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An Overview of Self-Esteem Theory
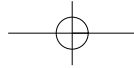
Key ideas in this chapter

This chapter provides an overview of self-esteem theory and the research evidence which underpins it. The field is rich in terms of ideas, but this very richness can provide difficulties because of the wide range of perspectives adopted and the variation in terminology employed. You will learn about:

- **some key ideas which have influenced how we talk about and investigate self-perceptions**
- **some issues surrounding the definition of terms**
- **the main research paradigms in this area – that is, the main ways in which self-esteem has been investigated, and the beliefs that underpin these approaches**
- **four key processes believed to influence our self-esteem.**

Introduction

A concern with how people value themselves is hardly new. References to what we now call self-esteem can be found in the work of the ancient philosophers; for example, more than three hundred years before the birth of Christ, Aristotle made reference to the idea of self-respect[1]. However,
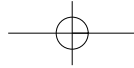
there is little doubt that an interest in self-esteem has grown significantly in modern times. In particular, the last decades of the 20th century saw the emergence of what has been called the self-esteem movement. This is a general label which has been applied to the increase in interest and activity – both organisational and financial – in the area. The roots of this can be found in beliefs about the importance of self-esteem; that is, its importance to general psychological health and well-being. But alongside such beliefs, there are those who argue that a healthy self-esteem is related to a range of performance factors in education, communities and the workplace. In essence, this view sees a positive sense of self leading not just to health and happiness, but to more efficient functioning in all respects.

Perhaps this was best exemplified by the 'California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility' in the 1980s. This initiative, which saw the state legislature investing large sums of money in an attempt to raise the self-esteem of its population, was based on a belief that improving self-esteem would lead to a range of benefits, both for the individual and for society. Not only would schoolchildren and students engage more with their studies, but workers in industry would also become more productive as a result of higher self-esteem. As a consequence, everyone would lead a more fulfilling life and society as a whole would benefit. This view then sees self-esteem as a panacea: a cure for all ills. Those who wish to read more about the California Task Force – including the evaluation of the project – should locate the report referenced at the end of this chapter (California State Department of Education, 1992).

While we are unaware of any similar initiative in the UK, there is little doubt that an industry associated with self-esteem enhancement has grown steadily in recent decades. It is interesting to Google 'self-esteem' and note how many of the hits (and there will probably be over 17 million of them) relate to people or organisations offering help, support or advice – sometimes free, but often at a price. While many of these groups may be well-intentioned, we might hold reservations about some of the others. Certainly, one might be excused for suspecting the motives of some 'conceptual entrepreneurs'. This is a label used by Hewitt (1998) to describe people who see a financial opportunity in convincing others that there is a problem (in this case, low self-esteem) and that they have the solution for it. For teachers with a genuine interest in enhancing the self-esteem of children, the skill is to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

If the growth of the self-esteem industry in its widest sense raises some concerns, the picture in education was (initially at least) somewhat less

contentious. There were many changes in educational thinking during the 1960s which led to greater interest in the role of self-esteem enhancement in schools. These changes included a move towards the holistic development of children, coupled with a growing awareness of the personal and social needs of individuals. This is a perspective with which many teachers identify, and self-esteem is still seen as a legitimate and important element of the curriculum in primary schools in many countries. This is true both at the level of official policy and individual teacher beliefs. It is certainly a perspective which underpins the work of the current authors. However, having said this, it has to be acknowledged that this is not a universal perspective.
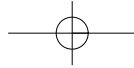
In fact, recent years have seen a 'self-esteem backlash' with teachers, psychologists and philosophers expressing concerns about what they regard as a preoccupation with self-esteem. We shall be looking at some of these concerns later in this book, but one recurring theme is a belief that self-esteem enhancement has achieved prominence at the expense of academic achievement. According to this view, we have been so concerned about protecting children's self-esteem that the quality of learning has suffered; we have 'taken our eye off the ball'. Whether this is true or not, this one issue, perhaps more than any other, has resulted in a polarisation of views on the topic amongst many in education, and indeed in society in general. In the course of this book, we hope to explain why this apparent choice – between enhancing self-esteem or improving learning – reflects a false dichotomy. But that is for later; first we will consider some key ideas from theory and research in the area.

Some important ideas from the literature on self-esteem

As Nicholas Emler pointed out, 'Few ideas in the human sciences have ever achieved the level of attention that has been lavished upon the notion of self-esteem' (2001, p. 2). Certainly, the literature on this topic is vast and is located in many academic disciplines; these include (but are not limited to) philosophy, sociology and psychology. In order to do justice to them all, we would require several volumes – not just a few short chapters! We have therefore had to be very selective and have focused mainly on the psychological literature. Even within this discipline, there are distinctive contributions from different branches of psychology: from cognitive, humanistic, psychoanalytical and social psychology.

Self-esteem research can be traced back over a hundred years to the

pioneering writing of William James (1890/1983). For James, our self-esteem reflects the relationship between our successes and our aspirations. In simple terms, feelings of self-esteem are determined by how successful we are in being what we hope to be. If I aspire to be a successful musician and I am making good progress towards that goal, my self-esteem is higher than it would be if I was failing to progress in my musical career. This emphasises an important point which will recur throughout this book – self-esteem is influenced by beliefs about competence.

Another early writer whose ideas remain influential is Charles Horton Cooley. In 1902, he argued that how we feel about ourselves is influenced by what we believe *other people* think of us. This idea – that we take on board the reflected appraisals of significant others – is encapsulated in his idea of the 'looking-glass self'. So, in self-esteem terms, the feedback we receive from other people serves as our looking glass. The point here is that as social animals, we cannot ignore the views that others express, or how others seem to rate us. This idea will also be central to the later chapters of this book.

Since the early writing of James and Cooley (and other influential writers such as George Herbert Mead), work in the area of self-perception has steadily accumulated. We shall be referring to the work of such seminal writers as Stanley Coopersmith, Morris Rosenberg and Carl Rogers, as well as to several more recent contributors. But first there is an important point to be made about the language we employ when we discuss the self.

