

**The Changing Faces of Self-Esteem:  
A Critical History of the Concept and Its  
Implications for Personhood**

by

**Carlye Vroom**

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# Approval

**Name:** Carlye Vroom  
**Degree:** Master of Arts  
**Title:** *The Changing Faces of Self-Esteem:  
A Critical History of the Concept and Its Implications  
for Personhood*  
**Examining Committee:** **Chair:** Margaret MacDonald  
Associate Professor

**Jeff Sugarman**  
Senior Supervisor  
Professor

---

**Paul Neufeld**  
Supervisor  
Associate Professor

---

**Scott Greer**  
External Examiner  
Associate Professor  
Department of Psychology  
University of Prince Edward Island

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**Date Defended/Approved:** December 14, 2015

## **Abstract**

This thesis critically analyzes the concept and phenomenon of self-esteem using the approach of *historical ontology*. The analysis focuses on how understanding and application of the concept has shifted as a consequence of three sociohistorical processes: the quantification, idealization, and normalization of self-esteem. While self-esteem originally was understood as unquantifiable and a by-product of success, it is now considered quantifiable and a cause of success. As well, whereas the modification of self-esteem previously was regarded as idiosyncratic, it is now believed that all people can and should raise their self-esteem using generic strategies that emphasize self-responsibility and self-management. It is argued that these changes gave rise to a new kind of person called “low self-esteemers.” Revealed is that although low self-esteemers have low self-esteem because they are marginalized in society, they are held responsible for their negative self-feelings. The source of their low self-esteem is social and political—a consequence of neoliberalism—but they and others are made to believe the cause of their low self-esteem resides internally as an individual psychological problem.

**Keywords:** self-esteem; historical ontology; critical history; governmentality; neoliberalism; educational psychology

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# Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2. Historical Ontology as Method for Analysis.....</b>	<b>8</b>
The Roots of Historical Ontology.....	8
Hacking’s Historical Ontology.....	11
The Making Up of People With High-Functioning Autism.....	13
Rose’s Critical History.....	17
Neo-Foucauldian Historical Ontology and Self-Esteem.....	23
Conclusion.....	25
<b>Chapter 3. The Self, the Birth of Psychology, and the Emergence of the Concept of Self-Esteem.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Locke and the Empirical Self.....	27
Rousseau, the Ideal of Authenticity, and Self-Love.....	29
The Birth of Psychology and the Emergence of the Concept of Self-Esteem.....	31
Conclusion.....	35
<b>Chapter 4. The Quantification of Self-Esteem.....</b>	<b>36</b>
The Rise of the Statistical Style in Psychology.....	38
The Individual Differences Paradigm.....	42
Self-Esteem as a Measurable Trait.....	45
Implications of Quantifying Self-Esteem.....	49
Conclusion.....	51
<b>Chapter 5. The Idealization of Self-Esteem.....</b>	<b>52</b>
Rogers, Maslow, Self-Actualization, and the Human Potential Movement.....	56
Branden, Rand, and Self-Esteem.....	63
Vasconcellos and the California Task Force on Self-Esteem.....	69
Conclusion.....	74
<b>Chapter 6. The Normalization of Self-Esteem.....</b>	<b>77</b>
Self-Esteem for Every Child: Public Schools and the Self-Esteem Movement.....	81
Self-Esteem for Girls: The Neoliberal Takeover of Feminism.....	95
Dove’s Postfeminist Self-Esteem Education for Girls.....	100
Conclusion.....	108

<b>Chapter 7. Discussion</b> .....	<b>112</b>
The Making Up of the Adolescent Low Self-Esteemer.....	114
The Paradoxical Quest for Self-Esteem.....	125
The Backlash and Legacy of the Self-Esteem Movement .....	127
Conclusion .....	130
<b>References</b> .....	<b>134</b>

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

For \$97 USD, Life Coach Karen Jones (2014) promises that she can help you improve your self-esteem in 30 days from the comfort of your own home with her self-paced home study program. Interspersed with testimonials from past clients, description of the program on Jones' website stresses that feeling good about yourself is "crucial to success in all areas of your life" (para. 23) and is "critically important to your ability to create and maintain a fulfilling relationship" (para. 19). The secret to improving self-esteem, according to Jones, is simple: "it's just a decision to make a commitment to feel good about yourself" (para. 12), "to consistently choose high self-esteem in your life" (para. 18). She claims that negative feelings towards yourself hold you back in life and she can teach you how to eliminate these negative feelings and replace them with positive ones. Through her program, you learn how to tame the voice inside your head and "consistently see and appreciate what's great about you" (para. 21). Since the dawn of the *self-esteem movement* in the 1970s, countless self-appointed self-esteem experts like Jones have preached the wonders of self-esteem and peddled similar advice, and millions of people in the West eagerly have turned to them to learn how to improve their own self-esteem or that of children for whom they care. At present, it is widely taken for granted that self-esteem is central to our wellbeing and success in life, that it can be bought and attained in a straightforward manner by following the generic strategies of an expert, that negative feelings towards oneself are harmful and should be tamed, and that it is our choice whether or not we feel good about ourselves. However, the concept of self-esteem was not always understood and used in this way.

Our modern understanding of self-esteem can be traced back to, but diverges considerably from, the description provided in 1890 by psychologist and philosopher William James. Whereas Jones considers self-esteem an important goal to pursue in life

because it is the cause of success, James regarded self-esteem a by-product of success. James believed that individuals should find a meaningful pursuit to commit to in life and that self-esteem will ensue if they are successful at this pursuit. Further, Jones sells generic suggestions that can apply to anyone. By contrast, James believed that what modifies self-esteem is unique to each individual. For James, self-esteem rises and falls in relation to the individual's particular goals in life. Negative self-feelings can inform individuals that they could benefit from a change in their life, such as trying harder to succeed or finding a more meaningful goal to pursue. In Jones' view, conversely, negative self-feelings serve no purpose, constrain one's potential, and we can choose to improve our lives by learning how to subdue our negative self-feelings.

Generally, the assumption with psychological phenomena like self-esteem is that historical changes to how they are understood are a matter of scientific progress (Rose, 1998). The belief is that self-esteem is an ontologically fixed and stable feature of persons and, through research, we have gotten better over time at identifying and comprehending it. There are inconsistencies between James' description of self-esteem and our current understanding not because James' experience of self-esteem was different from that of people at present, but rather, because we have since progressed in our ability to detect, measure, and explain the phenomenon. However, why should it be assumed that a client who follows Jones' advice experiences her/his self-esteem in the same way that James experienced self-esteem? Both would experience negative self-feelings as unpleasant, but where the former would regard them as a useless nuisance that must be eliminated, the latter would consider them as a valuable source of information.

Counter to conventional wisdom about psychological phenomena, scholars like Hacking (2002), Rose (1998), and Sugarman (2015a) hold that there are no universal and fixed psychological features of persons. Such scholars assert that features of persons like self-esteem emerge and are shaped and transformed through particular sociocultural and historical conditions. The process in which psychological features emerge and change is, simplistically, as follows. First, an ill-defined psychological phenomenon is made possible, materializes with certain people, and becomes noticeable and of interest in a particular sociohistorical context. Second, certain methods



are employed to detect and study the phenomenon and certain language is used to generate a concept and description to make it intelligible. Such investigations and language establish the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon and the boundaries around what constitutes it. Third, this concept and description enables new ways of thinking about persons and for persons to think about themselves and their experiences. Psychological concepts and descriptions can direct us to the features of persons that it is possible and desirable/undesirable to have. Humans interpret themselves through, and are reactive to, psychological concepts. Individuals can come to identify with such concepts and act in ways consistent with them—their relation to themselves and their conduct shaped by the concepts. In effect, the concept frames how the phenomenon is produced and experienced by people. There is, in other words, a relationship between the understanding and experience of the psychological phenomenon. With additional investigations of the phenomenon and revisions to its description, the phenomenon can be molded and transformed in different ways. As well, not only investigations, but also practices of psychological intervention can alter the phenomenon. Certain descriptions can give rise to the creation and use of certain strategies to manipulate the phenomenon, which further can change how it is understood and produced by persons. From the perspective of scholars like Hacking, Rose, and Sugarman, historical transformations regarding how a psychological phenomenon like self-esteem is described and understood cannot be assumed to be merely a matter of scientific progress because the phenomenon changes along with our variable conceptions and manipulations of it. As Hacking (2007) describes them, psychological phenomena are not static, but rather, are moving targets that alter as we try to study, comprehend, explain, and act on them.

The importance of the mutable nature of psychological phenomena that Hacking (2002), Rose (1998), and Sugarman (2015a) call attention to is that changes to a phenomenon are changes to persons. As Hacking (2002) highlights, an alteration to the description of a psychological phenomenon opens up and/or closes down possibilities for personhood; that is, how persons are able to understand, think about, relate to, experience, and conduct themselves. By enabling and disabling certain possibilities, psychological descriptions have the potential to liberate, constrain, benefit, and burden individuals in particular ways. To study a psychological feature of persons like self-

esteem as though it is transhistorical and fixed is potentially to overlook ways in which personhood has been unnecessarily and harmfully limited by our variable descriptions of the phenomenon. In addition, it is not only the description of a psychological phenomenon that can limit personhood, but also the psychological strategies that are used to manipulate the phenomenon. By actively molding the self-understanding and behavior of individuals in specific ways, psychological intervention strategies also have the potential to constrain people. Hacking (2002), Rose (1998), and Sugarman (2015a) suggest that historically and critically analyzing descriptions of a psychological phenomenon, as well as applications of the description, can bring to light ways in which persons have been limited by sociohistorical forces, and can open up the possibility for persons to reclaim agency from such forces.

There is evidence in the literature to suggest that the contemporary conception of self-esteem and the psychological strategies that have been used to enhance it have had restrictive and deleterious effects on personhood. For example, Stout (2000) has described the present view of self-esteem as “feeling good for no good reason” (p. 12), an understanding that she warns undermines the importance of hard work and moral behavior and so can block people from achieving meaningful self-esteem. Stout and a number of other scholars (e.g., Katz, 1995) also have affirmed that the strategies offered by contemporary self-esteem experts like Jones tend to be overly individualistic and to nurture a counterproductive level of self-absorption. Instead of encouraging community with others, such strategies serve to distance people from others by directing them to focus excessively on themselves and their own concerns. Damon (1995) has argued that the excessive self-focus fomented by such strategies makes their usage with children particularly dangerous because they contribute to a poor foundation for children’s psychological development. Scholars such as Beane (1991) and Goodkind (2009) have pointed out that when contemporary self-esteem enhancement strategies are promoted and perceived by people as the solution to their problems, this leads individuals to blame themselves for their poor self-esteem and diverts their attention away from aspects of their social environment that limit how they feel about themselves. Given that self-esteem strategies have been used by millions of people in the West, the points raised by scholars like Stout, Damon, Beane, and Goodkind suggest that numerous individuals have been guided to alienate themselves from others and to take

responsibility for their negative self-feelings, despite being led to feel badly about themselves by social forces. In light of these potential and weighty consequences, it appears that it could be beneficial to analyze self-esteem in the historical and critical manner advised by Hacking, Rose, and Sugarman. By investigating the sociohistorical conditions and practices that enabled the current understanding and application of the concept of self-esteem, the implications for personhood can be explicitly revealed and the possibility opened up for persons to be and do otherwise.

To this end, this thesis employs a neo-Foucauldian mode of inquiry called *historical ontology* to analyze the contemporary understanding and phenomenon of self-esteem. Following Sugarman (2009, 2013, 2015a), historical ontology is used here as a form of analysis that applies the unique and complementary approaches of Hacking (2002) and Rose (1998). Hacking's approach to historical ontology focuses on psychological concepts that became the object of scientific study and intervention. According to Hacking, when a psychological concept emerges and changes, it can bring into being new kinds of persons that did not exist previously. Hacking describes his approach to historical ontology as a historicized version of conceptual analysis that investigates the sociohistorical context within which a psychological concept emerges, thrives, and is transformed. Rose's historical approach places emphasis on the role of political forces in constituting contemporary personhood. Rose (1998) claims that, over the past century, psychological language and interventions often have functioned as indirect mechanisms of political power that bring people's conduct into alignment with sociopolitical objectives. By impelling and shaping individuals to be self-reliant and self-directing, Rose holds that contemporary psychological language and interventions serve the aims of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a mentality of government that relies on autonomous and self-responsible individuals who monitor and manage themselves. In Rose's view, to analyze a psychological phenomenon like self-esteem and to uncover limitations to contemporary personhood, attention must be given to the ways that psychological discourse about, and interventions for, the phenomenon, have served to mold people in ways consistent with neoliberalism. An historical ontological analysis that applies the approaches of Hacking and Rose can serve as an appropriate means to study self-esteem not as a fixed phenomenon, but rather, as a moving target that has changed over time through sociohistorical and political forces.

In the next chapter (Chapter Two), historical ontology is explicated. First, its roots are investigated, followed by an explanation of the distinctive approaches to historical ontology of Hacking and Rose. The description of Hacking's approach focuses on a specific framework he has outlined that can be used to structure an historical ontological analysis. According to Hacking, there are 10 possible *engines* that can lead to changes in how a psychological phenomenon is described and experienced. The first seven are types of scientific investigation that are used to understand and produce knowledge about a certain phenomenon, such as quantifying and measuring it. The additional three engines relate to attempts to manage and control people in light of the knowledge generated by the first seven engines. I adapt Hacking's framework to structure the analysis of self-esteem in this thesis. My focus is on the engines of "quantification," "idealization" (which is modified from Hacking's original engine of "norm creation"), and "normalization." These engines can account for what made possible the contemporary understanding of self-esteem.

Before addressing the three engines that have driven changes to how self-esteem has been understood and experienced, it is first necessary to provide the backdrop for how the concept initially emerged in 1890. The story of self-esteem not only is interwoven with historical changes in notions about the self, but also, it is tied closely to the history of psychology in the West. In Chapter Three, I trace the history of the concept of the self leading up to the birth of psychology in America, which was around the time that self-esteem first was defined by William James. James widely is considered the father of American psychology, and yet the psychology that followed him moved in a much more quantitative and less philosophically-rooted direction than he had envisioned for the discipline. Being able to produce quantitative psychological data was key to psychology's ability to stabilize as a scientific discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Self-esteem initially was not considered quantifiable, and so it faded as a topic of interest in psychology for several decades.

In Chapters Four through Six, I examine three engines for making up people that are vital to my thesis. Using the description provided in 1890 by William James as a contrast, I discuss how each engine changed the concept of self-esteem. First, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, self-esteem became quantified—transformed from a multi-faceted

experience of persons that only can be understood in context, as James understood it, to a concrete trait that can be isolated and measured (Chapter Four). Second, self-esteem became idealized (Chapter Five). Whereas James considered self-esteem a by-product of personal success, by the 1990s, self-esteem had come to be regarded as the cause of personal and social success as well as an end in itself. The third engine is normalization (Chapter Six). For James, what brings self-esteem for one person would not necessarily bring another person self-esteem, but by the 1980s, it became assumed that self-esteem can be modified with generic self-esteem strategies. Since many of these strategies guide individuals to manage and take responsibility for themselves, self-esteem has come to be equated with self-responsibility and self-management. My focus in Chapter Six is on the use of such self-esteem enhancing strategies with schoolchildren.

An overarching goal of historical ontology is to expose unnecessary limitations to personhood so as to open up the possibility for being or doing otherwise. Awareness of such constraints can put power back into the hands of people and enable them to transcend these limitations. Consequently, the stakes for conducting a historical ontological analysis can be high. In the concluding chapter (Chapter Seven), I discuss how the contemporary understanding of self-esteem—formed by the engines of quantification, idealization, and normalization—has given rise to a new kind of person, which I refer to as the “low self-esteemers.” Consistent with Rose (1998), I will argue that this way of being, which is inherently painful and self-defeating for the individual, serves the objectives of neoliberalism. I propose, that to begin to reclaim agency, low self-esteemers need to become aware of the neoliberal forces that marginalize and control them. My hope is that this thesis not only can serve as a sorely needed historical investigation of self-esteem as the moving target it is, but also can help to raise awareness that psychological discourse on self-esteem and strategies for its enhancement function as neoliberal tools of control.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Historical Ontology as Method for Analysis**

The concept and phenomenon of self-esteem are analyzed critically in this thesis using the neo-Foucauldian approach of historical ontology. This chapter elaborates the notion of historical ontology, discusses its implications for self-esteem, and outlines the methodological framework that will be used to structure the thesis. First, the Foucauldian roots of historical ontology are explored. Second, historical ontology, as it has been refined and applied by neo-Foucauldian philosopher Ian Hacking is discussed. Hacking has used historical ontology to analyze critically the history of psychological concepts that frame subjective experience. An outline of the specific framework Hacking created to structure historical ontological investigation of psychological concepts is presented, and includes autism as an example to illustrate his framework. The third section of this chapter gives an overview of a type of historical ontology known as “critical history,” as expounded by Nikolas Rose, another intellectual heir of Foucault. Rose’s critical history adds to neo-Foucauldian historical ontology an emphasis on sociopolitical power in the constitution of selves. Finally, the implications of historical ontology as applied to self-esteem are discussed, and the application of Hacking’s framework to the concept of self-esteem is summarized.

#### **The Roots of Historical Ontology**

The term “historical ontology” originally was coined by Foucault. Although he used the term explicitly only a few times, historical ontology could be said to be the approach Foucault adopted in his work. Notably influential on Foucault’s development of historical ontology was a particular text written by 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Immanuel Kant (2007) about the meaning of Enlightenment. Foucault (2007) most extensively

described his use of historical ontology in his 1984 essay *What is Enlightenment?*, which was written in response to Kant's text. In the essay, Foucault expressed that what powerfully impacted him was not so much the substance of Kant's thought about Enlightenment, but rather the form of his reflection. According to Foucault (2007), Kant's discussion of Enlightenment introduced a novel method of critical analysis. Foucault detected that Kant, unlike his philosophical predecessors, had reflected on his present by situating himself in a precise moment in history. Instead of considering the present as part of an epoch or as a point of transition towards the dawning of a new era, Kant's critique involved "reflection on 'today' as difference in history" (Foucault, 2007, p. 105). Enlightenment, for Kant, is "a 'way out'" (Foucault, 2007, p. 99) of the immaturity of the past. Kant (2007) urged individuals to have the courage to escape immaturity by taking a critical attitude toward the present, which involves reflecting on and analyzing limitations that restrict one's thinking. Kant held that there are some cases where limitations are necessary (e.g., obeying the rules of a community), and that critique must entail recognizing when limits imposed by authority are necessary and when limits can be transcended.

Foucault (2007) retained from Kant the notion that to reason freely against constraints imposed by authority, and thus to open up the possibility of being otherwise, individuals need to have a critical relation to the present by analyzing the limits that restrict thinking. However, Foucault did not agree with the Kantian search for universal limits. Foucault attempted to demonstrate that the limits Kant saw as indispensable are historically contingent—that there are no absolute truths or moral values. To accept certain limits as universal, Foucault asserted, is to overlook power structures that could potentially be constraining rational autonomy. Foucault (2007) was not concerned with searching for necessary and absolute limits of human possibility, but rather, in uncovering "what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects" (p. 110). In other words, whereas Kant's critique was directed to universal truths, Foucault advocated a critical and reflective stance that exposes unnecessary limitations on subjectivity in order to allow for the possibility of being otherwise. Foucault (2007) refers to his form of critique as an "historical ontology of ourselves," and describes it not as a theory or doctrine, but rather, as

an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (p. 118)

For Foucault, historical ontology is an approach to inquiry that critiques the present by analyzing the historical and political forces that frame subjective experience. The importance of such an approach is that it can open up the possibility for subjects to reclaim their agency by transforming themselves.

