tests temporary state self-esteem and whether temporary fluctuations of that self-esteem can affect results on relationship scales. If the results of this research find that fluctuations in state self-esteem affect relationship perception, we may be able to pinpoint a possible source of temporary satisfaction or dissatisfaction within relationships. As an end result, we may be able to educate others to be more conscious of this

effect. We also may make others aware of their individual emotions as well as the ways these emotions can possibly be projected onto their romantic relationships when the relationship itself had nothing to do with those emotions. Not only could this information be useful to those currently involved in romantic relationships, but those unattached as well. For example, awareness of this effect could possibly keep individuals from jumping into relationships for unsound reasons. With these results, it may well be possible to branch this research out into marriage and potentially keep marriages from starting or ending for unnecessary reasons.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is something that is more complicated than one might believe. It cannot be summarized into just one sentence because different social scientists have assigned multiple definitions to the concept. Michael H. Kernis summarized three ways that scientists have viewed and defined self-esteem. Self-esteem could be defined as a person's worthiness, competence, or a combination of both (Kernis 2006). Worthiness refers to how worthy and deserving a person views them self to be. For example, if a person had low self worth, that person would consistently assume they were undeserving of positive things in their lives such as a good job, car, spouse, etc. Second, there is an idea of defining of self-esteem as a measure of competence. This view is that self-esteem is a matter of whether an individual has goals and if that person strives and works hard to achieve those goals. Someone who views them self as competent usually has goals such as graduating from college and believes they have the means to attain those goals. For example, a child who believes worth is determined by intelligence will want to be smart. So, he or she will be focused on looking smart to those around them. However, this child would not want to ask for help or ask questions, they would be more likely to express the things they already know. It seems that this type of self-esteem is meant to come across as a false version of high self-esteem without any true concern for an individual's true worth and value.

The last way one could define self-esteem includes both of the concepts described above. This definition describes self-esteem as a measure of the combination of competence and worthiness. For instance, if a person were to have a goal, feel deserving of that goal, and worked hard using their personal skills to attain that goal, that individual would be seen as a person with high self-esteem.

Not only are there several ways to define self-esteem, but there are also multiple types of self-esteem. The type most commonly researched is global self-esteem. Global self-esteem is defined as a combination of specific and global sense of worthiness (Kernis, 2006). This type of self-esteem is measured as a trait; meaning it is stable within an individual. As a whole, it is not expected to fluctuate from day to day. One of the most popular ways of measuring this type of self-esteem is Rosenberg's 10-item questionnaire that has subjects answer what they believe to be true about themselves (Rosenberg, 1965).

The other type of self-esteem researched is state self-esteem. State self-esteem takes a look at self-esteem in the moment and is more often measured to see if there are fluctuations. This idea claims that self-esteem can be less stable and subject to momentary changes (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). For example, a compliment or insult could change one's state self-esteem temporarily. For the purposes of this study, we will be measuring state self-esteem using the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991). This scale is meant to measure an individual's self-esteem in that moment rather than overall.

Though there is much research on these ideas, some researchers disagree and have their own theories about self-esteem. Cast and Burke (2002) had another idea about how self-esteem is created. They theorized that self-esteem is a product of identity verification, the relationship between goals and achievements, and how these things are perceived by the individual. For example, if an individual believes that the factor that contributes best to their identity as a student is attendance, then that student will behave in ways that center

around getting to school as often as possible. These behaviors may include setting an alarm, making sure transportation is reliable, etc. When this person is able to maintain good attendance, it will create a sense of control and belief in the ability to achieve goals they set. This creates higher self-esteem, according to Cast and Burke. However, if this person is unable to maintain good attendance it is likely that person may feel inadequate and unable to achieve the goals set for themselves thus creating a lower self-esteem.