The language of self-perception

The more one reads about theory and research in the area of self-perception, the more one realises that the terminology is neither consistent nor straightforward. This will become apparent quite quickly.

Let us start with the obvious question. What is self esteem; how has it been defined? Well, in everyday speech at least, we probably share a common understanding of the term. Most would accept that self-esteem is a personal judgement about the self – a judgement which may be either positive or negative. One of the most frequently cited definitions is that of Coopersmith (1967): 'In short, self-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes an individual holds towards himself' (p. 4). Rosenberg, who, alongside Coopersmith, would be considered one of the giants in the field of self-esteem, stated simply that self-esteem is a positive or negative attitude towards the self. More recently,
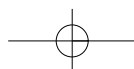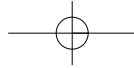
Roy Baumeister, a prominent writer in this area, said that self-esteem is a favourable global evaluation of the self. The use of the words judgement, attitude and evaluation are central to the issues we raise in later chapters of this book.

While these definitions seem broadly consistent with each other, and with everyday notions of self-esteem, there is a problem. Such definitions would seem to apply equally well to terms such as self-worth, self-regard, self-confidence, self-acceptance and self-respect. Some might argue that they are effectively the same as self-efficacy and self-concept. But, as we shall see in the course of this book, these terms are not synonymous. There are some quite important differences between them and they have been conceptualised and measured in different ways.

(You may want to note down your own definitions of these terms, and compare your list to that which is provided at the end of this chapter.)

Variability in definitions

While most workers in the area would accept the definitions of self-esteem we have provided in the section above, beyond that measure of agreement the picture becomes less clear-cut.

To a certain extent, this variability in terminology reflects the fact that different workers in the field have investigated the self from different perspectives, using different methods and creating different ways of understanding how we value ourselves. For example, even limiting ourselves to the discipline of psychology, self-esteem has been studied from the perspectives of cognitive psychology (Seymour Epstein), behavioural psychology (Stanley Coopersmith), humanistic psychology (Nathaniel Branden), psychodynamic theory (Robert White) and person-centred counselling (Carl Rogers). And this is before we look at writing in the area of philosophy and sociology!

The point is that all of these disciplines have their own frames of reference, methods of enquiry and associated truth criteria. (The last of these refers to what is considered proof or evidence in that discipline.) The consequence is that it becomes difficult to piece together a coherent picture of the field. This lack of agreement can be illustrated by looking at the ways in which writers have linked self-esteem to two other ideas: self-concept and self-worth.

To take the first of these, many writers differentiate self-esteem and self-concept. Self-concept is often considered the highest level of our collection
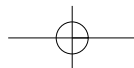
of 'self-words'. From this perspective, self-concept is defined as the sum of the beliefs that individuals hold about themselves. It has both descriptive and evaluative aspects. Descriptive aspects are reflected in self-image, and include gender, occupation, ethnicity, family role, and so on. The evaluative aspects – how we *feel and think* about these characteristics – are reflected in our self-esteem. It can be seen that this definition of self-esteem, emphasising evaluations or feelings about the self, is compatible with the definitions provided above.
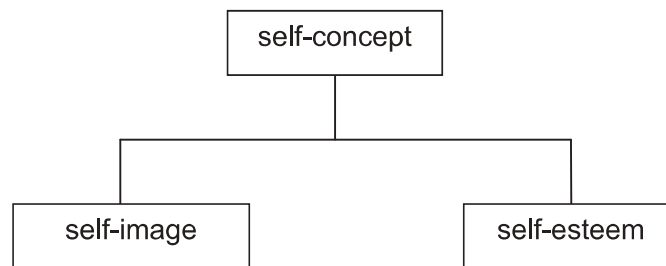
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Figure 2.1   The relationship between key self terms

While this perspective is widely accepted, it is not the only view of the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem. For example, Dennis Lawrence, whose publications on self-esteem have provided much helpful advice for teachers over the years, sees self-concept as an umbrella term consisting of three components: self-image, ideal self and self-esteem. This approach has links with earlier work by Carl Rogers, and can be represented by the following diagram:
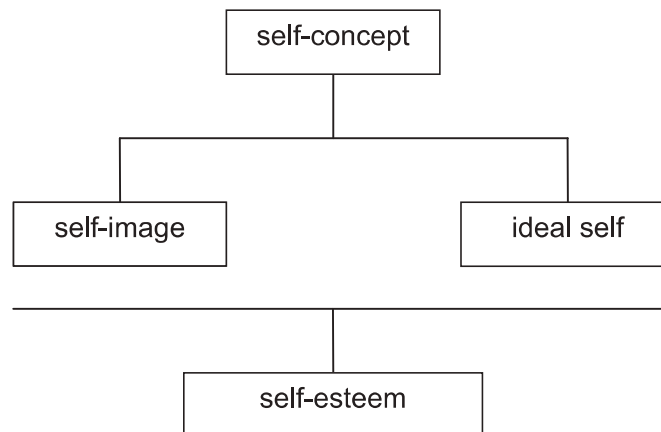
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Figure 2.2   An alternative model of the relationship between self terms. Reproduced with permission from Lawrence, 2006, p. 3

According to this model, the self-image is how we currently see ourselves; it is an awareness of our mental and physical characteristics. This seems consistent with its use in the previous diagram. The ideal self is a vision or a model of the person we would like to become. Self-esteem, according to this view, is how we feel about the difference between these two. Stated simply, if our self-image (how we currently see ourselves) is close to our ideal self (what we aspire to be) then our self-esteem is high. We are working towards achieving our goals. Rogers used the term congruence when the actual self or self-image and the ideal self are in harmony in this way. In contrast, if the gap between our self-image and our ideal self is wide, there is a lack of congruence and our self-esteem is correspondingly lower.

Readers may detect similarities with the pioneering work of William James, mentioned earlier. It will be recalled that, for James, self-esteem was the ratio of our successes to our pretensions.