Foucault (2007) concedes that it is not possible to acquire definitive knowledge of what constitutes our limits, but maintains, “that does not mean that no work can be done except in disorder and contingency” (p. 115). He contends that the work entailed by historical ontology is given structure and focus by addressing four common elements: homogeneity, systematicity, generality, and stakes. Homogeneity ensures methodological coherence in historical ontology, and entails study of “practical systems,” that concern what people do and their reasons for doing it—the forms of rationality that organize people’s activities and the freedom of their action. Systematicity provides historical ontology theoretical coherence, and is addressed by giving attention to Foucault’s axes of knowledge, power, and ethics. The main questions of historical ontology are systematized accordingly as: “How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?” (Foucault, 2007, p. 117). Practical coherence is enabled by the generality of historical ontology, and is based on Foucault’s observation that certain issues recur throughout time (e.g., the issue of sanity versus insanity). The task of historical ontology is to grasp the determined character of what we know, of the relations of power, and of our relations to ourselves in these recurrent themes. Finally, Foucault (2007) states that there are common stakes involved in historical ontology. He refers to a paradox in the relationship between capacity and power. As human capabilities have increased over time, so has humankind’s struggle for freedom, particularly among certain social groups. What is at stake in historical ontology is the disconnection of the growth of power relations from human capabilities.



## Hacking's Historical Ontology

Originally schooled in the tradition of analytic philosophy and interested in the natural sciences, Hacking became greatly influenced later in his career by Foucault's work and came to focus considerable attention on psychology, psychiatry, and the social sciences. Hacking (2002), like Foucault, is concerned with how we constitute ourselves as persons. Hacking emphasizes that how we constitute ourselves is dependent on the descriptions that are available to us. We experience, understand, and relate to ourselves as persons under certain descriptions. New possibilities for choice and action are enabled by new descriptions. Of particular interest to Hacking are psychological concepts and classifications that are used to scientifically study and to categorize certain kinds of persons. Hacking (2007) notes that psychological concepts and classifications typically are made objects of scientific knowledge for practical reasons—for example, so that we can manage, organize, and help people. At the same time, psychological concepts and their descriptions “become ourselves” (Hacking, 2002, p. 4) by directing us to what it is possible to be and do as persons. Descriptions of psychological concepts and classifications can alter the ways in which we interpret, experience, and act on ourselves. Such psychological descriptions also can be revised over time (e.g., through scientific research), and new descriptions open up new possibilities for how people understand themselves and their experiences. Hacking has espoused historical ontology as a term to describe inquiries that examine psychological concepts and the possibilities for personhood that their descriptions enable. Historical ontology, for Hacking, involves investigating what particular sociohistorical conditions made it possible for a psychological concept to emerge, thrive, be applied in certain ways, and, potentially, be transformed.

Central to Hacking's approach to historical ontology is what he terms “making up people” (Hacking, 1995). According to Hacking, new possibilities for personhood that are enabled by a certain psychological description can constitute a new way of being human that did not previously exist. In other words, a new kind of person can be brought into being—can be “made up”—by the description. Psychological classifications create new ways for people to be (i.e., to act and experience themselves differently), and people come to fit the categories by which they have been classified. What is more, classified

people also can change in their own ways and influence revision to the description and classification. Hacking refers to this interaction between a description and the people to whom it is applied as the *looping effect*. One example that Hacking has provided of making up people and the looping effect concerns the psychological classification of multiple personality disorder. Hacking (1995) demonstrated that the classification and description of multiple personality disorder changed alongside the people so labeled. For instance, Hacking shows that prior to the 1970s, there were no detected cases of individuals with alternate personalities of the opposite sex. The publication of the popular 1973 book, *Sybil*, provided the first case of an individual with an alternate personality of the opposite sex. After the book's publication, the number of cases with opposite sex alternate personalities increased dramatically. The book altered the understanding of multiple personality to allow for the possibility of opposite sex personalities—which enabled new ways for individuals to explain and describe their actions and experiences, and new interpretive lenses through which individuals could understand themselves. In effect, the new description produced more persons of that kind. Hacking (2007) suggests that although we tend to comprehend psychological phenomena like multiple personality disorder as though they are fixed and universal, such phenomena are actually better described as “moving targets.” This is because, Hacking asserts, there are interactions between our description of the phenomenon and the people who fall under the description.

In a lecture given to the British Academy, Hacking (2007) proposed a framework with which to structure the analysis of ways of making up people. The framework is made up of five elements that are deemed keys to establishing relations between a description and the people being described. The first element is the *classification*, the kind of person it is possible to be. Second, there are the *people* that are recognized to be of that type. The *institutions* that are responsible for generating and disseminating knowledge about the kind of person is the third element of the framework. Fourth, there is the *knowledge*, assumptions concerning what constitutes truth about the kind of person being described. Finally, *experts*, the people working in the institutions and generating the knowledge, is the fifth element in Hacking's framework.

To account for how the generation of knowledge and making up people is driven, Hacking (2007) further outlines ten potential *engines*. Each engine facilitates interactions among the five elements of the framework and changes both the characteristics of the classification and the people classified. Hacking refers to the first seven as *engines of discovery*. Engines of discovery produce knowledge about a certain kind of person. These include “counting,” “quantifying,” “creating norms,” “correlating,” “medicalizing,” “biologizing,” and “geneticizing.” The other three engines derive from the engines of discovery and the knowledge produced by them. The eighth engine, “normalizing,” is what Hacking terms an *engine of organization and control*. The ninth engine, “bureaucratizing,” is an *engine of administration*. Finally, the tenth engine, “reclaiming identities,” Hacking terms an *engine of resistance to the knowers*.

Having laid out Hacking’s framework in the abstract, we turn now to an illustrative discussion of its application in a concrete example.

## **The Making Up of People With High-Functioning Autism**

Consider the application of Hacking’s five-part framework and engines for making up people to the concept of autism.<sup>1</sup> The first element of the framework is the classification itself. Initially “autism” in 1908, the label later changed to “early infantile autism,” then “infantile autism,” subsequently “autism disorder,” and, most recently, “autism spectrum disorder.” The people constitute the second element of the framework. At present, individuals with autism are considered to be on a spectrum ranging from low-functioning to high-functioning. Third, there are the institutions that produce and disseminate the knowledge. Hacking mentions schools, social services, and health services as some of the institutions involved with autism. Eyal, Hart, Onculer, Oren, and Rossi (2010) add to this list psychology, psychiatry, parent organizations, and autism advocacy groups. Fourth, there is knowledge. Knowledge about autism has changed significantly from its initial description in 1908 by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler to its

<sup>1</sup> Note: Asperger’s Disorder, which has been closely related to, and often conflated with, high-functioning autism is left out of this discussion for the sake of simplicity. See Chapter 10 of Eyal, Hart, Onculer, Oren, & Rossi (2010) for a fascinating discussion of the “making up” of Asperger’s Disorder.

present day understanding. Originally considered a decidedly rare condition with a narrow definition and poor prognosis, autism is now regarded as a broad spectrum, ranging from very low-functioning individuals to high-functioning intelligent individuals, all of whom need support in developing social and communication skills. The experts are the final element in Hacking's framework. Eugen Bleuler is a notable illustration of an expert involved in knowledge about autism. Other examples include Leo Kanner, whose research formed the basis of our modern understanding of autism; Lorna Wing, a British psychiatrist who was central in widening the diagnostic criteria for autism in the revised third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R)*; and Temple Grandin, arguably the most famous autistic individual who was born low-functioning but learned how to compensate for her social and communication difficulties, and has been an ardent advocate for rights for autistic individuals.

The first of the engines of discovery is counting, which formalized autism as a kind of person and established the prevalence of the condition. Initial attempts to count individuals with autism found a frequency of approximately 4.5 cases for every 10,000 people (Hacking, 2007). A more recent estimation suggests at least 60 cases of autism per 10,000 people (Newschaffer, Croen, Daniels, Giarelli, Grether, Levy, Mandell, Miller, Pinto-Martin, Reaven, Reynolds, Rice, Schendel, & Windham, 2007). Regarding the second engine of discovery, Hacking (2007) states that "autism resists quantity" (p. 308), as it is difficult to quantify deficits, and so the engine of quantification does not apply. The third engine is norm creation and Hacking specifies that the initial diagnosis of autism as a disorder in 1943 followed a growing emphasis during the 1920s on normal child development. Correlation is the fourth engine of discovery, and autism has been correlated with a diverse array of factors ranging from relative finger length to air pollution. Autism has always been a mysterious condition and so when autism is found to correlate significantly with another variable, it is hoped that we are getting closer to understanding its cause. Childhood vaccinations are a notable example of a correlate that has had a significant impact on the understanding of autism. Although later debunked, a 1998 study that associated autism with childhood vaccinations became widely publicized and influenced public opinion to such an extent that vaccination rates dropped sharply (McIntyre & Leask, 2008). Autism was medicalized (the fifth engine) as of 1943 when it was first regarded as a mental disorder under the purview of medicine.

In the 1950s and 1960s it was widely believed that autism was the result of cold, unloving parents (especially so-called “refrigerator mothers”). By the 1970s, through the engines of biologization and geneticization, it generally became accepted that autism is not the result of poor parenting and almost surely has biological and/or genetic causes.

The eighth engine is that of normalization and involves attempts to make undesirable deviants as close to normal as possible, which Hacking (2007) points out is the purpose of behavioral therapies (and, arguably, most interventions) for autism. Treatment for autism has yielded dramatically positive results for some individuals, enabling them to adapt in ways that previously were inconceivable. Eyal et al. (2010) reveal that the success of behavioral therapies led to less restrictive diagnostic criteria for autism in the *DSM-III-R* than in the *DSM-III*. First, those on the committee for revising the *DSM-III-R* decided that because self-injurious behavior and repetitive movements could be treated or controlled by such therapies, they should not be considered core symptoms of autism. As a result, in the *DSM-III-R*, self-mutilation and repetitive movements were changed from core criteria to “associated features” that were not necessarily required for a diagnosis. Second, one *DSM* committee member in particular, Lorna Wing, believed that there were many individuals who had autistic-like traits and struggles and could benefit from behavioral therapies, but did not have access to these therapies because they did not meet the criteria for autism in the *DSM-III*. Wing successfully argued that “classical autism” was only one subtype of a wider spectrum (Eyal et al., 2010). Consequently, the diagnostic criteria for autism was expanded considerably in the *DSM-III-R*. For a diagnosis of autism, the *DSM-III* required the presence of each of a small list of relatively extreme characteristics like “pervasive lack of responsiveness to other people” (3rd ed.; *DSM-III*; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) and “gross deficits in language development” (*DSM-III*, 1980). By contrast, the *DSM-III-R* specified meeting only 8 out of 16 criteria that included more moderate descriptors such as “no or abnormal social play” (3rd ed. rev.; *DSM-III-R*; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) and a “markedly restricted range of interests” (*DSM-III-R*, 1987). It was with this expanded diagnostic criteria in the *DSM-III-R* that a new subclass labeled “high-functioning autism” was introduced.

The ninth engine, bureaucratization, led to the administration and management in schools of children with developmental problems. As awareness of autism has grown, so have funding opportunities for autistic children in schools and, as a result, an increasing number of children who previously may not have been considered autistic have been diagnosed with autism so that they could get access to funding (Hacking, 2009). Finally, there is the engine of reclaiming identities, of resisting the knowers. As noted by Hacking, starting in the 1990s, advocates for autism, many of whom are autistic themselves (e.g., Temple Grandin), began alleging that autism (especially high-functioning autism) is a normal human difference rather than a disorder. These advocates have attached themselves to a larger movement that has been steadily gaining currency since the 1990s known as the *neurodiversity movement*. Its adherents argue that there are different and equally valid ways for the brain to be wired neurologically. In this view, autism is not a disease that needs to be eradicated from the population, but rather, is an equally valid way of being—a way of being that is conspicuous and problematic in contemporary Western society, but would not necessarily stand out in the same way in other contexts. Recent changes to the classification of autism in the *DSM-5* in 2013 established more restrictive diagnostic criteria than the previous two editions of the *DSM* (Worley & Matson, 2012). It is possible that this engine of resisting the knowers has been influential in effecting this change in how autism is currently classified and understood.

The surge in the prevalence of autism has led to debate as to whether autism is actually becoming more common or if we have gotten better at detecting it. From an historical ontological perspective, prevalence differences are the result of sociohistorical changes in how autism is understood. Hacking (2009) indicates that first-person awareness of emotional states is a relatively modern phenomenon that came into being slowly over time, and so hundreds of years ago, individuals with autistic qualities would not have stood out the way that they do at present. When such people began to stand out, it was only extreme cases where the individual was described as severely socially detached and emotionally disturbed. Through interactions among the classification, the people, institutions, knowledge, and experts, the understanding of autism has expanded to encompass high-functioning individuals. In effect, people with high-functioning autism have been made up. Up until the publication of the *DSM-III-R* in 1987, it was not

possible to be a person with high-functioning autism. Since then, high-functioning autism has become a possible lens through which people can understand themselves and their experiences. It remains to be seen how the *DSM-5* criteria will affect not only the prevalence and understanding of autism, but also the people who have, or could have, come to recognize themselves through the lens of autism yet no longer meet the diagnostic criteria. It is probable that with a narrower definition of autism, the prevalence will decrease, and fewer high-functioning individuals will understand themselves through the lens of autism. Perhaps, with the rise of the neurodiversity movement, individuals who once were, or would have been, labelled as high-functioning autistic individuals increasingly will understand themselves and be understood and treated not as disordered, but rather, as normal individuals with particular strengths and weaknesses like everyone else.

## **Rose's Critical History**

Rose is another figure following in the footsteps of Foucault. Rose has taken a similar approach to Hacking in studying the kinds of persons we take ourselves to be in contemporary society, our current ways of relating to ourselves. Rose (1998) terms his approach "critical history," which he explains by contrasting it with two other types of history: "recurrent history" and "critique." Recurrent histories are told chronologically, with a sequence of thinkers and events that led to, and anticipated, our current understanding. History here is understood through the perspective of the present. The assumption with recurrent histories is that reality has remained the same, but we have improved and progressed in our attempts to explain and understand it. Rose (1998) argues that history understood in this way serves not only to glorify the present, but also to shape the future by demarcating what types of investigations and evidence can be used to determine truth. Critique, which has its roots in Marxist theory, is accusatory in nature and aims to emancipate humankind from an oppressive past. In this case, history is used to expose how economic, professional, political, cultural, and patriarchal factors have subjugated persons, so as to open up different possibilities for the future. Rose also takes issue with critique for its focus on attributing guilt, and for not sufficiently recognizing the productive effects of power.

Rather than recurrent history or critique, Rose (1996) advocates critical history, which he describes as:

a way of utilising investigations of the past to enable one to think differently about the present, to interrogate that in our contemporary experience which we take for granted, through an examination of the conditions under which our current forms of truth have been made possible. (p. 106)

Rose's critical history assumes that contemporary forms of personhood are not natural and inevitable, but rather, are the product of certain sociohistorical conditions and practices. By exposing the historical contingency of current forms of personhood, Rose's critical historical approach can reveal implications for, and open up the possibility for changing, how we think about and relate to ourselves. Rose's critical history thus bears distinct similarity to Hacking's approach to historical ontology. Both critical history and historical ontology are concerned with exploring historically the conditions that make contemporary forms of personhood possible and identifying consequences for how we experience and understand ourselves and our actions. Rose states in describing the substance of his inquiries that he is concerned with "the kinds of persons we take ourselves to be, how we have come to understand ourselves under such descriptions, and with what consequences" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 13). In this light, Rose's critical history can be seen as a form of historical ontology (Sugarman, 2013, 2015a).

What Rose's critical history adds to neo-Foucauldian historical ontology is an emphasis on *governmentality*, a topic discussed by Foucault and later extended by Rose (along with his colleague Peter Miller). Foucault referred to governmentality as a mentality of government—a way of thinking that concerns who, when, and how to govern in society. "Government," in Foucault's treatment, is not limited to the realm of politics, but rather, pertains broadly to the management and regulation of conduct. There can be government of others (e.g., governing a society, a family, or a classroom of students) and there can be government of the self. Foucault's discussion of modern governmentality introduced an innovative perspective on political power that draws particular attention not to direct control by the state, but rather, to subtler forms of social control that are exercised in an indirect manner. Foucault illuminated that ways of thinking about the conduct of persons become pervasive in society through diverse



mechanisms that indirectly link the actions of institutions (e.g., schools) and individuals to sociopolitical objectives. Miller and Rose (2008) term the way in which sociopolitical rule can be brought about through indirect mechanisms “government at a distance.” As expounded by Miller and Rose (2008), there are two forms of mechanisms that serve to govern at a distance, both of which are generated by authorities and experts. First, there are mechanisms of representation. This includes language that formulates the ends of government, vocabularies and knowledge about the persons to be governed, as well as procedures for producing such knowledge. Mechanisms of representation serve to identify who and when to govern. Second, there are mechanisms of intervention. These are techniques and strategies, referred to as *technologies*, for shaping the actions of individuals in relation to governmental objectives. Through language used to describe people, along with the technologies that are created to shape conduct, governmentality has serious consequences for how persons are able to think about, experience, and act on themselves.

Rose (1998) has focused his critical historical approach on the role of what he terms the *psy* disciplines (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy) in modern governmentality. According to Rose (1998), the *psy* disciplines have played a key role over the past century as authorities that produce governmental mechanisms of representation and intervention. In fact, Rose accentuates that the *psy* disciplines have been able to thrive in large part due to their ability to generate knowledge and technologies that have served modern modes of governmentality. Liberalism was the dominant mode of governmentality in North America as modern psychology was taking form. It was through meeting demands created by liberal society that psychology was able to stabilize as a discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under liberalism, the state needed to regulate and manage individuals through collectively funded social institutions and services like public education and health care, which presented demands for the regulation and coordination of large numbers of people. Beginning with the army, education, and industry, psychology was able to offer solutions by producing knowledge and technologies with which to sort, organize, and manage individuals. For example, the technology of the intelligence test met a need in England and France for determining which children were not suited for regular instruction. Intelligence testing came to transform the way students were grouped,

taught, and treated, as well as how they understood themselves and their experiences. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Rose (1998) notes, the psy disciplines were called on increasingly as authorities on the coordination and management of persons. Further, the reach of their authority became more extensive through what Rose refers to as *psychologization*. Diverse sites including schools, homes, hospitals, courtrooms, prisons, religious institutions, factories, and businesses became intelligible in psychological language and became infused with psychological practices. Psychologists would no longer need to be directly involved to exert influence on personhood, as their vocabularies and technologies were coming to be used by authority figures such as teachers, doctors, managers, and priests. The psychologization of government can account for why the psy disciplines are so important in an analysis of contemporary forms of personhood.

Since the 1980s, the dominant mode of governmentality in the West has been neoliberalism. The spread of neoliberalism is attributed to the economic policies implemented by Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. (Rose, 1998). These policies involved removing barriers to commerce and maximizing competition in the marketplace (e.g., through free trade, deregulation, and privatization) and reducing state programs for social welfare. Such policies reflected a political ideology that sought to replace a “culture of dependency” (associated with the welfare state) with an individualistic and business-oriented “enterprise culture.” It was believed by politicians like Thatcher that an enterprise culture would be beneficial to both the state and citizens by restoring the economy and enhancing the freedom and self-reliance of individuals. However, creating an enterprise culture could not be accomplished only through structural changes, but also would rely on the conduct of individuals. The success of the political approaches of Thatcher and Reagan hinged on autonomous citizens governing themselves and acting in ways that met the new needs of the economy. Neoliberalism became more than just a political ideology—it became a mentality of government—when a link was forged between the conduct of individuals and the new economic demands of the state (Rose, 1998).