Romantic Relationships

Relationship satisfaction is best described as how satisfied or dissatisfied an individual is with their current relationship (e.g. Regan, 2011; Murray, 2002; Zeigler-Hill, 2011; Sciangula, 2009). A great deal of research has been conducted on global self-esteem and how it may relate to relationships satisfaction (e.g. Regan, 2011; Murray, 2002; Zeigler-Hill et.al, 2011; Sciangula, 2009). Sciangula and Morry (2009) conducted a study and hypothesized that self-esteem affects self-perception. In turn, self-perception would affect the way they assumed their romantic partners perceived them (metaperception). They also estimated that self-perception minus metaperception, or what they called personal regard, would predict the individual's relationship satisfaction. What they found was that self-esteem contributed to self-perception and metaperception. Participants with lower self-esteem self-deprecated leading to less relationship satisfaction, while those with higher self-esteem self-enhanced leading to higher relationship satisfaction. These findings are important in leading into what this study plans to investigate, however there are some limitations to this research. In this methodology, Sciangula and Morry used participants who had only been in relationships for 3 months. This may not be enough time for participants to have gone through any sort of conflict with their partner. This also may not be a sufficient amount of time to truly get to know someone. Because of this, the individuals may be more likely to state they are satisfied regardless of their self-esteem causing data to skew one way.

There is also some research done on how either stable or unstable self-esteem could influence relationship satisfaction, regardless of whether it is high or low. Kernis et. al. (1993) found that instability was connected to accepting positive feedback and rejecting negative feedback in those with higher self-esteem. However, for those with low self-esteem, instability was not related to accepting positive feedback but was related to the acceptance of negative feedback. Branching off of this research, Zeigler-Hill et. al. (2011) investigated whether this information would make a difference in relationship perception. The interesting results they found showed that those with unstable high self-esteem had more positive views of their relationships overall, but may be claiming these positive feelings in order to enhance their feelings of self-worth. Zeigler-Hill et. al. argue the possibility that those individuals who show signs of instability in their self-esteem may be using their relationships to regulate the way they feel about themselves. Unexpectedly, gender influenced the tendency for this type of self-esteem boosting. Men with unstable high self-esteem were more likely to claim positive relationship views than women with unstable high self-esteem.

Research has also been done on constructs similar or related to self-esteem, such as optimism. For example, (Srivastava et. al., 2006) found that those who are more optimistic have greater relationship satisfaction. Srivastava et. al. also found that the optimists, when problems arose, saw their partners in a more positive way and as more constructive throughout their hard times.

Though these findings are interesting, it proves there is a big gap in current research of romantic relationships. Little to no research exists that studies single individuals' perception of romantic relationships. There are other areas that may investigate this such as romantic myths, abstract ideas and beliefs people have about relationships that may or may not be true such as love at first sight. However, it is difficult to find much research regarding single individual's self-esteem and its connection to relationship

perception. Furthermore, there is much research done on global and trait self-esteem, yet there has not been a whole lot of research which manipulates state self-esteem. One study conducted by Riketta and Dauenheimer (2003) tested a method meant to subliminally and temporarily alter state self-esteem while leaving mood unaffected. The results showed that their method was effective in manipulating self-esteem without effecting mood. However, no studies, to the knowledge of this author, test experimentally whether fluctuations in state self-esteem impact relationship satisfaction and perception.

The current research attempts attempt to investigate a number of questions where existing research is lacking. First, this research will investigate not only currently attached individuals and their relationship satisfaction, but will also study single individuals' perceptions of relationships. Secondly, this study will experimentally manipulate state self-esteem in order to discover whether and how fluctuations in state self-esteem may affect both relationship satisfaction and the relationship perceptions of single individuals.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 26 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M=19.86$). 12 were male, 11 were female, and three did not specify gender.

Procedure

Upon arriving at the study site, participants gave informed consent to participate in the study described as assessing the relationship between relationship perceptions and individual differences in vigilance or watchfulness. Participants completed the entire procedure at a computer in a private room. Before beginning the main portions of the experiment, participants were asked a series of questions about their relationship status.