But to return to our discussion about variations in terminology, yet another way of looking at the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem can be found in the writing of one of the leading authorities in the field of self-concept, Herbert Marsh. In his work, overall self-concept is synonymous with self-esteem (see for example, Marsh and Craven, 2006).
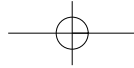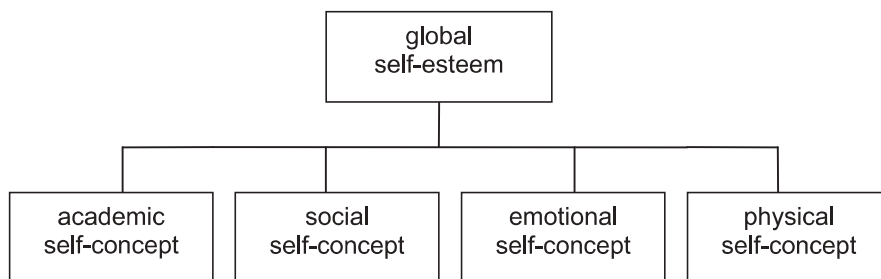

Figure 2.3   A third model of the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem

From this perspective, individuals make judgements about their abilities or performance in different contexts – for example, how successful they are in academic contexts, how competent they feel in social situations, and so on. When taken together, these various judgements combine to create an overall judgement about the self. This overall judgement is called *general self-concept* or *global self-esteem*. Marsh's work is actually more complex than this, and is discussed in more detail below. It will be revisited at several points in the following chapters since it has particular insights to offer teachers.

But to return to the key point about the terminology of self-esteem, even at this early stage in our discussion of self-esteem theory we can see that there are some very basic differences in the way the most fundamental constructs are defined. In fact, there are many other occasions where labels are used in different ways by different authors. For our second example, we mention just one more of these.

A key term in the literature is self-worth. Many writers use this interchangeably with self-esteem. This is illustrated by the title of Nicholas Emler's useful overview of the research in this area: *Self-esteem: The Costs and Causes of Low Self-worth* (2001), to which we refer later. Self-worth also seems synonymous with the label self-regard, associated with the work of Carl Rogers (1961). However, one particular model, which we discuss at some length in the next chapter, differentiates self-esteem and self-worth. This view, known as a two-dimensional model of self-esteem, sees self-worth as a *component* of self-esteem – with the other component being related to beliefs about competence or efficacy.

Many other inconsistencies are evident in the literature, but enough has been said here to illustrate the point: the field of self-perception is bedevilled by a lack of consensus on terminology. At this point, the enthusiastic but busy teacher might feel a little frustrated by the variety of definitions and beliefs in this area. And, of course, when the picture from academic enquiry is unclear, there is a very real danger that people may fall back on simplistic notions to help explain things.

However, we would encourage readers to be patient a little longer; there are some basic ideas which help us to gain an overview of the field and make sense of it all. In fact, one way to gain a perspective on the wealth of material in the area of self-esteem is to look at the way in which it has been studied in recent years.

Some different approaches to the study of self-esteem

In general terms, there have been three major approaches to the study of self-esteem and these differ in some important respects. The first of these is a *unidimensional* approach, where self-esteem is seen as a generalised feeling of worth. The second approach is really a variant of this, where global self-esteem is seen to be *multi-dimensional* and to comprise different elements. Finally, we have a more complex approach, based on a differentiated, *hierarchical* model, where self-esteem is seen as a set of judgements about performance in different domains. We shall look at each approach in turn,
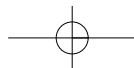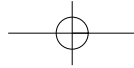
considering the basic principles, the main ways of measuring the phenomenon and the focus of the work that tends to be done from that perspective.

## The unidimensional perspective: global self-esteem

When discussing the unidimensional perspective on self-esteem, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of Morris Rosenberg. His work is often regarded as the central reference point in the field. Indeed, his measure of self-esteem (discussed below) is considered the gold standard against which all other self-esteem measures are judged. From this perspective, self-esteem is viewed as a generalised attitude towards the self.

With self-esteem, as with most attitudes, the strength or conviction with which it is held will influence how stable it is. For example, if I have firmly held attitudes in favour of gender equality, these are unlikely to be changed by one or two incidents of a negative nature. Similarly, if I am convinced about my overall self-esteem, it will not be easily changed by short-term setbacks. However, if that attitude is not so firmly held – that is, if I have somewhat mixed feelings about gender equality, or my self-esteem is uncertain – then the attitude is more susceptible to influence from events.

Of course, this is equally true if my attitudes are negative; a firmly held negative attitude towards the self is unlikely to be easily changed by one or two positive but short-term experiences. Unfortunately, many teachers may be able to recall children whose behaviour has illustrated this characteristic. While individuals with high self-esteem are likely to cope with setbacks, and to persevere with difficulties in order to overcome them, those with uncertain self-esteem are more likely to succumb to the challenge and to give up. The implications of such mindsets will be considered in later chapters.

This is not to say that self-esteem never varies; on the contrary, it is accepted that levels of self-esteem can and do vary *somewhat* from day to day. Nevertheless, the point is that we have an overall level of self-esteem which tends to be relatively stable. It may fluctuate a little, but does so around an average level. In this respect, self-esteem can be seen as having the characteristics of both a trait (that is, a relatively consistent personality variable) and a state (in that it can be influenced by the situation one is in). The underlying perspective of the unidimensional model, though, is that in *overall terms* one feels positive or negative about oneself.

This perspective is reflected in measurement terms. Accordingly, the level of overall self-esteem is determined by the sum of the positive statements
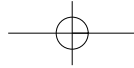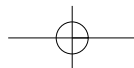
that individuals make about themselves. If one looks at the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, this becomes clear. Like most self-esteem measures, this is a self-completion scale – in this case, designed originally for adolescents.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

2. At times I think I am no good at all.

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel I am a failure.