According to Rose (1998), it was the language of enterprise that provided this link. The language of enterprise translated the needs of the neoliberal state into “a mode

of activity to be encouraged in a multitude of arenas of life—the school, the university, the hospital, the GP’s surgery, the factory and business organization, [and] the family” (p. 154). This is a language that glorifies, and incites individuals to be, a certain type of person that Rose refers to as an *enterprising self*. The ideal of the enterprising self is a self-governing, bold, confident, ambitious, optimistic, competitive, opportunistic, risk-taking, and self-fulfilling individual. Individuals are to achieve meaning and fulfillment, and express their individuality, through acts of choice and consumerism. Life is to be interpreted as a kind of project that is to be efficiently managed like a business. People are to take responsibility for, monitor, work on, and add value to themselves to be able to outdo others and be successful in a competitive marketplace. When necessary, individuals are to seek assistance and advice from experts on how to manage and improve themselves. Strategies to help individuals shape and regulate themselves to meet the demands of neoliberalism are a contemporary form of what are called *technologies of the self*. Individuals are motivated to use neoliberal technologies of the self because they are led to believe that doing so will enhance their wellbeing and will increase their ability to succeed. Rose (1998) highlights that neoliberal technologies of the self are particularly potent mechanisms of political power because people freely choose to apply such technologies to themselves. As Rose puts it, “the most powerful way of acting upon the actions of others is to change the ways in which they will govern themselves” (p. 64). The language of enterprise induces individuals to be enterprising and neoliberal technologies of the self are provided as means for them to mold themselves to be so.

The psy disciplines, Rose (1998) reveals, have been a central source of knowledge, theories, vocabularies, and discourse that prompt individuals to be enterprising and problematize those who are not. In addition, the psy disciplines have generated countless technologies of the self that serve to shape people to act in ways consistent with neoliberalism. As illustrated by Hickinbottom-Brawn (2013), individuals with social anxiety are one type of person in neoliberal society that has been problematized and offered psychological technologies of the self. Hickinbottom-Brawn notes that, under neoliberalism, social anxiety became particularly visible and problematic due to high demands for confidence and boldness in social interactions. In the neoliberal context, social anxiety became conceived of as a psychological problem

that should be studied and treated, which led to the emergence of *social anxiety disorder* (SAD) as a psychological classification in the *DSM*. In effect, individuals who fall too far from the standard for fearless self-presentation set by neoliberalism have become pathologized—made to understand their lack of adeptness in social situations as an illness that resides within them rather than a consequence of contextual pressures.

Hickinbottom-Brawn points to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a common form of psychological treatment offered to those with SAD. CBT can help to change the way individuals with SAD think about, evaluate, and respond in social situations. Typically conveyed through CBT is that fear in social situations is to be interpreted as irrational and that negative assumptions about what other people think about the individual are to be discarded. By learning to monitor and control one's thoughts and reactions, social anxiety can be reduced and managed. In the way that is characteristic of neoliberal technologies of the self, CBT functions to bring people into alignment with the objectives of neoliberalism. CBT guides people with SAD to govern themselves and to think and behave in ways that are more conducive to creating economic activity. As well, CBT offered as the solution to their social struggles reinforces the notion for individuals with SAD that the problem resides within themselves. Contextual forces that contribute to social unease are effectively concealed—many of which, as Hickinbottom-Brawn (2013) draws attention to, stem from the neoliberal standards themselves. This way in which CBT serves to distract individuals from constraining contextual factors is a common feature of psychological technologies of the self. Although psychological technologies of the self are often promoted and perceived as tools for empowerment that can enhance individuals' control over their lives, they actually can be disempowering. By molding people's subjectivity and conduct to meet political needs and by concealing external forces that constrain them, psychological technologies of the self can deprive individuals of agency.

Consideration of how psychological language, vocabularies, and interventions serve as tools of political power is what Rose's critical history contributes to neo-Foucauldian historical ontology. In attending to such indirect mechanisms of government, an historical ontological analysis can uncover veiled ways in which persons are controlled and constrained in contemporary neoliberal society.

## **Neo-Foucauldian Historical Ontology and Self-Esteem**

Hacking and Rose hold that psychological phenomena are not transhistorical and fixed, but rather are shaped by the language we use to describe them and the methods we use to study and intervene in them. Our descriptions of, and our procedures for investigating and acting on, such phenomena have consequences for personhood. Attention to such consequences through historical and critical analysis is central to a neo-Foucauldian historical ontological inquiry. Consequently, revealing implications for personhood is a principal aim in the present analysis of self-esteem. The application of Hacking's distinctive approach in this thesis concentrates on examining the sociohistorical conditions that made it possible for the understanding and description of self-esteem to change over time. Hacking's notion of "making up people" also is used to argue in Chapter Seven that the contemporary conception of self-esteem brought into being a new kind of person that I refer to as the "low self-esteemee." Rose's ideas on neoliberal governmentality are particularly important in the final two chapters of my thesis. Drawing on Rose, I attempt to demonstrate that neoliberal forces have been highly influential in "making up" low self-esteemees and that psychological discourse on, and interventions for, self-esteem have served as mechanisms of political power.

The five-part framework and engines for making up people outlined by Hacking (2007) is adopted as a structure with which to frame this historical ontological analysis of self-esteem. The first and second elements in Hacking's framework are the classification and the people classified. There are generally two scientific classifications associated with self-esteem—low self-esteem and high self-esteem—and correspondingly, two types of people classified—individuals with low self-esteem and those with high self-esteem. Despite the frequent bifurcation of self-esteem, it is believed to exist on a continuum from low to high, and every individual manifests some degree of it on this continuum. The third element of the framework is the institutions that produce and disseminate knowledge about the classifications. Generally speaking, the central institutions involved in generating knowledge about self-esteem have been the discipline of psychology and the field of education. Other institutions influential in establishing the cultural and psychological significance of self-esteem are pop psychology, psychiatry, the self-help industry, and the media. Knowledge is the fourth element of Hacking's

framework. Knowledge regarding self-esteem has varied since the term first was defined by William James in 1890. For a long time, the term “self-esteem” was not widely used. However, starting in the 1960s and 1970s, self-esteem increasingly came to be seen as the root of mental health. The experts who work within the institutions constitute the final element of the framework. Notable experts who have been involved in producing and circulating knowledge about self-esteem include William James, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Stanley Coopersmith, Morris Rosenberg, Nathaniel Branden, Jack Canfield, Michele Borba, Robert Reasoner, and John Vasconcellos. According to Hacking (2007), knowledge plays a central role in explaining how making up people takes place, along with the experts and institutions that generate and disseminate the knowledge. Therefore, these three elements of the framework (i.e., institutions, knowledge, and experts) will be detailed throughout my discussion of the historical development of the concept of self-esteem as it is taken up in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Not all of Hacking’s ten engines for making up people apply to the concept of self-esteem. More specifically, the engines of discovery, counting, correlating, medicalizing, biologizing, and geneticizing are not relevant to the present inquiry. Counting involves assessing the frequency of a certain kind of person, but because self-esteem is believed to be possessed by all, there is no need to count instances of it. Although self-esteem has been correlated with many other factors, correlation is not discussed here. To narrow the scope of this thesis, I focus on three engines that had the greatest impact on the understanding of self-esteem (see below). The engines of medicalization, biologization, and geneticization do not apply because self-esteem generally is not regarded as a medical, biological, or genetic issue. The engine of bureaucratizing also does not pertain to the concept of self-esteem. To bureaucratize is to use something for the administration and management of people. However, self-esteem has not been used in this way. Finally, reclaiming identities does not yet apply to the concept of self-esteem. Reclaiming identities occurs when kinds of people who have been shaped by sociopolitical forces take back control and reclaim agency. In Chapter Seven, I note that it would be particularly difficult for low self-esteemers—the kind of person that I argue has been “made up”—to reclaim agency from the neoliberal forces that limit them, but it is possible this could happen in the future.

The present analysis focuses on three of Hacking's engines: quantifying, creating norms (which is modified for the purposes of this thesis to an engine of establishing ideals, the rationale for which is discussed in Chapter Five), and normalizing. The position taken in this thesis is that these three engines can account for changes to the concept of self-esteem over time and the people to whom the concept is applied.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, historical ontology is a mode of inquiry rooted in the work of Michel Foucault, and adopted and refined by Hacking and Rose. The neo-Foucauldian historical ontology employed in this thesis adopts ideas from Hacking and Rose, particularly as described by Sugarman (2009, 2013, 2015a). Foucault envisioned historical ontology as a reflective examination of the present in which one is critical of historical and political structures that limit subjectivity. The purpose of historical ontology, as conveyed by Foucault, is to open up possibilities by which such limitations might be escaped or modified. Foucault did not believe that we could ever have complete and definitive knowledge of what limits our subjectivity. He argued that as a consequence of our historical nature, the task of historical ontology was an ongoing project. Extending Foucault's ideas, Hacking argues that because we understand and experience ourselves and our actions through the descriptions available to us, psychological concepts and classifications have significant implications for the possibilities available and limitations imposed on personhood. Hacking's brand of historical ontology presents a way of studying critically psychological concepts that constitute how we come to think about, understand, and experience ourselves. Rose also has extended Foucault's ideas, refining a type of historical ontology he refers to as critical history. The main contribution of critical history to neo-Foucauldian historical ontology is the attention that it gives to how the knowledge, vocabularies, theories, and technologies produced by the psy disciplines have been involved in the governing of persons in contemporary society. Rose's approach can help to uncover concealed ways in which personhood is formed and constrained by sociopolitical forces.

Applied to self-esteem, the kind of neo-Foucauldian historical ontology I have described requires an historical exploration of the conditions that gave rise to self-

esteem as a psychological concept and that led to changes in how the concept is understood and applied, its role in neoliberal governmentality, and the implications for personhood. We begin in the next chapter with investigation of the conditions that enabled the emergence of the psychological concept of self-esteem.



## Chapter 3.

# The Self, the Birth of Psychology, and the Emergence of the Concept of Self-Esteem

Although first usage of the term “self-esteem” dates back to the seventeenth century, modern understanding of the term emerged with the publication of William James’ magnum opus *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890.<sup>2</sup> It was on James’ description that the present understanding of self-esteem has been built. To discuss the modern emergence of the concept of self-esteem, it is first necessary to provide an overview of the historical background that set the stage for it. In the first two sections of this chapter, consideration is given to the crucial role played by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in shaping contemporary selfhood. Locke transformed the understanding of the self into something separate from the outside world and that could be known empirically. Rousseau developed an ideal for authenticity, that is, the need for turning inward to discover our true selves, and was the first to establish self-love as a moral good. The chapter concludes with an examination of how the modern notion of self-esteem was able to emerge at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but was initially unable to thrive. Central to this discussion is the birth and stabilization of the discipline of psychology.

## Locke and the Empirical Self

Many scholars (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Danziger, 1997a; Guignon, 2004; Martin, Sugarman, & Hickinbottom, 2010; Rose, 1998) point out that the self as we presently

<sup>2</sup> See Turner, Condor, & Collins (2014) for an analysis of the historical background of the term “self-esteem” leading up to William James’ definition in 1890. Turner et al. conclude that usages of the term prior to James did not inform the modern understanding of self-esteem.

experience and understand it in the West is a relatively recent phenomenon. In ancient Greece, for example, there was no word for “self” and there was no experience of an inner self separate from the external world. Human beings were regarded at that time as interconnected parts of the wider cosmos. Although the famous maxim of Socrates is translated as “know thyself,” for Socrates this did not mean getting in touch with an individualized and internalized self (as it would be understood at present), but rather, referred to knowing one’s preordained place in the cosmic order (Guignon, 2004).

It was not until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century through the ideas of John Locke that we begin to see an adumbration of the self as we know it today (Danziger, 1997a). Two points are notable about the 17<sup>th</sup> century context in which Locke initiated contemporary selfhood. First, Rene Descartes had set in motion major ideological waves in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century with his well-known declaration *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). By claiming that knowledge is determined by reason alone, the individual mind came to be seen as separate and distinct from the outside world, thereby altering how humans understood themselves and their relation to the cosmos (Levin, 1992). Second, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, individuals in England were becoming increasingly separated from social identities established by birth (e.g., class, kinship), and religiously based notions of personal identity also were beginning to weaken (Danziger, 1997a). As opposed to premodern times, in which the self was seen as stable and coherent through its relationship to God (Levin, 1992), personal identity had now come into question.

The starting point for Locke’s approach to selfhood was his idea of *tabula rasa*, the notion that the mind begins as a blank slate (Seigel, 2005). Locke’s masterpiece, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, distinguished between two types of ideas that come to be inscribed on the blank slate: *sensations* (ideas obtained through sensory experience) and *reflections* (ideas obtained through introspection). In the second edition of Locke’s essay, published in 1694, he discusses a complex type of reflection that he refers to as *personal identity*, a term he relates closely with *consciousness* as well as with *self*. According to Locke, with a nonhuman animal, identity is determined by its shape and the organization of its parts, but personal identity is established by sameness of consciousness. Locke observes that what distinguishes human beings is that they do not just live, act, and experience, they also are conscious

of their living, acting, and experiencing. For Locke, self is a product of consciousness and entails memory of past actions along with the ability to relate them to the present. Whereas previously the foundation of the self was God, with Locke it became the self-consciousness of the individual. Locke reasoned that if the self consists in the continuity of consciousness, it can be known empirically through introspection (Danziger, 1997b).

Although Locke's ideas generated much controversy during his life and for a long time afterward, particularly due to his framing of selfhood in secular terms, the claims made in his essay were highly influential. Notably, Locke established the self as an object of knowledge and raised the possibility that it can be known empirically and investigated like physical objects, a central presupposition for the discipline of psychology that would emerge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Danziger, 1997a). Danziger (1997b) notes that Locke's empiricist scheme made it possible to confer a much more positive value to the self than in previous times. Traditionally the notion of the self carried negative connotations due to Christianity's interpretation of the individual principally as a sinner. However, now the self was understood as a private possession that individuals discovered in themselves and could appraise through introspection, which enabled it to be perceived positively. In sum, prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the self was regarded as spiritual and indivisible from the greater whole, and had negative connotations. But following Locke, the self increasingly came to be understood as a discrete entity, separate from the outside world, that can be known empirically, and that can be positive in nature.

## **Rousseau, the Ideal of Authenticity, and Self-Love**

Another figure of central importance in forming modern selfhood, as well as laying the foundation for our current understanding of self-esteem, is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Melzer (1997) claims that "the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau played so great a role in shaping our current selves...[that] we cannot know ourselves without understanding Rousseau" (p. 274). In support of his assertion, Melzer points to Rousseau's involvement in elevating authenticity as the highest virtue for human beings. According to Melzer and other scholars (e.g., Guignon, 2004; Potter, 2010; Taylor, 1991; Trilling, 1971), the ideal of authenticity is one of the

defining characteristics of the contemporary age, and its roots can be found in the works of Rousseau. Guignon (2004) points out that while Rousseau never used a term that could be translated as “authenticity,” his sentiments are consistent with what is understood as authenticity in the modern era; namely, a distrust of society and the notion of a true inner self.

Rousseau believed that human beings are inherently good but that they are corrupted by society. In his view, humans in their natural state strive for *amour de soi*, a pure form of self-love that ensures the wellbeing of the individual. This pure self-love necessarily entails a natural inclination for compassion towards others and an abhorrence of human suffering. *Amour de soi* is, as Potter (2010) puts it, “a drive for self-preservation tempered by pity” (p. 59). Rousseau also expressed that the social pressures and comparisons that arise organically in society inhibit the individual’s *amour de soi* and instead yield *amour-propre*, an inauthentic self-regard that involves concern with social standing and a desire to dominate others (Seigel, 2005). For Rousseau, the highest good in life is to get in touch with, and actualize, the true self that one would have been in one’s natural, pre-social state. He agreed with Locke that the foundation of the self is not God, but rather, the internal self-consciousness of the individual, and so he posited that the true way to be authentic is “through withdrawal from everything else and communion with one’s inner self” (Melzer, 1997, p. 288). In other words, introspection and self-examination guide one to finding the true, authentic self that one was always meant to be.

According to Cooper (1998), while self-love had been advocated in earlier times, Rousseau was the first to promote a secular form of self-love and to proclaim it as the source of compassion and morality. By doing so, Rousseau paved the way for the idealization of self-esteem, which is explored in Chapter Five. As will be discussed, often implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the sentiments of self-esteem advocates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the notion that by having self-esteem, one will, by extension, be a socially responsible individual who cares about the needs of others.

## **The Birth of Psychology and the Emergence of the Concept of Self-Esteem**

Having given brief consideration to the two most important early figures that paved the way for the contemporary understanding of self-esteem, we turn now to the birth of psychology and the emergence of the term “self-esteem.” Introduction of the term “self-esteem” is intimately connected with the arrival of disciplinary psychology in America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The conditions surrounding the inauguration and stabilization of psychology in America enabled self-esteem to emerge, but curiously, not to thrive, at least initially. The reason is that there were disputes regarding the proper methods and objects of psychological study. In order for psychology to establish itself as a bona fide scientific discipline, the question of what constituted psychological knowledge needed to be settled.

The subject matter to be addressed by the discipline of psychology was originally under the purview of philosophy. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Locke had opened the door for the inner mental world to be an object of study using introspection as a method, but the study of such phenomena was not regarded as scientific at this time (Danziger, 1990). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant questioned if a scientific study of consciousness was viable. Eventually, he concluded such an endeavor would be impossible because the inner experience of the individual could not be observed objectively, quantified, and measured.

German philosopher Wilhelm Wundt, who is regarded as the father of experimental psychology, was aware of Kant’s argument. However, based on assertions that had been made by philosopher Franz Brentano, Wundt thought he had discovered a way to study empirically some aspects of inner experience. Brentano had claimed that the chief method for studying mental phenomena should be “inner perception” rather than “inner observation” (Lyons, 1986). Inner observation was regarded as an active focus on mental events. By contrast, inner perception was conceptualized as a simple form of perceiving in the moment. Wundt agreed with Brentano’s claim that actively paying attention to one’s thoughts would alter and corrupt them, so the only way to investigate mental phenomena objectively was to study inner perception. Wundt was

trained in physiology, and his first experiments in psychology were the result of an attempt to turn Brentano's notion of inner perception into a scientific method using experimental protocols derived from physiology.

In Wundt's view, the key to making inner perception amenable to experimentation was manipulating the conditions of the experiment so that the processes of inner perception could approximate external perception (Danziger, 1990). He did this with the paradigm of an experimenter presenting a stimulus to a subject who would then report on the perception as it was happening, thus avoiding any kind of judgment or interference. Since Wundt restricted his experiments to inner perception, the range of psychological phenomena he considered appropriate for study with his introspective method was highly limited. Only psychophysical objects, such as sensation, reaction times, and attention were considered suitable. Wundt believed that the study of more complex mental phenomena like memory, thinking, and personality required a non-experimental psychology that drew on techniques and perspectives adopted from philosophy, literature, history, and ethnography (Mandler, 2007).

Wundt is considered the father of experimental psychology not because he conducted the first psychological experiments, but rather, because he created the first experimental psychology laboratory that applied observation, quantification, and measurement to the study of psychological phenomena. In so doing, Wundt initiated a scientific tradition that would come to define the discipline. Wundt's significance to psychology also rests in having taught and minted many doctoral students; several of whom were American, went on to become eminent psychologists, and established psychology laboratories of their own. However, Wundt's successors did not follow the path he had carved for the discipline. Some of his students, especially American E. B. Titchener, advanced the method of experimental introspection, but the method was applied to a much wider array of psychological phenomena and with fewer restrictions than Wundt had intended (Danziger, 1990).