Self-esteem manipulation task

Subliminal primes, meant to manipulate state self-esteem, were embedded in a computer task based on the procedure of Riketta and Dauenheimer (2003). Participants were asked to focus on the center of the screen where an "X" flashed in the middle, followed by a row of asterisks (****) also in the center of the screen. In one of the four quadrants of the computer screen, flashes then appeared that were either positive or negative words and self- or other-referent words for 60ms and then immediately masked with a string of meaningless letters for 60ms. These time designations allowed for subliminal but not conscious processing of the word pairings, thus participants were not consciously aware of the words being flashed on the screen. They were also asked to indicate, via specific keys on a computer keyboard, whether flashes had appeared in the right or left side of the screen.

Word pairings differed between participants differed based on experimental conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three possible conditions. Two conditions paired either positive words ('good', 'great', and 'valuable') or negative words ('bad', 'lousy', and 'worthless') with self-referent words such as "I" to manipulate positive and negative self-esteem, respectively. The third, control condition paired positive and negative words with the non-self-referent name Leo, chosen because it is not a very common name. and no participants were expected call themselves Leo (and none, in fact, did). In Riketta and Dauenheimer's study, this procedure was successful in temporarily manipulating state self-esteem temporarily in both the positive and negative directions. Riketta and Dauenheimer's study showed that the effect was apparent for at least as long as it took participants to fill out a short survey, which was 3-5 minutes, and the effect beyond that time span is unknown. Thus, this procedure was used in the current study as an experimental manipulation of state self-esteem.

Following this task, participants completed a series of questionnaires to assess relationship satisfaction, perception, and state and global self-esteem.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)
(Hendrick, 1988)

The RAS is a scale often used to assess relationship satisfaction. It includes a series of questions answered via Likert scale from 1 to 5 (e.g. 1=never or unsatisfied, 5=always or extremely satisfied) and assessed certain respondents' feelings regarding their current romantic relationship (e.g. 'How well does your partner meet your needs?'; 'In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?'). This scale was only presented to students who indicated they were currently in a romantic relationship.

Relationship Perception Scale (RPS)

This scale was created specifically for this study by modifying the questions on the RAS (Hendrick, 1988) to be applicable to individuals who are not currently involved in a romantic relationship. The questions were answered via Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1=never or unsatisfied, 5=always or extremely satisfied) and assessed unattached individuals' overall feelings and perceptions regarding relationships as a whole ('I believe two people can be meant for each other', 'How well do you expect a potential romantic partner could meet your needs?').

Personal Attitudes Scale (Cross, Bacon, and Morris, 2000)

This survey consists of questions concerning respondents' feelings and attitudes regarding close relationships and the importance these relationships hold for self-definition ("My close relationships are an important reflection of who I am", "When I feel very close to someone, it often feels to me like that person is an important part of who I am"). These questions are answered using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

These questions run on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). This

survey consists of questions concerning global self-esteem ("On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", "At times, I think I am no good at all").

State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991)

These questions run on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). These questions aim to measure an individuals' state self-esteem ("I feel confident about my abilities", "I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or a failure"). This questionnaire was included to serve as a manipulation check for the experimental manipulation of state self-esteem.

Finally, participants answered demographic questions regarding gender, race/ethnicity, and year in school.

RESULTS

15 participants stated they were single and 11 stated they were currently involved in relationships. Out of those that were single, 6 were in the positive condition, 6 were in the negative condition, and 3 were in the neutral condition. Out of those who were involved in current relationships, 3 were in the positive condition, 3 were in the negative condition, and 5 were neutral. Personal Attitudes Scale mean score=40.81. Relationship Assessment Scale mean score=28.64. Relationship Perception Scale mean score=28.60. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale mean score=39.35. State Self-Esteem Scale mean score=60.23.