10. I take a positive attitude towards myself.

Figure 2.4   The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Reproduced with permission from Rosenberg, 1965

Respondents indicate whether they agree or disagree with each statement in turn – often using a four- or five-point scale. These ratings are then added up to provide a self-esteem 'score' or 'level'. So we see that such a score or level is simply the sum of the positive statements made about the self. It is also apparent that these are very general in nature; they reflect global evaluations of the self.

Much work in this area has focused on the relationship between global self-esteem and a variety of social and personal problems. For example, low self-esteem has been associated with the incidence of teenage pregnancy and with eating disorders. It is prevalent amongst victims of bullying. It has also been linked with low income and extended unemployment, specifically in males. In terms of psychological health, it has been

associated with vulnerability to depression and worse: suicide and suicidal thoughts.

However, as Nicholas Emler (2001) points out in his very useful overview of the evidence, there is a problem in interpreting these apparent links. The evidence available often provides limited information about the *nature* and *direction* of these influences. The point is that self-esteem could be the cause or the consequence of the associated problems. So, we cannot be sure whether low self-esteem contributes to people failing to get a job, or whether it is simply a consequence of being unemployed. Perhaps it is both cause *and* effect. Another possibility is that an *apparent* link – say between teenage pregnancy and low self-esteem – may actually be a result of another factor. For example, multiple partners and a difficulty with relationships might lead to both low self-esteem and unwanted pregnancies. In such a case, the link between low self-esteem and teenage pregnancies is purely incidental.

Of central interest to teachers is the relationship between global self-esteem and educational progress. In fact, many teachers hold a belief that raising self-esteem in children is likely to lead to future educational successes that might not otherwise have been achieved. Unfortunately, the evidence here is not encouraging. There is a relationship between global self-esteem and achievement, but it is not strong. And once more, we have the question about the direction of causality. Does higher self-esteem cause better grades, or do better grades lead to higher self-esteem? Or is something else influencing them both? We examine the issues here in more detail in Chapter 4.

There are other variations on the theme of global self-esteem, including a novel approach which sees self-esteem as a sociometer: a measure of our social acceptance. This idea is associated with the work of Mark Leary (1999) and the argument is that in evolutionary terms, being accepted by the social group has survival value. According to this view, our self-esteem reflects the extent to which we feel we are being accepted by others, and influences our behaviour accordingly. If we feel we are not accepted by others, this is a threat to survival and produces unpleasant feelings typically associated with low self-esteem. We feel the need to gain the approval of others.

A multi-dimensional view of self-esteem

There are several writers in the area of self-esteem who share a focus on the central importance of self-esteem, but who also look at different components of this overall judgement. One of these is Stanley
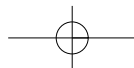
Coopersmith. Amongst his major contributions to our knowledge of self-esteem has been a recognition of the role that parents play in the development of a child's self-esteem, through their attitudes and their behaviours towards their children. The first version of his Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) consisted of 50 items in four sub-scales: peers, parents, school and personal interests. So although this provided an overall or global self-esteem score, it could also be examined to look for information from the four sub-scales.
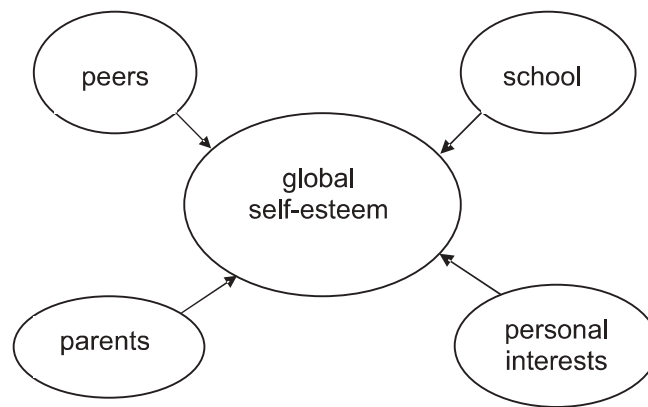

Figure 2.5 Global self-esteem being influenced by different factors

Another example is provided by the work of Susan Harter. In work spanning several decades, she has focused in particular on how children and adolescents develop a view of themselves. In a similar way to Coopersmith, she is interested in overall levels of self-esteem, but also in the nature of self-perceptions in different areas of children's lives. This is reflected in her approach to the measurement of self-esteem. In her 'Self-Perception Profile for Children' (SPPC) (Harter, 1985), a respected and widely-used instrument, she attempts to measure children's perceptions in five areas or *specific domains* – in addition to global self-worth. Harter labels these specific domains as follows: scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance and behavioural conduct. The argument is essentially that an individual's perception of worth in these different domains can vary – but that, in combination, these judgements influence the overall level of self-esteem.

Here are some items from just one of the sub-scales of Harter's SPPC, relating to social competence. It will be noted that these are presented in the form of binary choices; children have to say which statement is most like them.

Some kids find it hard to make friends;

but

other kids find it pretty easy to make friends.

Some kids are popular with kids their age;

but

other kids are not very popular.

Some kids are always doing things with *a lot* of kids;

but

other kids usually do things *by themselves.*

Some kids wish that more people their age liked them;

but

other kids feel that other people of their age *do* like them.

Figure 2.6   Items from the social acceptance sub-scale of Harter's SPPC. Reproduced with permission from Harter, 1985

As well as tapping into children's beliefs about their competence in these domains, Harter is also interested in how children *value* these skills or abilities. This relates to a widely held belief in self-esteem circles, going back to the pioneering work of James at the beginning of the 20th century, known as the importance effect. The argument here is that if we value a skill or ability, success or failure will affect our self-esteem; if we don't value it, it is less likely to do so. The importance effect relates to what we call the *contingencies* of self-esteem. A contingency of self-esteem is defined as 'a
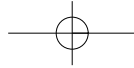
domain or category of outcomes on which a person has staked his or her self-esteem' (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001, p. 594). So, for a boy who really values football, being dropped from the team is likely to have a negative effect because he stakes his self-esteem on being a good footballer. In contrast, being dropped is unlikely to have a significant effect on the self-esteem of a child who is indifferent towards football; his self-esteem is not contingent upon success as a footballer.