Modern psychology may have originated in Germany, but it was in America that it became stabilized as a scientific discipline. William James frequently is credited as the father of psychology in America. Well educated, fluent in five languages including

German and French, and a frequent traveler to Europe, James was uniquely positioned to connect people and ideas when psychology was still in its infancy. A year before the formation of Wundt's laboratory in Germany, James began writing what was to become his greatest contribution to psychology, his monumental text *Principles of Psychology* (herein referred to as *Principles*). Considered a literary tour de force, *Principles* was published in 1890, was widely read, and was used as the gold standard textbook in psychology for many years (Pajares, 2003).

James was a pluralist. He did not believe that reality and experience could be reduced to one element (monism) or two elements (dualism). Instead, he considered experience and reality to be complex, multi-faceted, and made intelligible only in context. He agreed with Kant that inner experience could not be quantified and measured, but nonetheless, still believed consciousness could be studied empirically. In *Principles*, James demonstrated there to be two parts to the scientific study of consciousness, description and explanation (Lyons, 1986). Description is the result of careful introspection and explanation comes from physiological and neurological investigation. Although James included some psychophysiological research in attempts at explanation in *Principles*, the majority of the text is descriptive, based on James' own introspection. Rather than limiting introspection to perceptions in the moment as Wundt did, James used introspection retroactively, meaning he reported on a phenomenon after he experienced it, which made his method conducive to a much wider range of psychological phenomena.

In *Principles*, James wrote extensively about the self (the chapter on the self is the longest in the book). According to James (1890), each of us is concurrently both a self as knower that acts in the world, which he referred to as the *I*, as well as a self that is known to others, which he called the *Me*. For James, anything in which an individual is emotionally invested and considers part of his or her identity are all part of one's self. This includes one's body, possessions, job, interests, relationships, nationality, ethnicity, values, and beliefs. In addition, James believed that there is no self without feelings about the self (Levin, 1992). He maintained that we always love or hate ourselves more or less depending on contingent circumstances in our lives. In *Principles*, James introduced the term "self-esteem" to describe feelings we have about ourselves. James

(1890) defines self-esteem as an evaluation of personal accomplishment that can be formulated as the ratio of one's successes to one's pretensions, and that "depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do" (p. 310). Self-esteem is therefore highly personal, increased by an individual by achieving in areas that are important to him/her or by lowering particular pretensions. For example, if being a writer is what I consider myself to be, and I succeed as a writer, I will feel good about myself. If dancing is unimportant to me, whether or not I am good at dancing will have a negligible effect on how I feel about myself. Alternatively, if I aspire to be a musician and I am unsuccessful, I will feel better about myself if I put less stock in being a musician and find a different meaningful endeavor in which I can succeed. In this view, self-esteem can inform the individual. Negative self-feelings are an indicator that a person could benefit from making some sort of change in his/her life, for example, an attitude adjustment, greater effort, or pursuit of something that brings meaning and fulfillment. It is important to note here that James is far from saying that people simply should feel good about themselves whatever they think or do, or that high self-esteem will yield significant benefits to the individual or the society. James' discussion of self-esteem was only descriptive, based on his own experiences, and he characterized self-esteem as a by-product, not a cause, of success.

As the fathers of modern psychology, Wundt and James shared notable similarities. Both built theoretical and methodological bridges from a psychology rooted in philosophy and a psychology rooted in science. Both borrowed from philosophy consciousness as an object of study and introspection as a method (although their approaches to introspection took quite different forms). Wundt and James both wanted psychology to remain rooted in philosophy while supported with scientific research. However, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, introspection had begun to fall out of favor for being unreliable and unscientific. There was also growing opinion at this time that consciousness is not the proper object of psychology because it could not be measured objectively (Danziger, 1990). As a result, it was neither the introspective paradigms of Wundt or William James (or, for that matter, that of Wundt's students) that won the day in psychology. The psychology that followed Wundt and James became much more quantitative and mechanistic than either had envisioned. It was the quantitative paradigm that came to prominence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that helped



stabilize psychology as a credible discipline (as evidenced, for example, by the creation of psychology departments at numerous universities, as well as many psychology laboratories, journals, specialized jobs, and professional associations). The self as it was conceptualized at that time, as a mysterious inner entity evidenced by consciousness, did not lend itself well to measurement and so, for several decades, research on the self disappeared (Greer, 2003). While the concept of self-esteem fit into the introspective paradigm advocated by James, it was not well suited for the quantitative paradigm that took over the discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and so was to fade as a topic of interest for several decades.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the emergence of the notion of self-esteem, beginning with a brief overview of conditions that set the stage for its appearance. First, the concept of self-esteem could not have arisen in the way it did had it not been for key changes in the understanding of the self as expounded by philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Locke's view, no longer was God the foundation of the self, but rather, self consisted of the inner consciousness of the individual. Locke established the self as something separate from the outside world and that could be known empirically. Rousseau passed down to the modern world the notion that a certain type of self-love is moral. Second, conditions surrounding the birth of psychology enabled self-esteem to emerge, but not thrive, as a concept. Self-esteem emerged at a defining moment in psychology's history when the discipline was still trying to carve out its own scientific niche. The concept of self-esteem fit into William James' introspective paradigm for psychology. However, it did not fit with the quantitative paradigm that came to prevail and that helped stabilize psychology as a scientific discipline in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The next chapter discusses how self-esteem was able to resurge as a topic of interest in psychology by becoming considered quantifiable in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Chapter 4.

### The Quantification of Self-Esteem

I now turn to quantification, the first of Ian Hacking's three engines for making up people that will be applied to the concept of self-esteem in this thesis. To quantify is to bestow quantity and make measurable. As discussed in the previous chapter, self-esteem initially was not regarded as a phenomenon that could be quantified and measured. William James understood self-esteem as a complex experience of persons that cannot be reduced and only can be made intelligible in context. Such a notion of self-esteem did not fit with the quantitative paradigm that became prevalent in psychology at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, self-esteem faded temporarily as a topic of psychological interest. In this chapter I discuss how the understanding of self-esteem was transformed such that it became seen as a measurable trait, enabling it to resurface as a topic of interest in psychology.

Relevant to this discussion is a notion put forward by Hacking (2012) that he refers to as *styles of scientific thinking and doing*.<sup>3</sup> For Hacking, there is no universal, objective truth—there is only consensus on what is considered to be objective truth. Hacking describes styles of scientific thinking and doing as sociohistorically crystallized ways of finding out truth. Styles of scientific thinking and doing structure our thinking, dictate under what conditions something can be made a candidate for truth, and open up spaces of possibility in which new phenomena can emerge (Sugarman, 2009). A style of scientific thinking and doing does not just determine standards of objective truth, according to Hacking, but rather, it is the standard. Drawing on the work of A.C.

<sup>3</sup> Hacking (1992) originally referred to this as a *style of reasoning*, but later revised it to *style of scientific thinking and doing in the European tradition*—or, for brevity, *style of scientific thinking and doing* (Hacking, 2012).

Crombie, Hacking (1992) outlines six styles of scientific thinking and doing, ordered according to the historical progression with which each style emerged: mathematics, the experimental method, hypothetical modeling, taxonomy, statistical analysis, and the historical derivation of genetic development.

Hacking (2012) notes that once a style of scientific thinking and doing is established as a way of getting at the truth, the style becomes remarkably stable and autonomous (i.e., independent of its own history) because each has its own self-stabilizing and self-sustaining techniques. Styles of scientific thinking and doing come into being, and are strengthened, alongside the introduction of novelties, such as new techniques, classes, explanations, evidence, objects, sentences, and possibilities. Such novelties are brought into existence by, and only are made intelligible within, a style of scientific thinking and doing. Hacking highlights the circularity between what counts as a claim to knowledge and the criteria used to assess it. Take, for instance, representative sampling, a novelty of the statistical style of scientific thinking and doing. Introduced in the late 1930s, representative sampling is a technique used in research for selecting a group of individuals assumed to be representative of a population. It is now taken for granted in statistical research that representative sampling yields more accurate data than conducting an exhaustive census of an entire population, a notion that was unthinkable prior to the late 1930s. However, accuracy itself is determined statistically. Statistical tests of accuracy, themselves novelties of the statistical style of scientific thinking and doing, are used to substantiate the notion that representative sampling is an accurate way to measure a population. As Hacking (2012) puts it, styles “do not answer to any criteria of truthfulness other than their own” (p. 605).

The statistical style of scientific thinking and doing, which centers on probability and prediction, has been of particular significance in psychology since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the statistical style grew in prominence, the quantification of psychological phenomena became increasingly desired so that statistical procedures could be applied as a means of interpretation and inference. The statistical style accordingly gave rise to the *individual differences paradigm*, a framework in psychology that employs statistical analyses of quantitative differences among individuals. The differences most frequently targeted are psychological attributes that everyone is believed to possess to varying

extent, such as intelligence, and such attributes are typically measured with some sort of test, scale, inventory, questionnaire, or checklist. Fundamental to this paradigm are *operational definitions* that frame concepts in observable and measurable terms. As will be shown, over time, self-esteem came to be operationalized as a measurable trait under the individual differences paradigm.

This chapter begins by discussing the rise of the statistical style in psychology and introduction of the individual differences paradigm. Following, is an exploration of how self-esteem became part of the individual differences paradigm and an examination of the most commonly used tool to measure self-esteem, the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*. Finally, the implications of quantifying self-esteem are considered.

## **The Rise of the Statistical Style in Psychology**

The statistical style has its roots in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of probability theory. However, statistical thinking only began to surge in popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period saw increased interest in gathering statistics on a great variety of social phenomena, especially forms of deviancy like crime and poverty. Statistics were believed valuable for informing decisions regarding social reform and control. The value statistics provided was demonstration of relatively consistent incidence of these phenomena in a given region (Danziger, 1990). Adolphe Quetelet, who had a background in astronomy, one of the main fields employing probability and statistics at the time, particularly was struck by the regularities in social phenomena illuminated by statistics and came to believe that human attributes are subject to quantitative laws just like cosmic forces. Quetelet borrowed from astronomy the *law of error*—the notion that observations of phenomena follow a normal distribution, or bell-shaped curve—and began applying it in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to human characteristics (e.g., chest circumference and height). By tabulating instances of a certain attribute, Quetelet could determine the mean and distribution of a population. Hacking (1992) suggests that the upshot was creation of a new statistical object: a population characterized by a mean. The mean was now a property that described not specific individuals, but rather, a reified collective that could be subjected to further statistical computations. According to

Hacking (1990), following Quetelet's innovation, the floodgates had been opened for applying statistics to human characteristics.

The first to apply statistical thinking to the measurement of psychological characteristics was Francis Galton (Danziger, 1990). Galton had been powerfully influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and was interested in the extent to which human abilities are hereditary. Desired traits would presumably strengthen the chances of survival and so if they are hereditary, he reasoned, efforts should be made for the propagation of such traits. An extensive analysis of the biographical data of extraordinary families convinced Galton that human abilities largely are inherited, leading to his endorsement of what he termed *eugenics*, the practice of promoting reproduction among individuals with desired traits and restricting it among individuals with undesired traits. As eugenics became considered a viable solution to social problems, a demand was created for ways to describe populations and compare individuals within them (Richards, 2010).

In 1884, Galton established a laboratory employing a new methodology that he devised for comparing individual differences. Galton subscribed to Quetelet's belief that human attributes are normally distributed and set out to apply Quetelet's statistical methods to study mental abilities. Unlike Quetelet, Galton was interested in variability rather than averages (Hacking, 1990). For Galton, deviations from the norm signalled how individuals compared to the population as a whole, and could be used to rank individuals. People flocked to his laboratory which was open to the public, to be assessed on reaction times and simple sensory capacities, which Galton posited were reflective of overall mental faculties. An individual's performance was interpreted as an indication of their ranking in relation to an aggregate of individuals. How one stacked up against their contemporaries was seen as valuable information for gauging one's personal potential in an increasingly competitive social landscape (Danziger, 1990). But, for Galton, data obtained from the assessments was useful in creating indices of population norms for his eugenics project (Richards, 2010). Another eugenicist, James McKeen Cattell worked as an assistant in Galton's laboratory and subsequently brought Galton's approach to the United States. Cattell established psychology laboratories at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University that were modeled after Galton's

laboratory and employed the same type of assessments that Galton had used, which Cattell was the first to refer to as “mental tests.”

At the time that Galton launched his revolutionary statistical approach for assessing individual differences, psychology was in its infancy. Wilhelm Wundt's introspective method brought procedure to psychological study and was instrumental in inaugurating psychology as a scientific discipline. However the practical value of introspection was seen as relatively limited because its application was deemed appropriate only to a narrow range of psychological phenomena and it did not produce information useful to applied settings (Danziger, 1990). What was needed for psychology to stabilize as a discipline was a scientific methodology that could yield socially relevant and practical information. Galton's methodology fit the bill. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rapid expansion of legal, educational, industrial, and military institutions created demand for ways to administer large numbers of people. Galton's approach to mental testing equipped psychology to meet this need and, by so doing, gain credibility as a scientific discipline. The demonstration of the usefulness of statistical analyses in the practical contexts to which psychologists applied them likewise gave these analyses credibility in the wider community (Danziger, 1990). In line with the circularity that is characteristic of styles of scientific thinking and doing, the statistical analyses formed a symbiotic relationship with mental tests. The tests validated the presumption of internal mental characteristics and the statistical means by which they were demonstrated and, reciprocally, the statistical style validated the tests and the proposed phenomena they targeted.

Danziger (1990) emphasizes that Galton's statistical approach provided psychology with a new method for justifying knowledge claims. No longer was it necessary to study individual minds, as in the Wundtian approach, but rather, psychology could study the distribution of psychological characteristics in populations. By statistically analyzing such characteristics in populations, it was believed that the inherent nature of psychological phenomena would become apparent (Danziger, 1990). In other words, statistical regularities could form the basis of generalizations about psychological phenomena. Galton set the groundwork for the statistical interpretation of psychological phenomena that other scholars like Karl Pearson, Charles Spearman, and

Louis Leon Thurstone expanded to yield a host of statistical innovations that could be applied to such phenomena; for example, correlation, regression, reliability, and factor analysis.

One of the final stages in fixing the viability of the statistical style began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Galton used a statistical law not only to predict, but also, to explain a phenomenon (Hacking, 1990). Galton's extensive study of extraordinary families had provided evidence of the heredity of human abilities. But his analysis also demonstrated that brilliant men and women seldom had children that were as gifted as their parents. He described this latter finding as "reversion toward mediocrity" and sought a way to account for it. Galton eventually came to the conclusion that reversion toward mediocrity could be explained by heredity working in concert with the law of error. Exceptional individuals are outliers and statistically are rarer than people of average ability. Thus, if human characteristics follow the law of error (i.e., are normally distributed in the population), it would be improbable for the children of exceptional parents to deviate from the average as much as their parents.<sup>4</sup> In using the law of error to explain reversion toward mediocrity, the law of error had begun to take on an autonomous existence as a law that governs human characteristics (Hacking, 1990). Not even Quetelet had found that many characteristics he studied were actually normally distributed (Hacking, 1992). However, as statistical analyses were applied more frequently to psychological attributes, it was decreasingly questioned whether the attributes are in fact normally distributed. Galton was the first to use a statistical law to explain a phenomenon and, according to Hacking (1992), "many more explanations followed" (p. 150), which further aided stabilizing the statistical style. By the 1930s, the statistical style had become a generic methodology largely independent of its contextual origins and had become established as a way of making truth claims in psychology (Hacking, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon of the attributes of successive generations/iterations moving closer to the mean came to be known as "regression toward the mean," and has been a significant notion in statistics.

## The Individual Differences Paradigm

Galton's statistical methodology was to constitute a reformulation of the psychological study of individual differences, a new framework called the individual differences paradigm. Typically, methods for gauging individual differences that predated Galton were based on physical indicators (e.g., phrenology, which used measurements of the skull to determine psychological attributes), but Galton's framework redefined the assessment of individual differences in terms of comparisons of performances at set tasks (Danziger, 1990). Fundamental to Galton's reformulation of the study of individual differences is the usage of *operational definition*, which defines a theoretical concept in terms of observable and measurable behavior. The theoretical concept of interest to Galton was "natural ability," which he operationally defined as performance on the battery of tasks that made up his mental test. Although the term "operational definition" was not used in psychology until the 1930s, the mental testing of Galton and Cattell represented the first examples of operationalization in the discipline (Rogers, 1989). Operational definitions enable the quantification of psychological phenomena and are a central feature of the individual differences paradigm. Also notable about the paradigm that Galton initiated is that it maintains implicitly the assumption of an individual as a collection of stable, isolable, and measurable psychological qualities that are normally distributed in predictable patterns across a population. Psychological attributes, under the individual differences paradigm, are regarded as "unambiguous properties of the natural world" (Danziger, 1990, p. 162); that is, natural phenomena that can be known empirically and measured just like physical phenomena. Accordingly, psychological properties are thought to function in similar ways in different individuals, varying only in degree, and to remain stable within the individual across situations. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the individual differences paradigm became an increasingly powerful force in psychological research, as it enabled psychologists to meet growing demands for sorting people in institutional settings.

Next to be operationalized under the individual differences paradigm after natural ability was the concept of intelligence. Intelligence testing arose out of a desire to be able to predict how students would perform in educational settings, and expanded rapidly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1920s, Lewis Terman created the first paper-and-



pencil, group-administered version of the intelligence test, the versatility and easy administration of which made it quickly become the most popular way to measure intelligence and was a boon to a growing intelligence testing industry.

Following on the success of intelligence testing, personality came to be seen as a measurable quality of the individual under the individual differences paradigm and to offer advantages over intelligence testing. By the early 1920s, intelligence tests were being criticized for being ineffective in predicting how people would behave and perform, and it was thought that measures of personality would yield more practical information for administrative purposes (Danziger, 1997a). Growing interest in personality in psychology also was the result of an important shift that occurred around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. Victorian character ideals of integrity, morality, hard work, and self-sacrifice were being displaced by an emphasis on personality traits untethered from religious morality (Cushman, 1995). Whereas the Victorian character adhered to Christian ethics, with the spread of secularism, personality's "popular appeal lay in the lightness of its moral load" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 57). Personality, shorn of its religious moral injunctions, entailed uniqueness, charisma, and being liked by others. Character was not felt to be appropriate for scientific psychology because of its moral connotations, and so an emphasis on personality, with its progressive tone and seeming moral neutrality, was adopted by psychology.

A central figure involved in establishing personality as a research category in psychology was Gordon Allport, an American psychologist who was born at a critical moment when the social tide was changing from the traditional valuing of moral character to a new appreciation for the importance of personality (Nicholson, 2003). Allport spoke out against emphasis on character, instead advocating that ethical considerations were of secondary importance to self-expression and personal fulfillment. He was deeply concerned with safeguarding human individuality and believed that scientific psychology could help protect individuality by making it intelligible (Nicholson, 2003). Allport developed one of the first tests to operationalize and measure personality. His test employed several different types of procedures, but, similar to what was seen with intelligence testing, the approach generally regarded as the most promising was the

paper-and-pencil test. By the 1930s, personality testing had grown in popularity, especially the paper-and-pencil method (Nicholson, 2003).