Correlational analyses were performed for the major variables in the study. For individuals who were currently involved in a romantic relationship, there was a positive correlation between global self-esteem (RSES) and relationship satisfaction (RAS) ($r = .990$ $p = 0.037$). This means that those who reported higher self-esteem also reported higher relationship satisfaction. A positive correlation was also found for measured state self-esteem (SSES) and relationship satisfaction (RAS) ($r = .753$ $p = .018$). This suggests that those who reported higher state self-esteem also had higher relationship satisfaction. Correlations between

global self-esteem (RSES) and relationship perception of single individuals ($r=.741$ $p=.071$). These results were not significant, although they were close. Tests were also run between state self-esteem (SSES) and relationship perception of single individuals (RPS) ($r=.374$ $p=.669$). This suggests that there is no significant relationship between the two variables. Measured state self-esteem (SSES) and global self-esteem (RSE) were also highly correlated ($r=.749$ $p>.001$). This means that there is a positive relationship between global self-esteem and state-self-esteem. Those who reported high global self-esteem tended to report high state self-esteem.

A series of ANOVAs were used to test the study's two main hypotheses. First, the hypothesis that fluctuations in state self-esteem would affect relationship satisfaction for attached individuals was tested. No significant effects of experimental manipulation on RAS emerged ($p=0.491$). P was greater than .05. This result suggests that fluctuations in state self-esteem may not necessarily affect attached individuals' perceptions of their relationships. Similar results were found for the ANOVA testing the hypothesis that fluctuations in state self-esteem would affect single individuals perceptions of relationships in general. There were no significant effects of experimental condition on RPS ($p=0.127$).

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis stating that individuals manipulated to experience increased self-esteem would have higher scores on the Relationship Assessment Scale and the Relationship Perception Scale and that those manipulated to experience decreased self-esteem would have lower scores on the RAS and the RPS were not supported by the results. Thus, this study suggests there is no relationship between experimental fluctuations in self-esteem and relationships perception. However, many limitations of the study could have hindered the outcome. The most critical limitation of the study was the small number of participants included. In each condition there were only about 3-6 participants thus the results of this study should be taken with caution. It is possible

that the null result was simply due to the lack of power, rather than that the hypothesized relationships do not exist. It is possible that with an increased sample size, the study's hypothesis could have been supported. Another limitation to this study is participant honesty. Our results are based to the belief that every participant was honest in their answers, however it is possible that some participants could have lied in their reports in order to avoid psychological discomfort. The population we took our sample from is also a limitation. Participants were taken from the participant pool that consists of mostly freshman and sophomore students making our age range less diverse.

One correlation that was significant was between global self-esteem and relationship satisfaction only for those currently involved in relationships. This shows that there is possibly a relationship between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. This replicates the past findings as well as gives reason to further investigate this relationship. However, this relationship was only correlational, and the causal direction cannot be determined. For example, it is unclear whether having high global self-esteem leads to greater relationship satisfaction, whether being satisfied with one's relationship leads to enhanced global self-esteem, whether both contribute to the other, or if the link is caused by a third factor, such as attachment. For example, secure parental attachments could result in enhanced self-esteem and greater relationship satisfaction separately, with self-esteem and relationship satisfaction having no causal link to each other. The same relationship was found between state self-esteem and relationship satisfaction also only involving those who are currently involved in relationships. Even though the experimental manipulation did not affect perceptions of relationships satisfaction for these individuals, and thus we cannot conclude that changes in state self-esteem cause changes in relationship perception, this correlation suggests the idea might still hold merit and warrants for further investigation.

Because of the numerous limitations of this particular study, more research can still give

evidence to the importance of self-esteem in daily life, especially in relationships. If this hypothesis were supported it could affect our behaviors in daily life for the better. It could make individuals aware that their fleeting perceptions of themselves could possibly change the ways in which they view their current relationships or relationships overall. This, in turn, could help people understand that their low satisfaction could be due to more than just their interaction with the other person, it could be due to their perceptions of themselves. If this hypothesis were to be supported there would be other areas that would need to be explored. One question would be, why does state self-esteem effect relationship perceptions? Other closely related topics could also be studied such as optimism and mood. Could these other factors also effect relationship perceptions? With the correlations found between both global and state self-esteem and relationship satisfaction we can acknowledge the relationship between them. This information could make others aware that their satisfaction in relationships could be influenced by other variables such as the way we perceive ourselves.

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