We shall discuss this in more detail in later chapters since these ideas raise many important issues for teachers about the sort of things children base their self-esteem on. The more we know about these contingencies, the better we can help children who experience low self-esteem. Another reason this knowledge is important is because of the links between self-esteem and behaviour, a perennial concern for teachers.

But to conclude this section, we feel obliged to make the following point. Although the notion of the importance effect seems intuitively correct and is implicitly or explicitly supported by many writers in the field, recently it has been called into question. (A reference is supplied at the end of this chapter if you wish to follow this up.) However, we move on now to look at a third and rather different approach to how self-esteem is conceptualised and measured.

The hierarchical model

There are many differences between the hierarchical model and those which emphasise global judgements of self-esteem – even those such as Harter's work, outlined above, which include a multi-dimensional element. These concern the structure of the model (its fundamental nature and how it 'works'), how it is measured and what the information collected is typically used for.

The model can be traced back to the work of Herbert Marsh and Richard Shavelson (see, for example, Shavelson et al., 1976) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is most closely associated now with the continuing work of Marsh, currently one of the most prolific writers in the area of self-perception. Strictly speaking, this work is in the area of self-concept rather than self-esteem, but even a brief association with Marsh's writing confirms that he links self-concept and self-esteem very closely[2]. In the self-esteem literature, the model has been employed by O'Brien and Epstein (1983).

In essence, the hierarchical model rests on the belief that how we feel about ourselves is influenced by a series of judgements we make in a variety
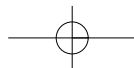
of different domains. The simplest way of explaining the model is by use of a diagram.
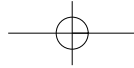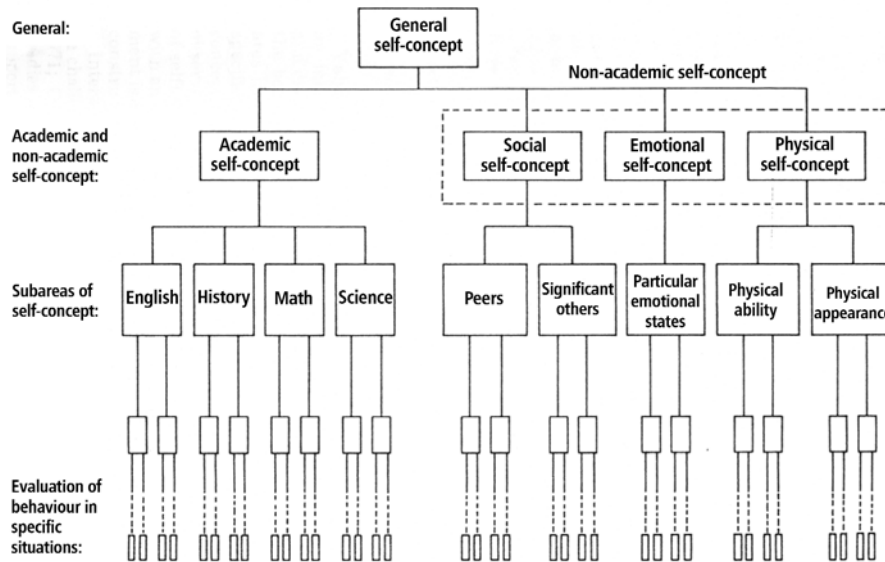

Figure 2.7 The structure of the self-concept. Reprinted with permission from Shavelson et al., 1976, p. 413

A preliminary point here is that this model of the self-concept is based on student populations. A model of self-concept for individuals not in education might contain some changes to these categories, but the essential structure and working of the model would remain. How does it work?

It can be seen from the diagram that general self-concept (or global self-esteem) sits at the top of the hierarchy. Global self-esteem is therefore a cumulative evaluation based on a variety of judgements we make about ourselves – about academic, social, emotional and physical aspects of life. In turn, each of these academic and non-academic aspects of global self-esteem is informed by judgements of competence in several different contexts (sub-areas) which come under that umbrella. So, for example, our global self-esteem is influenced partly by judgements about our social self-concept which in turn is influenced by interactions with peers and with significant others. These sub-areas can themselves be further sub-divided into more specific components which are informed by evaluations in situations where we perform in some way.

Let us take the example of spoken language ability to further explain the

working of this model. Starting at the top of Figure 2.7 and working down, we see that our global self-esteem is influenced to a significant extent by academic self-concept; in turn, academic self-concept is influenced by judgements made in the English sub-area. Following the diagram down- wards, we see that the English self-concept is influenced by judgements below it – let us say, in talking and listening, reading and writing. If we focus on the talking element, the specific situations in which this might occur could include general class discussions, formal presentations to peers, and so on. Evaluations of performance in this respect will be important not just to judgements in that immediate context, but to all the levels of the hierarchy above.

Several important points follow on from this model. First, the fact that many different evaluations contribute to overall self-esteem helps to explain how our judgements of competence can vary from context to context, while at the same time our overall self-esteem can remain relatively stable.

Second, the model makes clear that the higher levels of the hierarchy – the more generalised evaluations – are being influenced by a variety of messages from specific interactions at lower levels. As the example of spoken language above hopefully illustrates, if we want to enhance self- esteem, we need to look towards the lower levels of the hierarchy for our interventions. The point is that attempts to boost someone's self-esteem by telling them they are doing fine (at a global level) are likely to be ineffective when their more specific judgements – based on first-hand experiences – tell them something altogether different.

Third, it is worth reflecting on the fact that there are two ways of improving our overall self-esteem. One way is to work on the sub-areas, and in particular the specific situations which feed into them: simply stated, to improve our performance. This relates to the point above and will be central to much of the advice in the later chapters of this book. But there is another way.