Despite his enthusiasm for a science of personality, Allport was concerned that quantifying personality could have the effect of undermining human agency and purpose (Nicholson, 2003). This issue led him to develop *trait theory*, which posits that traits are the basic units of personality and that a person's behavior is a function of the pattern of his or her traits. According to trait theory, traits exist on a neurological level and their existence can be established empirically and statistically. For Allport, studying traits would allow personality to be studied scientifically while still "affirming an enchanted view of the person as individually unique...[and] at least partially self-determining" (Nicholson, 2003, p. 156). Allport held that to account fully for human individuality, personality research should include both quantitative and qualitative methods. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1940s, the study of personality had become mainly the statistical study of traits, with stress on the potential of traits to predict future behavior (Richards, 2010).

Although they had been used in psychology since the mental testing of Galton and Cattell, operational definitions were officially introduced to the discipline in 1935 by S. S. Stevens. Stevens had adopted the idea of operational definitions from physics. Rogers (1989) remarks that psychological measurement was under attack around this time and was "in dire need of scientific rationalization" (p. 141), and so being able to associate psychological measurement with a practice from physics provided scientific legitimacy to extant practices. Following Stevens' formal introduction of operational definitions to psychology, the practice of using them spread rapidly throughout the discipline (Rogers, 1989). Given that operational definitions are central to the individual differences paradigm, the proliferation of operational definitions in psychology served to fortify the individual differences paradigm. As will be discussed in the next section, eventually features of the self, including self-esteem, came to be operationalized under the individual differences paradigm as traits that can be measured, similar to intelligence or personality traits.

## Self-Esteem as a Measurable Trait

Attempts to measure features of the self arose initially out of a need in the clinical realm of psychology for tools to measure an individual's progress in psychotherapy. In addition to adopting methods of testing from personality psychology, these early measures targeting properties of the self tended to be based, at least in part, on the theory of clinical psychologist Carl Rogers. While Rogers (1965) did not intend to focus on the construct of the self, he noted that "so much of the verbal interchange of therapy had to do with the self that attention was forcibly turned in this direction" (p. 136). He came to believe that successful psychotherapy is best explained by changes to the individual's self-concept, which he defined as "an organized configuration of perceptions of the self which are admissible to awareness" (p. 136). Accordingly, most of the earliest measures of features of the self focused on the construct of self-concept. It was assumed that by measuring self-concept, it could be determined "what changes take place during [psychotherapeutic] treatment and what conditions are necessary to produce them" (Raimy, 1948, p. 153).

Victor Raimy, a student of Rogers, was the first to create a measure of self-concept. Raimy (1948) claimed that the self-concept "is of ultimate psychological significance in organized behavior" (p. 154) and that a positive change in self-concept is key to successful counselling. Raimy devised a checklist that could be used by clinicians to classify clients' verbalizations as expressions of approval, disapproval, or ambivalence about themselves so that psychotherapeutic progress could be assessed and tracked. He reasoned that changes in individuals' verbalized attitudes about themselves would be indicative of "changes in self-concept and therefore in personality organization" (p. 162). Greer (2003) points out that in focusing on self-feelings of approval and disapproval, Raimy's assessment was designed to probe self-esteem rather than self-concept. Conceptual slippage between self terms such as self-concept, self-regard, self-approval, self-acceptance, self-worth, self-image, and self-esteem was indeed a theme that was to recur in subsequent empirical research on features of the self (Greer, 2007).

By the mid-1950s, psychological researchers had spawned many additional measures to gauge self-concept, such as the *Index of Adjustment and Values* (Bills, Vance, & McLean, 1951), the *Self-Rating Inventory* (Brownfain, 1952), and the *Q-technique* (Stephenson, 1953). Like Raimy's checklist, most of these subsequent measures operationalized self-concept by employing some sort of rating of an individual's behavior by an observer who assessed the verbalizations of the individual. However, following Raimy, operational definitions often entailed a combination of these behavioral ratings with some sort of paper-and-pencil self-rating scale, checklist, or inventory similar to what often was used in intelligence and personality testing. Over time, the trend of applying operational definitions of self-concept moved increasingly away from ratings of an individual's behavior by an observer in favor of self-report assessments like self-rating scales, which were easier to administer.

In addition to the greater tendency to rely on measures like self-rating scales and checklists, over time, the rationale for creating measures of the self moved away from a focus on assessing changes within an individual in a clinical context to explaining and predicting behavior more generally. Related to this change in rationale for self measures was a new language that had become entrenched in psychology, the language of variables. Talk of independent and dependent variables had become convention in the discipline by the 1950s because it was thought to be more theoretically neutral and broader in scope than previous ways of describing the relationships between phenomena and so could form the basis of a *lingua franca* for psychologists (Danziger, 1997a). Implicit in this language was an entirely linear conception of psychological causality—-independent variables caused and could predict dependent variables. To speak with the language of variables was to suggest causal relations that could be described statistically. As the trend with self-concept measures moved away from evaluating psychotherapeutic progress within an individual, the research literature increasingly referred to self-concept as a variable and more frequently used words that imply causality, such as “cause,” “determine,” “affect,” “predict,” “expect,” “produce,” and “influence.” Given that self-concept had been connected to progress in psychotherapy, with the new language of variables, self-concept gradually came to be understood as a variable that could predict mental health. Greer (2007) mentions that William H. Fitts,

who developed the *Tennessee Self Concept Scale* in 1965, went so far as to say that his scale could be used as a diagnostic tool for psychological disorders.

By the late 1950s, self measures had become largely tools of prediction, and it was at this time that the earliest measures crafted explicitly to tap self-esteem were devised. Greer (2003) indicates that self-esteem became regarded as a more appealing construct to work with in psychological research than self-concept because self-esteem was seen as easier to conceptualize in a linear, ordinal fashion that would make it amenable to statistical analyses. Stanley Coopersmith (1959) created the first self-esteem measure, the *Self-Esteem Inventory*. Coopersmith referred to self-esteem as a “determinant of behavior” (p. 87) and as “indicative of psychological health” (p. 87). Using his inventory, Coopersmith conducted a series of studies to explore statistically which variables predict high/low self-esteem, the results of which were published in his 1967 book *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem*.

Most notable among the earliest self-esteem measures was the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*, which quickly became the dominant tool in empirical self research and is still the most commonly used self measure in contemporary psychological research (Alessandri, Vecchione, Eisenberg, & Laguna, 2015). Rosenberg’s scale was presented initially in 1965 in his book, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Rosenberg (1965) uses the term “self-esteem” interchangeably with “self-image,” and assumes that it is “central to the subjective life of the individual, largely determining his thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (p. vii). Like Coopersmith, Rosenberg had conducted a study using his scale to determine which variables correlate with high/low self-esteem, and his book was a report of the findings. An example of a finding Rosenberg (1965) derived from his study was that

since people with low self-esteem are more likely to present a false front to others and since people who present a false front manifest more symptoms of anxiety, we might assume that one reason people with low self-esteem show more anxiety is because of their tendency to present a false front. (p. 156)

In this example, Rosenberg demonstrates the new tendency amongst researchers to use measures of the self not to evaluate an individuals’ psychotherapeutic progress, but

rather, to explain and predict behavior more generally. Rosenberg's scale also provides evidence of the departure from measures that require the external judgment of an observer in favor of a self-rating instrument that is easy to administer and score. The *RSES* assesses level of self-esteem based only on the degree to which a person agrees or disagrees with 10 statements (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself"), making it the shortest and simplest self measure up to that point in time. The ease with which the *RSES* can be administered and analyzed has undoubtedly contributed to its continuing popularity in psychology. While Greer reported 1,164 hits for "Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale" on the online journal database *PsycINFO* in 2007, the same search in early 2015 struck just over 2,000 hits. As further testament to its continued popularity, the *RSES* has been translated into 28 languages and administered across 53 countries (Schmitt & Allik, 2005).

Of final note is that what can be tapped by the *RSES* falls short of Rosenberg's overall conception of self-esteem. In describing self-esteem, Rosenberg is clear that people with high self-esteem respect themselves and view themselves as individuals of worth, without considering themselves superior to others. Such individuals, according to Rosenberg (1965), "do not simply accept themselves for what they are; they also want to grow, to improve, to overcome their deficiencies" (p. 31). However, none of the 10 statements Rosenberg used in his scale to operationalize self-esteem<sup>5</sup> alludes to humility, self-improvement, or overcoming deficiencies. Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) note that by simply asking people if they consider themselves a person of worth, without any objective criteria, the *RSES* "obscure[s] needed distinctions between defensive, inflated, narcissistic, and so-called genuine high self-esteem" (p. 5). For example, agreement with the statement "I am able to do things as well as most other people" encompasses both instances of accurate self-assessment and unrealistic self-appraisal. Rosenberg's assumption that having high self-esteem entails a drive towards

<sup>5</sup> In order, the 10 items of the scale are: "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others;" "I feel that I have a number of good qualities;" "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure;" "I am able to do things as well as most other people;" "I feel I do not have much to be proud of;" "I take a positive attitude toward myself;" "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself;" "I wish I could have more respect for myself;" "I certainly feel useless at times;" and "At times I think I am no good at all."

growth and self-improvement is indicative of an idealized understanding of self-esteem, which was emerging around this time (This will be discussed in Chapter Five.).

## **Implications of Quantifying Self-Esteem**

Danziger (1990) asserts that there is an inescapable interaction between methods and objects of psychological investigation. Methods are not neutral, but rather, carry implicit assumptions about the nature of the phenomena to which they are applied. The more widely used and accepted a method becomes, the more people come to understand a phenomenon in the way presupposed by the method. Quantifying psychological phenomena by creating tools to measure them is a common approach taken in psychology that can change how the phenomena are understood. For example, prior to the proliferation of intelligence tests in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, intelligence was interpreted broadly as the capacity to know and understand (Danziger, 1997a). The wide-scale acceptance of IQ tests had the effect of changing the common understanding of intelligence to how one performs on an intelligence test represented by a numerical value (i.e., their IQ score). Quantification not only affects how a concept is understood, but also, according to Hacking (1990), it has “consequences for the ways in which we conceive of others and think of our own possibilities and potentials” (p. 6). Continuing with intelligence as an example, tests of intelligence were used widely in several institutional settings to administer individuals, notably in schools. The use of IQ tests for the purposes of administering students in schools transformed the way students were grouped, taught, and treated, as well as how they came to understand themselves and their experiences.

The consequences of quantification for how self-esteem is understood and how people conceive of themselves has not been as dramatic as the case with intelligence. Self-esteem has not become equated with what self-esteem measures assess in the same way that intelligence became largely what intelligence tests test. Unlike intelligence tests, self-esteem measures generally are not used in schools or other institutional contexts, nor are they used commonly in counselling or psychiatric settings. The principal application of self-esteem measures has been in psychological research. Self-esteem measures were introduced out of a desire to be able to explain and predict

behavior and this purpose holds true in the present day. Nevertheless, quantification has had some notable consequences for how self-esteem is understood and for our own self-understanding.

First, self-esteem measures like the *RSES* have reified self-esteem. The understanding of self-esteem has been transformed through these measures from an abstract experience of persons, as William James regarded it, to what is presumed to be an identifiable, real, and discrete, psychological trait. Richards (2010) accentuates that just because something can be measured does not mean that it necessarily exists in the natural world. As Richards puts it,

It is easy to devise procedures yielding numbers that can be treated as scores and submitted to elaborate statistical procedures from which a pattern of some sort emerges...The temptation...is to treat this as representing some objectively existing reality. It is commonly recognized that behaviours everyday language identifies by a single classification (intelligent, aggressive, etc.) may not in fact be manifestations of single psychological processes, but may variously lump together more than one such process or only partially overlap. (p. 286)

In other words, when a psychological measure is created, it does not follow automatically that it is tapping an underlying psychological reality. It cannot be presumed through quantification that self-esteem is a discrete psychological property that can be extricated from other psychological processes and functions. The acceptance and use of tools to quantify self-esteem have constituted the very phenomenon that they are designed to measure.

Second, measuring self-esteem has had the effect of reducing the complexity of what it means to feel and experience self-esteem. Measures of self-esteem presuppose that self-esteem is a unitary and universal psychological feature that functions and is experienced in the same way across individuals. Counter to James' conception of self-esteem as an idiosyncratic experience of persons, self-esteem has become regarded as a stable trait that is experienced uniformly. This change in understanding paved the way for the creation and use of generic strategies for self-esteem enhancement (such strategies will be examined in Chapter Six).



## Conclusion

This chapter explored quantification, the first major conceptual change to self-esteem. It would be difficult to imagine self-esteem becoming quantified had it not been for the statistical style. A characteristic of styles of scientific thinking and doing like the statistical style is that they are self-authenticating to the extent that they become independent of their own history. Research on intelligence, personality, self-esteem, and other psychological constructs indeed seldom refer to the historical background of the statistical methods that are employed to study them. It has become taken for granted that, problems with measurement notwithstanding, statistics should be used to understand individual differences in psychology. However, the method that is used to study a psychological phenomenon like self-esteem will determine how it is understood. Originally described by James as an abstract, multi-faceted feature of persons, through quantification, self-esteem is now conceived of as a concrete trait that can be isolated and measured. Chapter Five will examine how self-esteem became idealized as the cause of personal and social success and as an end in itself.

## Chapter 5.

### The Idealization of Self-Esteem

The second engine for making up people applied in my analysis is “establishing ideals.” This engine is a modification of Hacking’s original engine of creating norms. In this chapter, I return to the notion of the authenticity ideal (introduced in Chapter Three), a moral framework first articulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For Rousseau, the foremost good to be pursued is self-fulfillment, which comes not through God or others, but rather, by getting in touch with one’s inner self. In Rousseau’s view, humans are inherently good, and self-love is not only moral, but also is the source of compassion and morality. Social forces are regarded as antagonistic to the individual and the cause of a loss of wholeness in one’s life. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a modern form of the authenticity ideal grew to become the dominant moral force in American society, and self-esteem was part and parcel of this modern ideal. According to this contemporary moral framework, individuals ought to strive not merely for an average level of self-esteem, but rather, unceasingly for an ever higher level because self-esteem is presumed unlimited and invariably good. From this perspective, one always can and should have more self-esteem than one possesses. Thus, it is more accurate to speak of self-esteem as an ideal rather than as a norm.

Philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) indicates that the ideal of authenticity has been expressed in different ways over time, some nobler than others. Taylor is clear that there is value to the ideal of authenticity in contemporary society. Up until the end of the Middle Ages, one’s identity in life was established from birth according to position in what was believed a divinely constituted social hierarchy. By contrast, beginning in the early modern era, individuals were expected to carve out their own identities. Taylor argues that to live a truly authentic life in contemporary society, two interrelated criteria must be met. First, the individual must determine and articulate what values they will

commit to upholding in their life. Second, what is taken to be significant in one's life must be determined in relation to the concerns of others. Drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead, Taylor highlights that human life is fundamentally dialogical in nature. Humans acquire an understanding of the world and themselves not on their own, but rather, through dialogue with others. It is only through and with interactions with others that meaning and significance in life are made possible. Taylor (1991) argues that pursuing authenticity without regard to the demands of our ties with others is destined to fail because it destroys the conditions under which authenticity can be attained. Guignon (2004) similarly maintains that genuine authenticity cannot be achieved without a social dimension. For Guignon (2004), what an individual chooses to pursue in life must provide them with "a sense of belonging and indebtedness to the wider social context" (p. 163). To privilege the individual over society to the extent that it distances us from our relations and commitments to others constitutes what Taylor (1991) describes as a debased and self-defeating form of the authenticity ideal. According to both Taylor and Guignon, it was in this debased form that the authenticity ideal became the prevailing moral framework in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

What allowed for the flourishing of the modern moral ideal of authenticity was a configuration of the self that became predominant in the United States following World War II. This configuration, which Cushman (1995) calls the "empty self," dovetailed with the ideal of authenticity. The empty self came about owing to two main factors. First, the empty self was partly the culmination of changes that had been occurring in the American population since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Steady growth in immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and secularization imparted on the populace intensifying feelings of cultural confusion and rootlessness. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, feelings of disconnection and uncertainty became rampant. To compensate for a diminished sense of community and a growing loss of guidance previously furnished by religious and cultural traditions, individuals increasingly were turning inward in their search for meaning. In other words, in place of religion, the individual self was becoming "the ultimate locus of salvation" (Cushman, 1995, p. 77). By the time World War II was over, the United States was highly urbanized and people were living more secluded, self-contained, and secular lives than ever before. Loss of community and shared meaning was the first main factor that shaped the empty self. The empty self experiences a

pervasive sense of meaninglessness and is desperate to fill the void. Second, the economy that developed in the United States following the war depended on the continual consumption of products and experiences. Not only did the empty self match the needs of the postwar economy, it was also perpetuated by it, as the empty self is encouraged to strive continually to fill up the emptiness by consuming products, experiences, psychotherapies, and ideologies. What is valued most in life is personal fulfillment, growth, and enjoyment, and the empty self is expected to take responsibility for achieving these values through consumption.

In the absence of the orientations provided by religion or tradition, the empty self is guided by the ideal of authenticity. The empty self trusts that by turning inward and expressing its presumed true inner self, the void can be filled and fulfillment achieved. For the empty self, the pursuit of authenticity can be bought. By undergoing psychotherapy, purchasing a self-help book, or attending a human potential workshop, the empty self is led to believe it can transform itself and become self-actualized. However, Cushman (1995) states that until community and tradition are re-established, the empty self will remain unfulfilled. Taken together, Cushman (1995), Taylor (1991), and Guignon (2004) all affirm that attempts to fill emptiness and gain authenticity are counterproductive if they do not connect individuals with community, tradition, or shared meaning. To feel truly fulfilled, what individuals choose to devote themselves to in life must tie them to something beyond themselves and their own desires.

What is more, self-esteem became idealized not only through being a fundamental part of the authenticity ideal, but also through being a feature of the ideal self presupposed under neoliberalism, the *enterprising self* (introduced in Chapter Two). Neoliberalism has been the dominant mode of governmentality in the West since the 1980s and relies not on government by the state, but rather, on the self-governance of autonomous and enterprising citizens. Under neoliberalism, institutions such as schools, workplaces, and families increasingly have been modified by the presupposition that humans should be enterprising—self-reliant, ambitious, bold, goal-oriented, and adaptable. Part of being enterprising is having high self-esteem because, in neoliberal society, individuals must be self-assured and adept at selling themselves. In order to be enterprising, there is no room for feelings of self-doubt or unworthiness. The enterprising

self has retained the empty self's concern with consumerism and self-fulfillment, but the authenticity ideal has gradually faded away as the guiding moral framework. In neoliberalism, it is market values that reign supreme and apply to all aspects of human life, including what constitutes moral behavior (Sugarman, 2015b). Individuals are prompted to treat their lives like a business that needs to be efficiently self-managed and promoted in order to be successful in a competitive marketplace. The obligation to conduct life in this enterprising way, with everyone responsible only for themselves and in constant competition with one another, has only exacerbated our emptiness by pushing us ever further away from community participation, shared meanings, and collective interests and concerns. (Neoliberalism and its implications for self-esteem will be covered in much greater detail in Chapter Six, but are necessary to touch on in the discussion of the idealization of self-esteem.)