An alternative method of reducing the negative feelings associated with poor performance is to avoid situations where we feel inadequate. In fact, as adults, we often take this option. If my social self-concept is being negatively affected by the people I meet – for example, in a particular social circle – I will be inclined to spend less time with these people. If my physical self-concept is negatively influenced by my failure to learn basic skills on the tennis court, the chances are that sooner or later I will stop playing; after all, no one likes to feel inadequate. So, we can protect self- esteem by avoiding situations where we feel we are failing – and, as adults
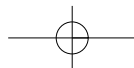
with an element of choice, we often do! But, for children, the scope here is more limited. Their world may involve compulsory participation in most or all of the contexts that adults and their peers have set up for them – even when their self-judgements in these contexts are consistently negative. This realisation opens up a range of issues for schools about participation or non-participation, acceptance or refusal, compliance or defiance. We return to such matters later.

What are the issues surrounding measurement of self-esteem when viewed from this hierarchical perspective? When we looked at measurement of global self-esteem, it was seen that the items in the self-report form were very general in nature. In contrast, the items in the measures here tend to be very specific to the domain being investigated.

A measure commonly used for children of primary-school age is the Self Description Questionnaire 1 (SDQ1) (Marsh, 1992). It contains 76 items designed to tap into eight different factors, or aspects of self-concept: Physical Abilities, Physical Appearance, Reading, Mathematics, Peer Relations, Parent Relations, General-Self and General-School. Here is a sample of the items from the SDQ1. (As with many self-report measures, the reader indicates agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale.)

I am good looking

I am good at all **SCHOOL SUBJECTS**
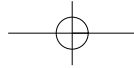
I can run fast

I get good marks in **READING**

My parents understand me

I hate **MATHEMATICS**

I have lots of friends

I like the way I look

Figure 2.8 Items extracted from the Self Description Questionnaire (SDQ1). Reproduced with permission from Marsh, 1992

It can be seen that these items specifically attempt to gauge how the individual feels about him- or herself in different domains or contexts. This reflects both the multi-dimensional nature of self-esteem and also the hierarchical relationships involved. For example, how the respondents feel about their abilities in mathematics and reading should (logically) impact on how they rate their performance on all school subjects; and how they feel about all of these domains will contribute to overall feelings of esteem.

There are many very practical implications for teachers here which will be addressed in the later chapters of this book. These relate to the range of experiences available to children and the messages they receive about their worth and competence. In addition, several very interesting and encouraging messages have emerged from workers in this field. Typically, investigations based on this model have related scores in specific aspects of self-concept to measured performance in corresponding domains. For example, mathematics self-concept has been matched to performance in maths tasks. Such work, often with huge data sets, has highlighted many important processes at work, shedding new light on the relationship between self-concept and school performance. Unlike the messages that emerge from the literature on global self-esteem, these messages are very encouraging in relation to self-esteem and learning. They will be discussed in Chapter 4 when we look at the evidence in relation to education.

Meanwhile, for the final section in this chapter, we move on to think a little about causal processes. What are the experiences which influence how we feel about ourselves? What are the determinants of self-esteem?

What factors influence how you feel about yourself?

At one level, we can probably create a long list of experiences, perceptions and messages which influence how we feel about ourselves as individuals. Obvious esteem-enhancing experiences include success in attaining goals, receiving acclaim from others and feeling one is valued. For children, we assume that experiences such as receiving praise, winning prizes or gaining approval from parents and teachers are likely to enhance feelings of worth. For adults, perceptions that one is doing well in one's career or one's personal life would seem to be obvious causes of enhanced feelings of worth. Beliefs that we are attractive, popular or respected will tend to make us feel better about ourselves. It would be possible for each of us to draw up a long list, although one suspects that many of the items on that list might be personal to the individual concerned.
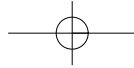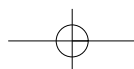
It is interesting here to note that different writers in the field tend to focus on very different 'causes' of self-esteem. As we discuss at various points throughout this book, many writers (implicitly or explicitly) seem to operate within a rather narrow perspective on how self-esteem is influenced. Even amongst the more 'academic' writers, there are many differences. For example, Emler (2001) maintains that the single largest source of self-esteem is genetics, followed by parental upbringing. Mruk (1999) identifies a wider range of factors which influence self-esteem, and although there is overlap between his list and that of Emler, there are also differences – for example, in relation to birth order, a range of social factors and values. Interestingly, both writers identify experience of success as a factor, and Emler makes the interesting point that our experiences of success influence self-esteem – but not as much as our *perceptions* of those successes. Several of the issues here are revisited later in this book, since they have relevance to what we as teachers can do to enhance self-esteem.

In the meantime, a question arises about whether it is possible – or realistic – to try to identify the processes which influence an individual's self-esteem. Some might argue that the factors that bring high self-esteem are only too obvious – success, wealth, beauty and popularity. The more we have of these things, the higher our self-esteem. However, while this might seem almost 'common sense', the work of Michael Argyle (1969) provides a different perspective on how we form judgements of ourselves. He identifies four major determinants.

First, he argues that our self-perceptions are influenced in the course of social interaction – by the messages we receive from others. To be more accurate (following the early work of Cooley [1902]), our perceptions are influenced by what we *believe* others think of us. Although in this chapter we have pointed out many differences of opinion in relation to self-esteem, this belief – that our self esteem is affected by the messages we get from others around us – is widely accepted. From such messages, we develop a belief that we are worthy, likeable people – or not. We get a feeling that we are accepted into the social group – or not. People appear to respect us and our views – or they do not. It is important to note that these messages can relate to our achievements (our performance or competence in certain domains) or to ourselves as individual humans (irrespective of how talented or successful we are).

The results of this process are most evident with young children. A child who is told she is pretty, helpful, kind and clever is likely to grow up believing it; her self-esteem will reflect such positive messages. In contrast, a child

who receives messages from others that she is selfish, or not to be trusted, or useless, is likely to see herself in that way; her self-esteem will reflect this. Even as adults we are not immune from such influences. Many of us have been surprised by a message from someone indicating we are actually doing a bit better than we had previously thought – and have benefited a little in terms of self-belief. Similarly, we may have felt a dip in esteem upon learning that others did not share our own high impression of some achievement or other characteristic. Such self-esteem moments (to use a term associated with the work of Seymour Epstein [1979]) are often related to the messages we pick up from others. We shall return to this idea later.

Second, self-esteem is influenced by comparisons with others, a belief which can be linked to important work by Leon Festinger (1954) in the mid-1950s. The point here is that there seems to be a basic human tendency for us to make comparisons with others in many areas of life. A moment's reflection will probably testify to the validity of that belief – and it is not just when we are striving for some prize or 'sizing up' a rival for a job that we go through this process. Certainly, in such cases it seems a natural process: healthy competition and the survival instinct. But in a less confrontational way, social comparison is characteristic of many day-to-day interactions. It helps us to categorise information and make sense of our world. For example, when you meet new people in a social situation, what is going through your head as you try to decide what 'sort of person' they are? What points of reference are you using when they tell you a little about themselves or their family or their jobs? So, social comparison is a natural human tendency; it plays a significant role in how we make sense of our experiences and is a way of locating ourselves in the social world we live in. For young children, social comparison helps them to make sense of their experiences, to learn how they are doing compared to others and about acceptable and valued ways of behaving.

From a self-esteem perspective, the comparisons we make influence how we feel about ourselves, in particular our sense of achievement. The significant question here is, when we make comparisons with others, *which* others are we comparing ourselves to? Well, in order to have an effect on our self-esteem, the comparisons have to be meaningful. We usually compare ourselves with people of a similar or slightly higher standing. So, an enthusiastic and relatively competent social golfer compares himself to a player of similar or slightly greater skill; this influences how he rates himself as a golfer and influences that aspect of his self-concept accordingly. However, the greater the distance between himself and others,
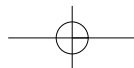
the less meaningful any comparison will be. For our enthusiastic golfer, an unfavourable comparison with the winner of a professional tournament would not impact upon self-concept, because the gap is too wide. The comparison is not meaningful.

All other things being equal, we would expect some comparisons to be favourable, some not; some will enhance our self-esteem, some not. This is what children have to come to terms with; it is what life is about. There are many implications for the classroom, not least of which is the fact that comparisons are made in schools on a daily basis. In fact, we might almost say on an hourly basis; and not just in the classroom – in the playground, the dinner hall and outside the school too. Such comparisons are based on a range of academic, personal, social and cultural factors. They may even be based on criteria which are not fully understood by the children themselves. We return to these concerns in later chapters.

Third, our self-perceptions are influenced by the roles we play. This is an obvious point, perhaps; the role situation in which we find ourselves reflects to some extent the influence we have in society. A related idea is that such roles reflect the trust that a community has placed in us. These factors influence our feelings of worth. A famous study conducted by Robert Merton in 1957 illustrates this neatly. He investigated the effect of occupational roles on the self-concept of medical students. He measured the self-concepts of the medics at the start of their course and again four years later. He found that at the later date they were less likely to see themselves as students but instead tended to see themselves more as doctors. As we know, the role of doctor is a respected one which confers a high status on members of the profession and it is no surprise that this change brought about improvements in self-perception. Many reading this book will be able to reflect back to their professional training and consider how their self-perceptions were influenced when their role changed from being a student to a qualified teacher – again, a valued role in society. In terms of children in the classroom, there are many implications for the roles children choose to play – and the roles that they are required to play. This is particularly so at a time when various forms of peer interaction are becoming mainstream practice in primary schools, and issues surrounding the effects of role on self-esteem are considered in later chapters.

Fourth, self-concept is influenced by identification with models. There are two aspects here which are important: the process of modelling and the role of the model as 'ideal self'. We shall look at each in turn.

The process of modelling is associated with the social learning theory of

Albert Bandura (see for example, Bandura, 1977). It is the process by which an individual acquires social behaviour by copying the actions, responses and apparent emotions of others. The influence of role models on self-esteem is of particular importance when we are thinking of the parent as model. We know that children and young people imitate those who are closest and most important to them. If those people have a healthy self-esteem, we would expect children to benefit accordingly.

This work also receives support from Coopersmith (1967) who high-lighted important links between the behaviours and attitudes of parents and the self-esteem of their children. One of his key findings was a positive relationship between the self-esteem of mothers and their children. The explanation is that parents demonstrate the route to self-esteem by the way they live their lives. As Mruk (1999) put it:

> Parents who face life's challenges honestly and openly and who attempt to cope with difficulties instead of avoiding them thereby expose their children to a pro-self-esteem problem-solving strategy very early. Those who avoid dealing with difficulties reveal a very different route for handling the challenges and problems in life. (p. 75)

Both Coopersmith and Mruk are referring to parents in their roles as models, but parents are not the only role models children encounter – particularly as they grow up. Amongst other models are members of their peer group, sporting heroes, media celebrities, and so on. And, of course, it is an acknow-ledged fact that teachers are also role models for children – particularly so at primary school. The behaviours we demonstrate, the values we share and the attitudes we appear to hold will inevitably have an influence on the self-esteem of our pupils. We shall return to this in later chapters.

The second aspect here is when a role model – or possibly an amalgam of models – becomes the 'ideal self'; that is, the person an individual aspires to become. It will be recalled from what was said earlier in this chapter that the discrepancy between the current self-image and the ideal self influences how we feel about ourselves. It is not necessary to revisit the discrepancy model here, but one point is important. The process of judging progress towards the personal goal one has emphasises an element of *self-referencing* which is not immediately apparent in the other three processes discussed. Such judgements are, in essence, of a different nature from the others identified above (even if they are not immune to influence from such factors). This point will be central to advice in later chapters, in particular when we discuss processes of learning in classrooms, such as formative assessment.
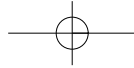
To conclude this section, we believe these four processes, as identified by Argyle (1969), provide helpful insights into how our self-esteem is influenced. In essence, they give us an overview of causal factors at work in an area where beliefs and perspectives vary considerably. Importantly, many implications for the classroom stem directly from these four determinants of self-esteem; they will be central to the advice in the later chapters of this book.