This chapter focuses discussion on four main self-esteem advocates who made the idealization of self-esteem possible by endorsing self-esteem as advantageous for both the individual and society. All four advocates provided solutions that appealed to the empty self, and each adhered to the ideal of authenticity. Although they underscored social benefits of self-esteem, implicit in their ideas was the notion that individuals should focus on their own interests at the expense of the concerns of others, and so a debased form of the authenticity ideal was supported unwittingly. First to be examined are the contributions of humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Rogers and Maslow posited optimistic theories of self-actualization, and both designated self-esteem as a requirement for self-actualization. Their theories became fundamental to the *human potential movement* of the 1960s and 1970s, which popularized their ideas in North America. Self-esteem was to become a focal point of the human potential movement following the 1969 publication of *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, a book written by pop psychologist Nathaniel Branden, the third key self-esteem advocate discussed in this chapter. Branden announced self-esteem to be a vital need of the individual and a determinant of psychological health. His book spurred the self-esteem movement, which grew out of the human potential movement and, in the 1980s, eventually would eclipse it with the help of a California politician named John Vasconcellos, the final self-esteem advocate considered here. Vasconcellos assembled a task force on self-esteem that served to crystallize widespread interest among the

public in self-esteem as a personal and social panacea. By shifting responsibility for social problems away from the state and towards individuals, Vasconcellos supported the neoliberal agenda and helped to establish self-esteem as a political obligation.

## **Rogers, Maslow, Self-Actualization, and the Human Potential Movement**

Self-esteem first began to be idealized through the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Rogers and Maslow were both associated with humanistic psychology, a movement that began in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to perceived limitations of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. There was growing discontent with psychoanalysis for what was alleged was its overly negative focus, more specifically, on pathology, and criticism that behaviorism inappropriately neglected what was going on within the mind of the individual. Maslow and Rogers, along with other psychologists such as Gordon Allport, Rollo May, Sidney Jourard, and Clark Moustakas, sought a more holistic and optimistic approach to the study of psychology that could do justice to the complexity of what it means to be human. With the establishment of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 1961 and the formation of the *American Association for Humanistic Psychology* in 1962, humanistic psychology had been launched officially, and was to be a dominant force in the discipline of psychology for the next two decades. Although the founders differed in their visions of what humanistic psychology should be, the rallying point of consensus was the centrality of self-actualization, which they considered the pinnacle of psychological health. The belief was that if everyone became self-actualized, people would act more responsibly and the entire society would benefit (Grogan, 2013). Humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-actualization would come to resonate profoundly with the empty self of postwar America, because of a preoccupation with self-fulfillment and personal growth.

Humanistic psychologists held varying conceptions of self-actualization, but most evoked some form of the authenticity ideal in their theories. The ideal of authenticity is particularly salient in the work of Carl Rogers. Between a devoutly religious upbringing and exposure to Freudian thinking, Rogers had been instilled with a grim view of human nature, which he claimed took years for him to overcome (Kirschenbaum, 1979). It was

through working as a clinical psychologist that Rogers developed an optimistic perspective on human nature. In 1958, Rogers wrote:

My whole professional experience has been with the dark and often sordid side of life, and I know, better than most, the incredibly destructive behavior of which man is capable. Yet that same professional experience has forced upon me the realization that man, when you know him deeply, in his worst and most troubled states, is not evil or demonic. (p. 17)

Rogers believed that humans are trustworthy at their core and are driven innately toward self-actualization, a term he used synonymously with authenticity and psychological health. He thought that if the conditions in a person's life are favorable, he or she will naturally move in the direction of authenticity. Like Rousseau, Rogers attributed a loss of purity in the individual to social forces. It is through experiences with others that individuals are led to develop defenses that block their natural inclination toward authenticity. Individuals stop trusting their inner selves, and instead use false fronts to conform to the expectations of others. Problems in life, according to Rogers, stem from people not being true to their authentic selves.

Rogers believed coming to trust and accept one's inner self to be the fundamental good in life, and he felt that people typically need help from a facilitator in this pursuit. In the context of psychotherapy, education, or a close relationship, barriers to wholeness can be removed. Necessary for this process, Rogers theorized, is "unconditional positive regard" of the facilitator for the individual. Unconditional positive regard involves "an acceptance of and a caring for the...[individual] as a separate *person*, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences, and to find his own meaning in them" (Rogers, 1961, p. 283). To give a person unconditional positive regard is to consider them a person of worth no matter what they say or do. Through unconditional positive regard, the facilitator gives the individual the freedom to try out new approaches or attitudes and to make mistakes without any fear of loss of regard. Rogers (1961) claimed that "the more fully the individual is understood and accepted, the more he tends to drop the false fronts with which he has been meeting life, and the more he tends to move in a direction which is forward" (p. 27). It is through feeling totally accepted that individuals will be able to correct their self-defeating attitudes and defenses, and become authentic. The idea then is that over time, individuals internalize

the acceptance and trust received from the facilitator and develop unconditional positive regard toward themselves (Kirshenbaum, 1979). In this way, people no longer rely on anyone but themselves to acquire the acceptance needed for self-actualization. Rogers (1965) moreover held that when an individual has unconditional positive regard for himself, “he is necessarily more understanding of others and is more accepting of others as separate individuals” (p. 520). Unconditional positive regard for oneself enables individuals to both move toward self-actualization and to be more accepting of others. Although Rogers rarely used the term “self-esteem,” his idea that unconditional positive regard for oneself is a prerequisite for psychological health would come to have an enormous influence on the self-esteem movement that began to emerge in the 1970s, particularly through the field of education (Rogers’ influence in education will be considered in Chapter Six). In addition, Rogers’ ideas made a significant impression on California politician John Vasconcellos, whose contribution to the idealization of self-esteem is discussed later in this chapter.

The authenticity ideal is likewise evident in the ideas of Maslow, who, like Rogers, championed the notion of self-actualization with self-esteem as its prerequisite. Maslow (1968) held that humans have an “essential inner nature” (p. 190) that is “definitely not primarily ‘evil,’ but is rather what we...in our culture call ‘good’” (p. 192). Also similarly to Rogers, Maslow held that the individual “‘knows’ better than anyone else what is good for him” (p. 198), that the individual’s inner voice should be trusted, and that people are driven innately toward self-actualization. For Maslow, self-actualization is equated with psychological health and authenticity, and entails acceptance and expression of one’s inner self. Maslow (1968) gauged that “authentic selfhood can be defined in part as being able to hear these impulse-voices within oneself, i.e. to know what one really wants or doesn’t want, what one is fit for and what one is not fit for” (pp. 190-191). For Maslow (1956), self-actualization is not just beneficial for the individual, but also contributes to making the world a better place. His ideal society was one in which everyone is constantly striving towards self-actualization.

Maslow’s approach (1954) to the study of self-actualization was to formulate a list of remarkable people and determine the qualities that they shared. He was clear that self-actualization is attainable, but stipulated that 98% of people will never achieve it.



Self-actualizers, Maslow expressed, are not perfect, but are as close to perfect as humanly possible. In his study, Maslow included individuals such as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein, and devised a list of fourteen characteristics of self-actualizing people. Spontaneity, tolerance of uncertainty, creativity, and the ability to accept oneself are examples of such characteristics. As well, Maslow described self-actualizers as highly independent and self-reliant. These individuals succeed because they stay true to their inner self rather than depending on others for their self-actualization. In fact, Maslow (1954) went so far as to say that self-actualization “may actually be hampered by others” (p. 214). As stated by Maslow, for self-actualizers, “the determinants of satisfaction and of the good life are...inner-individual and not social” (p. 214). People achieve self-actualization, Maslow alleged, by standing apart from their culture and transcending societal expectations.

Maslow (1954) most notably referred to the relationship between self-esteem and self-actualization when he outlined his legendary *hierarchy of needs*. His theory holds that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy based on the significance of each need. Lower level needs (physiological and safety) are fundamental for survival, whereas higher level needs (love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization) are necessary for psychological health and fulfillment. In order to be able to move up levels in the hierarchy, one must have met the needs of levels below. For example, one does not have the need to belong until their physiological and safety needs have been met. Needs that are lower in the hierarchy are more fundamental to the individual than higher level needs. If one is hungry, eating is more important to them than love or self-actualization. By the same token, one does not have a need for self-actualization until they have enough self-esteem. In other words, self-esteem is more fundamental to the individual than self-actualization. The implication is that if an individual wants to become self-actualized, they must first ensure they have enough self-esteem and, if they do not, they must find a way to enhance it. Maslow (1954) additionally warned of “the dangers of basing self-esteem on the opinions of others rather than on real capacity, competence, and adequacy to the task” (p. 91). Just as self-actualization is achieved through standing apart from culture and being true to one’s inner self, for Maslow, so too should self-esteem be developed independently of others.

As humanistic psychology was gaining popularity, the human potential movement, another product of 60s counterculture, also was beginning to emerge. The 1960s was a time of great social and political activism in the United States, and the human potential movement, like humanistic psychology, was premised on the belief that social change could be achieved through personal change. The relationship between the two was symbiotic. The ideas of humanistic psychology—especially the theories of Maslow and Rogers—provided the theoretical underpinning for the human potential movement and, reciprocally, the human potential movement afforded humanistic psychologists a medium through which their ideas could be disseminated on a wide scale. Over the course of the movement, hundreds of thousands of individuals flocked to “growth centers” all over the United States where people could undergo various human potential movement therapies and learn various practices with the aim of getting in touch with their authentic selves. For example, a common offering at growth centers was encounter group therapy, an approach in which a small group of people were incited by a facilitator to shed their social masks and express their true selves.

Rogers and Maslow were certainly well-intentioned in the formulation of their theories, as no doubt were many who promoted the human potential movement. Rogers and Maslow were concerned with social issues and truly believed that the more self-actualized people are, the better society would be. Nonetheless, embedded in their ideas was a debased form of the authenticity ideal. Both Rogers and Maslow had declared that attaining self-actualization and self-esteem should entail shutting out the expectations of others. Several scholars (e.g., Daniels, 1988; Yankelovich, 1981) have argued that by guiding the individual to ignore societal expectations and follow their inner voice, the theories of Maslow and Rogers unwittingly provided moral sanction to egocentrism and self-indulgence. With one’s inner voice as the source of authority in one’s life, people’s “sense of direction and powers of discrimination are limited to a reliance upon what ‘feels good’” (Daniels, 1988, p. 8). Indeed, according to Yankelovich (1981), it quickly was discovered in the human potential movement “that authentic feelings...included merely selfish or hedonistic ones” (p. 245). Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, as people were goaded increasingly by the human potential movement to strip away social conventions and to focus on themselves and their innermost desires, behavior that was antithetical to social harmony abounded. For

example, Grogan (2013) notes that while encounter group participants in the early 1960s were typically polite and accommodating of their group mates, by the 1970s, participants were exhibiting unruly behavior, such as shouting, shoving, groping, using obscene language, and writhing on the ground. Many fad therapies were hatched in the name of the human potential movement and the trend with these therapies was “toward a deification of the isolated self” (Marin, 1975, p. 45). A particularly popular fad therapy, for instance, was Erhard Seminars Training (EST), which stressed that God is within the self; that everyone determines, and is responsible for, their own fate; and that all must take care of themselves (Marin, 1975). The effect was that a sense of social responsibility was diminishing. As opposed to followers of the human potential movement in the 1960s who were characterized generally as communitarian and socially conscious, by the 1970s, people were described increasingly by cultural critics (e.g., Lasch, 1979; Wolfe, 1976) as socially fragmented and self-involved. Although the human potential movement had started out with the belief that individual transformation could lead to social change, by the 1970s, individual fulfillment and self-indulgence had taken over as the main aims. On seeing the hedonistic trajectory of the movement by the close of the 1960s, Maslow remarked shortly before his death in 1970 that he regretted placing so much emphasis on the individual at the expense of others (Grogan, 2013).

Alongside the rise of the human potential movement came the proliferation of “pop psychology,” a genre that incorporates psychological concepts, theories, and practices outside of a formal context. Human potential ideas not only were circulating at growth centers, but also, gradually becoming part of popular culture, as evidenced in such diverse forms as self-help, parenting, and educational books, as well as workshops, seminars, magazines, television talk shows, and radio call-in programs. Pop psychology enabled the authenticity ideal to spread, as pop psychology often could be consumed relatively inexpensively and in the comfort of one’s own home. People no longer needed to have the ability to take time off of work to check into a growth center or to undergo psychotherapy. They could simply purchase a self-help book and read it in their spare time. The danger is, however, that pop psychologists frequently do not have the credentials to make their claims. Pop psychologists are often able to enlist followers not because of the validity of their ideas and methods, but due to their charisma and persuasiveness, and by drawing on the language of authenticity made popular through

the human potential movement (Justman, 2005). The ideas and practices advocated by pop psychologists have tended to convey a particularly debased form of the authenticity ideal. Pop psychologists often underline the social benefits that can come from following their advice, but, at the same time, they tend to position the individual as suppressed by social forces and counsel people to ignore or dismiss the influences that shaped them (Justman, 2005). According to Justman (2005), the rhetoric of pop psychology generally involves an assumption that “responsibility [to others] oppresses the self and saps authenticity” (p. 31).

The importance of self-esteem has been present in the ideas of many human potential pop psychologists. A notable example is Virginia Satir, a renowned therapist and author, and key figure in the human potential movement. Scholars tend to attribute Satir’s success to her personal warmth and charisma rather than substantive theoretical contributions (Lee, 2002). Satir had a background in teaching and social work, and developed ideas on self-esteem through her work as a therapist. With regard to self-esteem, Satir wrote in her 1972 book *Peoplemaking*:

The crucial factor in what happens both *inside* people and *between* people is the picture of individual worth that each person carries around with him...Integrity, honesty, responsibility, compassion, love—all flow easily from the person [who has high self-esteem]...He feels that he matters, that the world is a better place because he is here. He has faith in his own competence...[H]e believes he can make his own decisions and is his own best resource...He doesn’t have rules against anything he feels. (pp. 21-22)

Satir therefore characterizes an individual who is authentic as someone with high self-esteem. To have high self-esteem is to follow one’s inner voice, which enables the individual to be responsible and loving. High self-esteem, for Satir, is both personally and socially advantageous. Grogan (2013) notes, however, that Satir’s ideas “reflected an extreme personal focus” (p. 232). Encouraging the individual to believe that the world is a better place because of their existence easily could be interpreted as sanctioning an inflated sense of self-importance. The encouragement of self-importance is also evident in a famous poem Satir (1972) wrote entitled *My Declaration of Self-Esteem* that was meant as an empowering mantra that individuals could recite. In the 280-word long poem, while the word “I” is used 24 times, “me” is used 22 times, and “my” or “myself” is

used 15 times, “other” or “others” appears only 3 times—suggesting a strong focus on the individual. Unlike Rogers and Maslow, Satir was clear that she generally was uninterested in social and political change, and that her concern was only with changing individuals and family dynamics (Grogan, 2013).

As Twenge and Campbell (2009) observe, prior to the 1970s, human potential pop psychologists, in most cases, did not target specifically the concept of self-esteem, but rather, made mention of it as part of a broader focus on self-actualization. It was following the 1969 publication of pop psychologist Nathaniel Branden’s hugely successful book, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, that attention in the human potential movement was turned directly toward the concept of self-esteem. It is to the contributions of Nathaniel Branden that I now turn.

## **Branden, Rand, and Self-Esteem**

Nathaniel Branden was undeniably the most eminent of all pop psychologists who endorsed self-esteem. Before he died in late 2014, Branden had authored over a dozen self-help books on self-esteem that have been translated into 18 languages, lectured extensively and gave countless workshops and seminars all over the world on self-esteem, and published essays and blog postings on numerous websites with suggestions on how to raise self-esteem. By far, the principal ideological influence on Branden’s work was Russian-American author Ayn Rand. In his 1989 memoir, Branden wrote of a conclusion he came to as an adolescent: “What I would like to find, someday, is a great issue, a battle, a crusade...something really worth fighting for...something that would require and demand everything I am and everything I’ve got to give” (p. 28). He indeed was to find this great crusade—the self-esteem movement—through Ayn Rand.

Branden and Rand were exceptionally close intellectual allies for 18 years and lovers for a time. Rand was a philosopher who used novels to expound her philosophy. Branden, 25 years her junior, had become enchanted with her ideas at the age of 14, on reading her first blockbuster novel, *The Fountainhead*. For Branden (1989), the book confirmed beliefs he held about the importance of maintaining one’s own convictions and values above all else. He wrote Rand a letter and eventually they met and before long

grew intimate. According to Branden (1989), Rand would come to say publicly on more than one occasion that he “knew her thoughts more profoundly and specifically than any other human being and that...[he] was qualified to speak for her on virtually any aspect of her ideas or convictions” (p. ix).

Rand’s philosophy became known as “Objectivism,” which was hinted at in *The Fountainhead* and was most clearly developed in her last major novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. In short, Objectivism advocates rationality, self-interest, independent thinking, individual rights, and political and economic freedom. It holds that reality exists independently of consciousness and that reason is the most fundamental tool humankind has to navigate reality. Rand (1957) alleged that what makes human survival different from that of other species is that our existence depends on the extent to which we make rational choices. What is rational, for Rand (1957), is to make choices that support one’s own life. As she put it, “A being who does not hold his own life as the motive and goal of his actions, is acting on the motive and standard of death” (p. 1014). It is rational to be selfish, as selfishness is necessary for one’s survival and wellbeing. Conversely, to be selfless is immoral and irrational because it compromises the person’s survival. Help and care towards others should only be in service of one’s own needs and values. One’s goals and values must be self-determined, derived through independent and rational thought, and must contribute to the achievement of one’s own happiness, which is the highest good in life. Objectivism teaches that self-actualization, happiness, and greatness can and should be achieved.

While Rand wrote *Atlas Shrugged*, Branden studied psychology at New York University and practiced psychotherapy.<sup>6</sup> Branden (1989) acknowledged that Rand’s ideas were so internalized in him that he sought to understand everything through the lens of Objectivism. As he practiced psychotherapy, he searched for a common denominator among his clients’ issues and, before long, “was struck by the thought that the underlying problem is faulty self-esteem—a flawed self-concept, intellectual self-doubt, a sense of unworthiness or guilt, an experience of inadequacy” (Branden, 1989,

<sup>6</sup> With only an undergraduate degree in psychology at the time, Branden (1989) did not have the credentials to practice as a psychotherapist, but he claimed that fact did not deter his clients—most of whom he knew through his association with Rand.

p. 173). This epiphany was primed at least partially by Rand, who was incorporating ideas about self-esteem into her writing at the time (Branden, 1989). Rand (1957) was to define self-esteem in *Atlas Shrugged* as man's "inviolable certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness" (p. 1018). For Rand, self-esteem is a desperate need, a matter of life or death. To lack self-esteem is to believe one is unfit for existence, whereas to have self-esteem is to rely on the judgment of one's own mind. Self-esteem is also a precondition to experiencing any happiness or love in life, as "the man who does not value himself, cannot value anything or anyone" (Rand, 1961, p. 28). She believed that to be altruistic and selfless is to lack self-esteem and to render oneself unable to achieve happiness. To have self-esteem is to be rationally selfish and concerned with one's own needs. From this perspective, self-esteem is highly individualistic—entailing selfish concern with one's own needs—and is a precondition to happiness.

After *Atlas Shrugged* was published, Branden got permission from Rand to found an institute called the *Nathaniel Branden Institute* that offered lectures on Objectivism. Branden was a captivating speaker who lectured with great conviction and attracted listeners in large numbers. The institute expanded rapidly and started offering audio tapes of Branden's lectures that could be purchased throughout the United States and Canada. He continued practicing psychotherapy while lecturing at the institute, and also began in 1962 to co-author a newsletter with Rand called *The Objectivist Newsletter*, in which he wrote several articles about self-esteem. Many of these articles became part of his book *The Psychology of Self-Esteem (PSE)*, first published in 1969. By that time, Rand had broken from Branden for personal reasons and he was forced to dissolve the *Nathaniel Branden Institute*. But with *PSE* he was able to make an even bigger name for himself than he had through his ties with Rand.

Despite the split, Branden was to preserve Objectivist philosophy as the basis for the theory he outlined in *PSE*. Remarkably, although *PSE* was published in 1969, by which point humanistic psychology had become mainstream in the discipline of psychology, Branden never referenced Rogers, Maslow, or any other humanistic psychologists. Likewise, he made no mention of empirical research on self-esteem, including Morris Rosenberg's *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (1965) and Stanley

Coopersmith's *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* (1967), the two pioneering books on self-esteem that, to this day, most psychologists reference when discussing self-esteem. In fact, Branden rarely cited any psychologists in the book. Instead, his theory of self-esteem is predicated entirely on Rand's philosophy. Branden (1989) noted several times in his memoir that Rand rarely read and had based her philosophy largely on the ideas of Aristotle and her own independent thinking. Due to the absence of scholarly references in their work, Branden and Rand largely have gone ignored in the academic community. It was as a charismatic pop psychologist that Branden was able to thrive.

In *PSE*, Branden (1969) defined self-esteem in much the same way as Rand had, as "the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living" (p. 110), and called it an "urgent imperative" (p. 110). He stated that "there is no value-judgment more important to man—no factor more decisive in his psychological development and motivation" (p. 109) than self-esteem. Self-esteem is necessary for survival. A threat to one's self-esteem was a threat to one's ability to function and survive in the world. Branden held that "to face the universe without self-esteem is to stand naked, disarmed, delivered to destruction" (p. 110). Like Rand, he alleged that self-esteem should not depend on others and is precondition for happiness and love.

As Burns (2009) observes, Branden's theory translated Rand's philosophy into psychological terms. What was revered as moral by Rand—self-esteem and rationality—morphed into psychological health in Branden's theory. Branden (1969) averred that "self-esteem is the hallmark of mental health" (p. 238). He advocated for rationality as key for self-esteem, proclaiming that "the achievement of self-esteem require[s] of man the fullest exercise of his reason" (p. 239), and that "an unbreached rationality...[is] the only possible basis of authentic self-esteem" (p. 114). As well, what was immoral to Rand was deemed psychologically pathological in Branden's model. Rand had decried irrationality as immoral, and Branden described mental illnesses as a disruption in one's ability to think rationally. Branden wrote that "irrational beliefs, emotions and actions are the symptoms by which we detect the presence of mental illness" (p. 103). For thinking to be rational and psychologically healthy, Branden claimed it must be intellectually independent. Branden referred to a psychological syndrome he called "social metaphysics:" a "parasitism of cognition, of judgment, of values—a wish to function



within a context established by others, to live by the guidance of rules for which one does not bear ultimate intellectual responsibility” (p. 180).

In *PSE* looms a debased form of the authenticity ideal. Branden (1969) speaks of a “deepest self...that is the changeless constant within him” (p. 173) and that is the source of a person’s rationality and self-esteem. Authenticity is the highest moral good and can be achieved by applying reason, thinking independently, and having self-esteem. To be inauthentic, conversely, is to be a “social metaphysician” (p. 185)—one who lives by the guidance of others instead of their inner, rational self. Branden’s theory not only supported a highly individualistic understanding of persons, but also, as Burns (2009) states, “made everyday human concern with the thoughts and opinions of others problematic and pathological” (p. 154).

Walker (1999) said of *PSE* that it “became one of the most enduringly successful of all pop-psychology self-help books” (p. 152). Published at the height of the human potential movement, *PSE* was optimally timed. Given Rand’s influence, Branden’s ideas instantly were appealing to Objectivists, but what made Branden so successful initially was the fact that his ideas also were attractive to people in the human potential movement. Branden’s proclamation that self-esteem is an inherent need that determines psychological health corresponded with what people in the movement were already coming to take for granted. There was great appetite for pop psychology books and Branden’s decidedly individualistic, Objectivist adaptation of self-esteem resonated with the increasingly self-centered and socially fragmented mindset of the 1970s. Twenge and Campbell (2009) claim that the concept of self-esteem came to be regarded as more appealing in the human potential movement than self-actualization because it was thought to be more fundamental and easier to attain than self-actualization. Spearheaded by Branden’s book, the self-esteem movement grew out of the human potential movement but eventually would come to surpass it.

Following his split from Rand, Branden (1984) began to reconsider her philosophy and found some problems with it. For example, he criticized Rand’s contention that it is dangerous to follow one’s emotions because he held that sometimes a person’s feelings may reflect a more accurate assessment of reality than their

conscious beliefs. None of Branden's critiques of Rand's philosophy, however, challenged her endorsement of an overly self-centered orientation to life. The style and tone of his books changed after *PSE*, but Branden (1984, 1989) conceded that Objectivism continued to remain present in his work following *PSE*, and this included its highly individualistic emphasis. Take, for instance, his 1987 self-help book, *How to Raise Your Self Esteem (HRYSE)*, which was meant to provide practical application of his theory. Branden (1987) defined self-esteem in *HRYSE* in much the same way as he did in *PSE* (and, for that matter, as Rand had defined it in *Atlas Shrugged*), as "a feeling of personal competence and a feeling of personal worth" (p. 6). Branden continued to imply that self-esteem should not depend on others by saying that "the tragedy is that so many people look for [self-esteem]...everywhere except within themselves, and so they fail in their search" (p. 9).

At the same time, *HRYSE* made bolder and more idealistic claims about the benefits of self-esteem than were made in *PSE*. In *HRYSE*, Branden retained his assertion that self-esteem equips the individual to cope with life's adversities, but added that it makes people more likely to be ambitious, assertive, and successful; to form nourishing relationships; to experience joy; and to be creative in their work. In *PSE* Branden associated self-esteem generally with mental health, but in *HRYSE*, he pushed this connection further by decreeing:

I cannot think of a single psychological difficulty—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to underachievement at school or at work, to spouse battering or child molestation, to sexual dysfunctions or emotional maturity, to suicide or crimes of violence—that is not traceable to poor self-esteem. (p. 5)

That Branden made bolder and more idealistic pronouncements in *HRYSE* than in *PSE* may have been related to the fact that the human potential movement had been under attack and was dying out by the mid-1980s. Several substantial critiques (e.g., Lasch, 1979; Marin, 1975; Wolfe, 1976) had been lodged against the human potential movement for its role in contributing to increasing narcissism. Branden (1987) acknowledged in *HRYSE* that the pursuit of self-actualization and self-esteem increasingly was being condemned as an overly selfish endeavor. In light of such critiques, Branden dedicated a chapter in *HRYSE* to defending the pursuit of self-

esteem, affirming it as not only personally valuable, but also, socially beneficial. Branden (1987) wrote that “the higher the level of an individual’s self-esteem, the more likely that he or she will treat others with respect, kindness, and generosity” (p. 147). *PSE* never stated that self-esteem has social benefits, nor did Rand ever mention this. Objectivism is clear in its position that the individual’s own life is the standard for moral value, and that showing kindness and care towards others is good and rational only if it is instrumental to one’s own values and needs. Branden’s announcement in *HRYSE* that self-esteem is “the foundation of respect for others” (p. 8) was a new addition to his theory. Self-esteem declared as only personally beneficial may have been enough for the socially fragmented population of the 1970s but, by the 1980s, people were becoming wary of practices that encouraged focus on the self. The addition to Branden’s theory served to re-establish the pursuit of self-esteem as noble amongst such people. Branden’s addition built on the sentiments of another persuasive self-esteem advocate, John Vasconcellos, who, in the 1980s, was advancing the idea that self-esteem is not only beneficial for the individual but for all of society.

## **Vasconcellos and the California Task Force on Self-Esteem**

A Democratic California State Assembly member, John Vasconcellos would provide the final thrust in the idealization of self-esteem. Unlike the other self-esteem advocates discussed in this chapter, Vasconcellos was not a theorist. He was profoundly swayed by humanistic psychology and the human potential movement, and desired to apply what he had learned from both to his political agenda. Vasconcellos’ exposure to humanistic ideas began when he first became a politician in 1966 and sought help from a therapist who had studied under Carl Rogers. Vasconcellos (1989) had been successful in many areas of life, but came to realize through therapy that he worked hard for his achievements “only in a constant attempt to please others” (p. xv). He came to the conclusion that he had been struggling with a lack of self-esteem his whole life, and underwent various forms of human potential therapies over the years. He visited growth centers and read voraciously on the topics of humanistic psychology and human potential. In 1970, Vasconcellos attended a workshop with Carl Rogers, and was to become his close personal friend and mentee (Dreher, 1995). Through his relationship

with Rogers and through the many human potential therapies and workshops in which he participated, Vasconcellos (1989) claimed he was transformed. For the first time in his life, he began to feel happy, self-assured, and authentic, and he desired that people everywhere undergo a similar transformation.

The political vision Vasconcellos developed over the course of the 1970s and 1980s clearly demonstrated the authenticity ideal. He came to believe that humans are innately good and that social forces are to blame for a loss of psychological wholeness in life. Vasconcellos (1989) attributed his own poor self-esteem to his childhood, which he characterized as an emotional prison in which he was taught to think of himself as a guilt-ridden sinner, and to conform rather than to think for himself and trust his own feelings. Dreher (1995) contends that Rogers' notion of unconditional positive regard changed Vasconcellos' life dramatically. Vasconcellos (1974a) felt that if he had been treated with unconditional positive regard as a child, rather than being taught to "shut up, sit still, take in, [and] conform" (p. 12), he would have developed self-esteem. He equated self-esteem with a pure unconditional positive regard for oneself that is internalized through unconditional acceptance from close others and that enables responsible behavior. Self-esteem is undermined, Vasconcellos believed, by a repressive upbringing in which individuals are taught to be ashamed of themselves (Fishel, 1992).

Vasconcellos (1974b) thought the overarching problem that needed to be addressed was that the entire culture was largely rooted in the notion that humans are fundamentally bad and untrustworthy. For Vasconcellos (1974b), the presuppositions that are held about human nature will be self-fulfilling. If we regard people in a negative light, we will expect them to behave badly and be inclined toward repressing their true nature. Alternatively, if we consider people inherently good and honest, we will trust and accept them unconditionally and they will feel free to be their authentic selves. The belief that humans are inherently bad was regarded by Vasconcellos as the old, pathological, self-repressing model that he associated with his childhood. He was pleased that the human potential movement had ushered in a new self-affirming paradigm in which people were beginning to trust and assert themselves. Under the assumption that humans are good, people will naturally feel more trusting towards others and will be

inclined to believe in themselves. Moreover, trusting in ourselves and others will inspire and enable responsible behavior in others and will make the world a better place for everyone (Vasconcellos & Saunders, 1986). Vasconcellos accordingly believed that institutions needed to be redesigned such that people are treated not as inherently dangerous and untrustworthy, but instead, as dependable and responsible. His political vision was “to transform all our relationships and institutions (personal and political) to fit our new-found faithful sense of ourselves” (Vasconcellos & Saunders, 1986, p. 218).

In addition to the authenticity ideal, Vasconcellos’ political vision also aligned with the emerging neoliberal ideology. For Vasconcellos (1979), individual change is the most important tool for political change. He felt that his ability to be an effective leader was contingent on his own personal development and that for others to be contributing members of society, they too must work on themselves (Dreher, 1995). As Vasconcellos (1979) put it, “how we humans most healthily grow and develop is the central political issue of our times” (p. 154). By changing the way they view human nature and themselves, individuals can contribute to making society a more self-affirming place for everyone which will result in responsible behavior. Vasconcellos additionally felt that people should not be controlled, but rather, should be trusted and free to govern themselves.

Upon being appointed to take care of the state’s annual budget in 1980, Vasconcellos began to think about a way to reframe social problem solving that could both reduce costs and empower the population. Based on his own experience through therapy, as well as through the influence of Rogers, Vasconcellos (1989) was already convinced that self-esteem could be the “social vaccine...capable of strengthening people, [and] making them less vulnerable to problem behaviors” (p. xvi). He claimed that he also had been increasingly hearing from researchers and practitioners studying and dealing with social problems that self-esteem is a central factor. Vasconcellos (1989) came to see it as both “morally and fiscally responsible to create a formalized governmental effort” (p. xvi) to compile data on self-esteem. The belief was that if the information collected confirmed his hypothesis that self-esteem functions as a social vaccine, it could be used to form new social policy initiatives in the state of California.

Vasconcellos first introduced legislation in 1984 for a task force on self-esteem, but several of the conservative legislative leaders were skeptical about the idea. According to Vasconcellos (1989), one skeptic asked him, “You really want to help people learn how to live without the government taking care of them?” (p. xvi), to which he, consistent with neoliberal ideology, answered emphatically in the affirmative. Only in broadening his project’s aim to include the promotion of not only self-esteem, but also, personal and social responsibility, was he able to get the bill to pass in 1986. For Vasconcellos (1989), personal and social responsibility are built into the idea of self-esteem, but he needed to add them explicitly to the bill’s goals in order to win over the conservatives. The bill that was finally passed stipulated that a 25-member task force would be created with a budget of \$735,000 over the course of three years. It was to be called the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (the “Task Force” or the “Task Force on Self-Esteem,” for short), and had a triple mandate. First, academic researchers would be enlisted from the University of California to conduct literature reviews to establish scientifically the relationship between self-esteem and various social problems, which included crime, violence, academic failure, teenage pregnancy, drug use, and welfare dependency. Second, information was to be collected from practitioners specializing in self-esteem—pop psychologists including Nathaniel Branden and Virginia Satir. Third, public hearings would be held for laypeople from the community to discuss their experiences with, and opinions on, self-esteem.

Two official publications resulted from the efforts of the Task Force. First, in 1989, the results from the academic literature reviews were compiled in a book called *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem (SISE)*. The following year, a final report called *Toward a State of Esteem (TSSE)* was published, that outlined the main recommendations of the Task Force based on all of the information that had been gathered. Both pieces abounded with optimism and enthusiasm about the results. Smelser (1989) wrote in the introduction to *SISE* that the “causal link is clear: low self-esteem is the causally prior factor in individuals seeking out kinds of behavior that become social problems” (pp. 7-8). Vasconcellos (1990) exclaimed that the results far exceeded his initial expectations, and indicated that the *TSSE* report pointed “the way toward a successful effort to truly improve our human condition” (p. x). The Task Force

collectively declared in *TSSE*: “We believe that we have substantiated the premise on which this project was built—namely, that self-esteem is central to the personal and social concerns we face today” (p. 44). Interspersed with inspirational photographs and motivational quotations, the bulk of *TSSE* outlined recommendations such as developing statewide media campaigns to educate the public on the significance of self-esteem and integrating self-esteem enhancement into school curriculums.

What is curious about the overall conclusions that were drawn and the recommendations that were made is that buried in both *SISE* and *TSSE* were strong indications that the Task Force’s first charge, to substantiate scientifically the link between low self-esteem and various social problems, was largely a failure. For example, the literature review on child maltreatment determined that “there is insufficient evidence to support the belief in a direct relationship between low self-esteem and child abuse” (Bhatti, Derezotes, Kim, & Specht, 1989, p. 61). Regarding the connection between self-esteem and academic achievement, Covington (1989) stated that “the most disquieting feature of these studies is the generally low magnitude of association” (p. 79). Similarly, Scheff, Retzinger, and Ryan (1989) discovered that “the vast body of quantitative studies does not establish level of self-esteem as a cause of crime and violence” (p. 177). Including the foreword and preface, 29 pages into *SISE*, after pronouncing low self-esteem to be a causal factor in social problems, Smelser (1989) conceded: “One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume...is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are” (p. 15). The overall trend found by the academic research was ultimately that “the association between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent” (Smelser, 1989, p. 15).

The fact that the academic research was unable to validate empirically the connection between low self-esteem and social problems did not deter the Task Force. In both *SISE* and *TSSE*, blame was placed on matters of method and definitions of self-esteem that were used in the studies that made up the literature reviews. According to the Task Force, that the academic research was unable to confirm scientifically relationships between self-esteem and social problems “does not mean that the study of self-esteem [should] be abandoned, but that the current scientific procedures [should] be

altered” (California State Department of Education, 1990, p. 43). It was proclaimed in *TSSE*: “Many of us on the Task Force are convinced that a sizeable number of practitioners in functioning programs are well ahead of academic researchers in their appreciation of self-esteem’s central role in the social problems that plague our society” (p. 43). Thus, as Stout (2000) points out, *TSSE* basically undermined the efforts of the academic researchers that were commissioned for the Task Force by saying that the pop psychologist practitioners knew better, and that improved research would need to be conducted with a clearer definition of self-esteem, better measures, and larger sample sizes. Stress was placed in *SISE* on how it is clearly intuitive and logical that self-esteem is personally and socially beneficial, demonstrating that self-esteem had already become quite idealized by that point in time. Smelser (1989) repeatedly mentioned that the causal relationship between self-esteem and social problems is intuitive, referring to it as “the link that we all know exists” (p. 17).

The results of the Task Force were publicized extensively and received much statewide and national attention, but rarely brought up were the inconclusive literature reviews. Spotlighted in the media instead was the Task Force’s assertion that self-esteem is “the likeliest candidate for a social vaccine...that inoculates us against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure” (California State Department of Education, 1990, p. 21). Broadcast far and wide was the gospel that self-esteem had been found to reduce antisocial behavior by protecting people from being overwhelmed by life’s challenges (Solomon, 2006). According to Williams (1990), the overall message absorbed by the public was: “Make people feel better about themselves and the whole nation will benefit” (p. C1). In the end, Vasconcellos and the Task Force served to establish as common knowledge the notion that enhancing the self-esteem of an individual is invariably beneficial for all of society. The idealization of self-esteem was complete.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter investigated how self-esteem became idealized, which was made possible particularly through the efforts of four persuasive advocates of self-esteem.



First, humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow positioned self-esteem as a prerequisite for the ultimate goal of self-actualization. The theories of Maslow and Rogers became foundational to the human potential movement, which spread their ideas on a wide scale. In the 1970s, attention in the human potential movement turned increasingly towards self-esteem because of pop psychologist Nathaniel Branden, who wrote a best-selling book on self-esteem. Branden affirmed self-esteem to be a vital need of the individual and the pinnacle of psychological health. Branden's ideas launched the self-esteem movement, which was bolstered by John Vasconcellos, a politician who initiated the California Task Force on Self-Esteem. Although the Task Force was unable to confirm scientifically the hypothesis that low self-esteem is related to social problems, the message adopted by the public was that increased self-esteem has benefits for all of society.