〰 Points to consider

- Which of the major research paradigms do you feel provides most insights for us as teachers?
- What do you feel about the hierarchical model?
- It has been suggested that there are four processes which help to determine levels of self-esteem. Can you relate these to your own experiences?
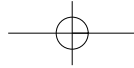
Chapter summary and conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to establish a foundation for the later chapters by providing an overview of some important theoretical issues related to self-esteem. We have acknowledged some early writers in the field, and noted that a number of fundamental ideas from early in the last century are still held to be true today. We next discussed the fact that definitions of self-referent terms are not always shared by the writers in this area.

Next, we looked at three main research paradigms in this area – that is, three ways in which self-esteem has been investigated and the principles and assumptions which underpin those approaches. One approach sees self-esteem as a holistic judgement, based on a generalised feeling of worth. A second approach can be thought of as a development of this model; overall self-esteem can be sub-divided into esteem in several different domains. The third model, rather more complex than the others, views self-esteem in terms of a hierarchical structure, based on a series of judgements in different contexts or domains – both academic and non-academic. All three of these models have important messages for us as teachers.

Finally in this chapter, we looked at some major factors believed to influence our self-perceptions.

What would be really helpful, of course, would be a theory which encapsulated the main insights from these different approaches. The good
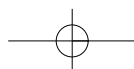
news is that this can be achieved. In the next chapter, we introduce a relatively recent perspective – one which underpins much of the practical advice contained in the later chapters of this book. It is known as a two-dimensional model of self-esteem. This model is associated with the work of Christopher Mruk (1999).

But why, you may well ask, do we plan to introduce another perspective on self-esteem, when there already seems to be a variety of different perspectives? Are we not simply adding to the uncertainty? Our answer is that we focus on this model in the next chapter for several reasons, the most important of which is that it has helped us – and many teachers and student teachers with whom we have worked – to see a way through the wealth of material in this area. It is able to encompass the insights gained from a huge number of research studies. And, perhaps most importantly of all, it provides a clear sense of direction for teachers in primary classrooms.
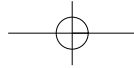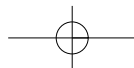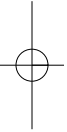
Table 2.1 Some key self-referent terms

Self-concept	Self-concept seems to have been conceptualised in different ways, but is usually defined as the overall body of beliefs that an individual holds about himself or herself. It is generally accepted that it includes both descriptive and evaluative judgements.
Self-esteem	Again, this has been defined in different ways, but it usually refers to an evaluation or judgement about oneself. It is how you *feel about* the picture you have of yourself.
Self-image	The way you see yourself. As with many of these terms, there are different interpretations, but essentially self-image is descriptive rather than evaluative.
Ideal self	A notion of the person you would like to become: what you aspire to be. Links can be made with the idea of a role model. The gap between your ideal self and your current self-image is often taken as an indication of your level of self-esteem.
Self-worth	This has two meanings, depending on which model of self-esteem you subscribe to. For many writers, self-worth is synonymous with self-esteem. However, it has a more specific meaning for those who are attracted to the idea of a two-dimensional model of self-esteem, to be explained later. For these people, self-worth is one *component* of self-esteem; it is the extent to which you feel you are leading a good life (based on good principles) and deserving of care and respect from others.
Self-competence	If self-worth (above) is one component of self-esteem, as some writers argue, self-competence is the other component. It is a feeling that you can cope with the challenges you face in life. It has much in common with the idea of self-efficacy (below).
Self-efficacy	Confidence in one's ability to achieve a given task. It tends to be specific to a task, or a relatively narrow set of behaviours – for example, computer self-efficacy. A generalised sense of self-efficacy is similar to what is called 'self-competence' (above).
Self-regard	Self-regard is a term associated with the work of Carl Rogers. In use it seems broadly comparable to self-respect, self-esteem or a positive self-image.

Notes

1 See book 4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, D. Ross and L. Braun (trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2 As we noted earlier, in Marsh's work, he equates general self-concept with overall or global self-esteem. We have followed this convention and in our description use the terms interchangeably.

Further reading 📖

1. If you would like to consult some of the original work of seminal writers mentioned in this chapter, see:
- Argyle, M. (1969) *Social Interaction*. London: Methuen.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967) *The Antecedents of Self-esteem*. San Francisco, CA: Freeman.
- James, W. (1890/1983) *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rogers, C. (1961) *On Becoming a Person*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965) *Society and the Adolescent Self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
2. For more on the work of Susan Harter, see:
- Harter, S. (1990) Self and identity development. In S. Shirley & G. Elliot (eds) *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harter, S. (2011) *The Construction of the Self: Developmental and Sociocultural Foundations*, 2nd edn. New York: Guilford Press.
3. For recent overviews of the research evidence on self-esteem, see:
- Baumeister, R.F., Campbell, J.D., Krueger, J.I. & Vohs, K.D. (2003) Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4 (1), 1–44.
- Emler, N. (2001) *Self-Esteem: The Costs and Causes of Low Self-Worth*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation and YPS.
4. To read a report of the California Task Force to raise self-esteem, see:
- California State Department of Education (1992) *Toward a State of Esteem: The Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility*. Available at: www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED321170.pdf
5. To read more about the importance effect, see:
- Crocker, J. & Wolfe, C.T. (2001) Contingencies of self-worth. *Psychological Review*, 108 (3), 593–623.
- Marsh, H.W. (2008) The elusive importance effect: more failure for the Jamesian perspective on the importance of importance in shaping self-esteem. *Journal of Personality*, 76 (5), 1081–122.
6. For more on the idea of self-esteem as a sociometer, see:
- Leary, M.R. (1999) Making sense of self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 8 (1), 32–5.