Due to its idealization, self-esteem changed from a by-product of success, as William James considered it, to an end in itself. In other words, self-esteem is no longer regarded as a consequence of success, but rather, it is now believed to be a cause of it. Idealized self-esteem is an unconditional self-love that individuals should pursue for its own sake because it will yield crucial personal and social benefits. Moreover, in neoliberal society, the responsibility to pursue an ever-increasing level of self-esteem is not only a personal and social obligation, but also a political obligation. As Cruikshank (1996) puts it, "taking up the goal of self-esteem is something we owe to society, something that will defray the costs of social problems" (p. 232) and make us good neoliberal citizens. Low self-esteem must be avoided at all costs, for it is believed to be the source of a wide array of personal and social problems. In fact, so strong has this connection been made, that low self-esteem "has become an all-purpose explanation for the problems of everyday life" (Furedi, 2004, p. 155). Individuals have begun to interpret problems in any area of their life—be it troubles in the workplace, in a relationship, at school, with mental health, or with the law—as stemming from a lack of self-esteem (Furedi, 2004). People also are more inclined than ever to understand other people's struggles in life, as well as social problems, as a result of low self-esteem. For example, Banet-Weiser (2015) has discussed the recent practice of girls posting videos on YouTube asking the public if they are pretty or ugly, a phenomenon that is almost exclusively described in the media as symptomatic of a problem of low self-esteem

among girls. Banet-Weiser emphasizes that the issue with attributing such phenomena to issues with self-esteem is that it distracts from critical structural factors, such as gender inequality. This shifting of attention away from the influence of social structures toward the responsibility of the individual is a hallmark characteristic of neoliberalism and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The idealization of self-esteem set the stage for the normalization of self-esteem, the final engine for making up people to be applied in this thesis. Once self-esteem had become idealized as a personal and social panacea, strategies and practices to increase self-esteem proliferated rapidly. Chapter Six will examine how such strategies and practices became integral in education. Due to the debased authenticity ideal implicit in the contemporary understanding of self-esteem, it will be shown that such strategies and practices typically foster not connection with others, but rather, excessive focus on the self, and therefore do not contribute to genuine self-fulfillment. In addition, it will be argued that such strategies serve as technologies of the self that bring people into alignment with the goals of neoliberalism.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **The Normalization of Self-Esteem**

The preceding chapter revealed how self-esteem became idealized. Not only was self-esteem a fundamental part of the moral framework that became dominant in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also it has been a central feature of the ideal self presupposed in neoliberal society. Through its idealization, self-esteem came to be considered a personal and social necessity, and a political obligation under neoliberalism. We turn now to normalization, the final engine for making up people to be discussed in my analysis. Normalization is defined here as the process of attempting to bring people into conformity with a standard. With a standard set for everyone continually to be striving to augment their self-esteem, a demand was created for ways to raise and protect self-esteem. This chapter investigates the strategies, techniques, exercises, activities, programs, methods, practices, and conventions that have been devised and implemented with the aim of bringing others and oneself into alignment with this standard for increased self-esteem. I will collectively refer to these varied means for raising and preserving self-esteem as “self-esteem strategies.”

When William James wrote about self-esteem in 1890, he described it as dependent on how successful the individual is at that to which he has chosen to devote himself. Negative feelings towards oneself, for James, are a sign that one could benefit from making a change in one’s life, such as increased effort or pursuit of something different. Self-esteem can inform the individual, and what brings one person self-esteem would not necessarily bring another person self-esteem. With the rise of neoliberalism, however, self-esteem has been turned into a generic commodity that can be bought and sold. By buying a book on self-esteem, undergoing psychotherapy, or attending workshops, and following the universal, “quick fix” self-esteem strategies provided therein, self-esteem can be attained. Contemporary self-esteem strategies are “one size

fits all” approaches. The expectation is that what raises self-esteem for one, raises self-esteem for all. Negative self-feelings now inform individuals not simply that they could benefit from making a particular personal change, but rather, that they have a problem that can be fixed through consumption of generic self-esteem strategies.

Since the 1970s, there has been a cornucopia of generic self-esteem strategies provided to the public. Underlying each strategy is an assumption about how self-esteem is uniformly modified in people; that is, what factors raise self-esteem and/or what factors undermine it. Consistent with James, many strategies center on success as the source of self-esteem, but acceptance is another common factor on which self-esteem strategies focus. Self-esteem strategies usually are directed toward providing opportunities for success and acceptance; making people feel accepted, valued, and recognized; and teaching skills that are believed to lead to success and acceptance. Two general types of self-esteem strategies can be identified. First, there are strategies that involve instilling and preserving self-esteem in others through how you treat others, what you say to others, and what you do to others. For instance, it is believed that praising another person or paying them special attention can boost their self-esteem by making them feel recognized and accepted. Conversely, avoiding criticism and negative feedback to prevent feelings of rejection or failure that would damage a person’s self-esteem are another example. This type of self-esteem strategy is often used by authority figures such as teachers and parents. I will refer to this type as “other-directed self-esteem strategies.” The second type of self-esteem strategy is one that individuals can apply to themselves with help from someone else. These strategies involve learning a particular skill that is valuable in society, under the assumption that this skill will enable the individual to achieve the success and acceptance that will bring them self-esteem. Common examples include learning to set goals, manage one’s feelings, and change the way one talks to oneself. Self-help literature is a common source of this type of self-esteem strategy. It can also be used in schools, under the direction of a teacher, typically as part of a formal program or curriculum that aims to increase self-esteem in students. This type of strategy will be referred to as “self-directed self-esteem strategies.”

The normalization of self-esteem is a broad topic. Self-esteem strategies have been applied to and by both children and adults in a range of contexts, including schools, homes, daycare centers, self-help literature, workplaces, religious institutions, and criminal rehabilitation settings. My focus for this chapter is on children in educational contexts. I begin with the use of self-esteem strategies with schoolchildren in public education from the 1970s until the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the heyday of the self-esteem movement. At first, self-esteem strategies were used because it was believed they would enhance students' psychological development and academic achievement. Following the declarations of the California Task Force on Self-Esteem in the late 1980s (see Chapter Five), low self-esteem was linked increasingly to social problems, which raised the stakes for using such strategies in schools. It came to be believed that low self-esteem is the cause of social problems and that instilling self-esteem in all children is a way to prevent such problems. Over time, self-esteem strategies have become targeted particularly toward those considered at-risk for low self-esteem and social problems, that is, children of marginalized groups. In the second part of this chapter, I give consideration to girls as the marginalized group that has been most targeted by self-esteem strategies. Educational initiatives that aim to increase the self-esteem of girls have become ever more common since the 1990s. Originally, these were largely non-profit or government-funded feminist endeavors, but the more recent trend is for such initiatives to be corporate-funded and apolitical. I examine the *Dove Self-Esteem Project*, a corporate-funded self-esteem initiative for girls.

A common criticism that has been made regarding the use of self-esteem strategies in educational settings is that rather than cultivating connectedness and community, such strategies tend to foster self-absorption (e.g., Katz, 1995; Kohn, 1994; Stout, 2000; Twenge, 2006). In this chapter, I support this allegation through analysis of various self-esteem strategies that have been used in educational contexts. I show that self-esteem strategies tend to be highly individualistic and usually do not help connect individuals to others, but rather, guide people to be attentive to their own needs and experiences above all else. Often what is implicitly sanctioned by self-esteem strategies is a sense of self-importance and the notion that others are instrumental to our own needs. Following Taylor (1991) and Guignon (2004) (see Chapter Five), I maintain that such strategies are counterproductive. To privilege one's own needs, experiences,

concerns, and feelings over everyone else's is to destroy the conditions for "genuine self-esteem." I define genuine self-esteem here as the kind of self-esteem worth having. This is self-esteem that is earned, enduring, and fulfilling. I assert that genuine self-esteem only can ensue when individuals are concerned for the needs of others, committed to the social good, and part of a community.

There is another weighty implication that pertains exclusively to self-directed self-esteem strategies and their role as technologies of the self (introduced in Chapter Two) in neoliberal society. Technologies of the self frequently involve an individual constructing, regulating, or altering the way they think about themselves on the advice of another in an effort to improve or fulfill themselves in some way. Technologies of the self always support particular political objectives (Rose, 1998). Neoliberal technologies of the self serve to mold individuals to meet the neoliberal requirement of being enterprising—confident, self-reliant, decisive, purposeful, and self-managing. I argue that self-directed self-esteem strategies have constituted a significant form of neoliberal technology of the self. In other words, self-directed self-esteem strategies have functioned as important tools for shaping individuals into self-governing entrepreneurs of their own lives. Self-directed self-esteem strategies center on attaining skills of self-management such as decision-making, goal-setting, managing emotions, and controlling self-talk, under the belief that these abilities will lead to self-esteem. As enterprising skills became more and more desired and rewarded in society, they increasingly were regarded as abilities that would make individuals feel better about themselves. The belief is that success and acceptance will come to those who are enterprising and self-esteem will follow. Thus, self-esteem is regarded not only as a source, but also, a product of success and acceptance in neoliberal society. Self-esteem is part of what it takes to be enterprising as well as a consequence of being enterprising.

It is difficult to deny that self-directed self-esteem strategies can bring benefits to the individual. Developing skills in decision-making and goal-setting are unquestionable assets in contemporary society. Nevertheless, in addition to stimulating a level of self-focus that is counterproductive to social connection and genuine self-esteem, self-directed self-esteem strategies serve to govern "at a distance" (Miller & Rose, 2008); that is, they function as mechanisms that indirectly link our conduct to sociopolitical

aims. By adopting such strategies, we are brought in line with the neoliberal agenda by taking responsibility for ourselves and governing ourselves in the way that neoliberalism demands, while being distracted from the influence of structural factors. Where this becomes particularly disconcerting is when self-directed self-esteem strategies are promoted and provided as tools for empowerment to young marginalized individuals like girls, who are constrained in certain ways by gender inequality and who may not fully understand or recognize these limitations. Far from being empowering, these strategies obscure the role of structural factors in impeding girls' success and acceptance, and send girls the message that their low self-esteem is a personal failing that they must fix by changing themselves. Using self-directed self-esteem strategies may improve a girl's ability to achieve economic success in the competitive neoliberal marketplace, but will not contribute to genuine self-esteem and will do nothing to challenge the social structures that will continue to constrain her and other girls. Collective opposition to social structures that limit girls, traditionally the task of feminism, has abated significantly with the rise of neoliberalism and largely has been replaced with individualistic neoliberal technologies of the self like self-directed self-esteem strategies.

## **Self-Esteem for Every Child: Public Schools and the Self-Esteem Movement**

Starting in the early 1960s, when the human potential movement was first gaining momentum, humanistic psychologists began to apply their ideas to education, constituting a new approach known as *humanistic education*. There was growing realization that societal change could be effected not only by helping adults get in touch with their inner selves at human potential growth centers, but also, on a much wider scale, by helping youth move toward self-actualization in schools (Chase, 1975). Carl Rogers was a central force in humanistic education. Rogers (1969) advanced the idea that education is a form of therapy and proposed that schools could be used to help youth improve their self-concept and move toward self-actualization. Just as it was believed a therapist can help remove an individual's obstacles in achieving self-actualization, so too was it held that educators could facilitate the drive toward authenticity in students. Rogers believed that education should not be about imparting

knowledge, but rather, about creating a climate in the classroom in which students feel freedom and acceptance. Key to establishing such a climate is to provide students with unconditional positive regard, which entails “prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinions, his person” (p. 109). By internalizing trust and acceptance from the teacher, a student will develop an unconditional positive regard for herself, which will enable her to move toward self-actualization and be trusting of others. Further, not only does providing students with unconditional positive regard facilitate the drive toward self-actualization, it also stimulates what Rogers described as the most meaningful kind of learning, which is experiential, “free, self-initiated and spontaneous” (p. 126). For Rogers, individuals have an inherent sense of what is best for them and their learning, and so should be given the freedom and trust to follow their natural inclinations.

Another important humanistic educator, who studied under Rogers, was Arthur W. Combs. Combs (1962) believed that the central role of schools is to help students achieve a positive view of themselves. According to Combs, individuals with a positive view of themselves accept themselves, are well-adjusted, and will make important contributions to society. It is people with a negative view of themselves, by contrast, who “fill our jails, our mental hospitals and our institutions. These are the maladjusted: the desperate ones, against whom we must protect ourselves” (p. 52). The stakes are decidedly high, for Combs, for ensuring that youth come to see themselves positively. It was his view that instilling youth with a positive sense of self will produce psychologically healthy citizens who can contribute constructively to society. Combs placed great responsibility on teachers to produce a positive view of self in students by saying that “it is through teachers and the experiences they construct that student self concepts are built or destroyed in the classroom” (p. 116). He held that a positive view of self can be learned in schools through provision of unconditional acceptance. Teachers must accept students unreservedly, as it is only by being accepted that students learn that they are acceptable and are able to accept others. Also imperative for producing a positive sense of self in students is to provide them with experiences in which they can be successful. Combs argued that it is a myth that failure has any value for learning or psychological development. Failure must be avoided at all costs because it elicits feelings of shame and degradation in people and has “cancerous effects upon our thinking” (Combs, 1979, p. 125). Success, by comparison, fuels feelings of strength, security, and adequacy. For



Combs, schools must provide challenges and tasks that are within reach and that students can be successful with and master. Grades and competition should be abolished from schools as they can lead to failure and so can damage students' self-concepts. Also to be avoided is preoccupation with the "right" answers because this teaches students that they cannot depend on themselves.

Although Rogers and Combs referred not to "self-esteem" but rather to "self-concept," their ideas would become central to the self-esteem movement. By recommending that teachers provide students with unconditional positive regard and opportunities for success, and by advising against competition and grading, Rogers and Combs presented some of the first other-directed self-esteem strategies that were to become widely used in schools. Implicit in these strategies were the assumptions that humans are inherently good and trustworthy; that making youth feel consistently good, and never bad, about themselves leads them to have unconditional positive regard for themselves; and that having unconditional positive regard for oneself enables meaningful learning and psychological wellbeing, as well as makes individuals respectful and caring towards others.

Starting in the early 1970s, an outgrowth of humanistic education known as *affective education* began to emerge. Rooted in the same theory as humanistic education, affective education was intended to develop practical applications of humanistic ideas. In other words, affective education was a means to bring humanistic theory into the classrooms and to bridge the gap between academic research and educational practice. Affective education aimed to increase emphasis in schools on the psychological, emotional, and social development of students, and largely consisted of add-on programs, curriculum materials, and educational strategies that could be used in classrooms. Early affective education programs tended to focus on self-actualization and to adapt therapeutic methods, such as encounter groups, being used at human potential growth centers. For example, one of the earliest affective education programs, the *Human Development Program*, used a method similar to encounter groups known as the "magic circle," which entailed students and the teacher sitting in a circle discussing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in an effort to get in touch with their inner selves (Palomares & Rubini, 1973).

There was some controversy surrounding affective education from the beginning. Not all educators or parents were in agreement with efforts to enhance the psychological development of youth in schools. A common concern was that affective education was taking time away from learning academic content, and so typically called attention to by its promoters was how affective education could enhance not only the psychological and emotional development of students, but also their academic learning and achievement. With the *Human Development Project*, for instance, stress was placed on how students' motivation to learn would be increased, and that discipline problems would be reduced, which would free up additional time for the teacher to teach (Palomares & Rubini, 1973). Over the course of the 1970s, the focus in affective education shifted away from self-actualization towards self-esteem as the overarching goal. Not only was there mounting empirical research to suggest that self-esteem is related to academic success and cognitive gains (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; Purkey, 1970), but also, Nathaniel Branden's highly successful book *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* had shifted attention in the human potential movement away from self-actualization toward self-esteem (see Chapter Five). There was a growing belief that self-esteem is easier to attain and more fundamental than self-actualization, and that self-esteem is the wellspring from which psychological health and responsible behavior flows.

Three educators were particularly important in the rising emphasis on self-esteem in affective education. Given that self-esteem was becoming increasingly considered the root of personal and social welfare, teachers felt morally obligated to do whatever they could to make students feel better about themselves, and these three educators were some of the first to offer them tangible tools to do so. Jack Canfield<sup>7</sup> was the first. On completing a Master of Education at the University of Massachusetts—a hub for humanistic/affective education training—Canfield established an institute called *Self-Esteem Seminars*, which provided training to educators on how to raise self-esteem in students. In addition, along with his colleague Harold C. Wells, Canfield (1976) wrote one of the first educational handbooks with self-esteem enhancing techniques, *100*

<sup>7</sup> At present, Canfield is best known for being a cofounder of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book franchise, as well as a successful motivational speaker.

*Ways to Enhance Self-Concept<sup>8</sup> in the Classroom*. Michele Borba was the next affective educator to provide activities and strategies for raising self-esteem in students. Borba was the daughter of Daniel Ungaro, a humanistic educator who placed importance on self-esteem. Over the span of six years, Borba published three educational books on self-esteem (two of which were co-authored with her husband). Borba also went on to conduct well-attended self-esteem seminars for educators and, in 1989, released an entire self-esteem curriculum entitled *Esteem Builders*. Finally, there was Robert Reasoner, who worked for several decades as a public school administrator in California and became convinced that self-esteem is the most important determinant of student behavior and academic achievement. Reasoner spent 10 years developing ideas and materials that culminated in the 1982 publication of *Building Self-Esteem*, a guidebook for teachers containing advice and classroom materials for self-esteem enhancement in students.

Canfield, Borba, and Reasoner are by far the most cited in educational literature on self-esteem. The materials they developed set the tone for the spate of educational manuals, handbooks, and curricula on self-esteem enhancement that would be produced in the ensuing years. The majority of the activities, exercises, and suggestions offered by Canfield and Wells (1976), Borba and Borba (1978), and Reasoner (1982) constituted other-directed self-esteem strategies. Following Rogers and Combs, they strongly accentuated the importance of establishing a warm, supportive, and accepting environment in which students feel valued and cared for, and in which any opportunities for feelings of failure or inadequacy are avoided. Teachers should believe in their students and make them feel special; show interest in the students' lives, feelings, and thoughts; praise and show appreciation for students' accomplishments and efforts; give students choice in academic content, projects, activities, and assignments; and avoid competition, judgment, or criticism.

Sometimes these other-directed self-esteem strategies took extreme forms that could be detrimental for some students. An example provided by Borba and Borba

<sup>8</sup> Canfield and Wells used "self-concept" and "self-esteem" as synonymous terms in the handbook.

(1978) concerns the use of praise. Under the assumption that praise invariably leads children to internalize a positive attitude about themselves, Borba and Borba advocated for liberally praising students for “any effort or achievement” (p. 100). For the Borbas, “even a seemingly insignificant achievement is worth a positive comment” (p. 4). As Baumeister et al. (2003) point out, praising individuals for trivial accomplishments has the potential to cultivate an inflated sense of competence. Research has shown several ways in which praise is not always beneficial. In a literature review on praise, Henderlong and Lepper (2002) concluded that praise sometimes has negative effects on intrinsic motivation. According to Zentall and Morris (2010), receiving nonspecific praise (e.g., “good job”) can reduce task persistence and increase performance anxiety as opposed to specific appraisals (e.g., “you took a creative approach on this assignment”). Another study found that adults are more likely to give inflated praise to children they perceive as having low self-esteem as opposed to high self-esteem, but that inflated praise tends to make children with low self-esteem anxious and to discourage them from taking on challenges (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014). Thus, it would seem that praise does not affect everyone in the same way and can limit individuals’ performance in certain circumstances. McGregor, Nail, Kocalar, and Haji (2013) discovered that after receiving praise, individuals with a grandiose sense of themselves are likely to become callous toward the suffering of their peers, providing evidence that praise can provoke disregard for others in some individuals. Even if it does not lead to disregard for others, being praised liberally for any accomplishment or effort is unlikely to contribute to connectedness with others and can endorse self-focus.

Reasoner (1982) also was in favor of liberally praising students and added that giving tangible rewards, such as prizes and award certificates, is a great way to show recognition and increase students’ motivation. Giving students tangible rewards for good behavior, Reasoner stated, is also effective for behavior management and should replace the use of punishment in classrooms because punishment is damaging to self-esteem. In his guidebook, he provided a number of award certificates that could be used to recognize well-behaved students. One award, for example, entitled the recipient to some extra free time in the classroom “for being so good” (p. 349). Not only is it impossible to handle or prevent all behavior problems by merely rewarding good

behavior, providing students with rewards can be a problematic practice. Kohn (1993) holds that using rewards for good behavior does not teach students why they need to follow rules and be kind to others, and instead stimulates temporary compliance and reliance on rewards. Kohn explains that when rewards are used, it is extrinsic, not intrinsic, motivation for following rules and showing kindness that is promoted. Studies have indeed shown that the more people are rewarded for an action, particularly with tangible rewards, the less intrinsically motivated they are for that action. Two meta-analyses by Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999, 2001) concluded that tangible rewards tend to have a substantial negative effect on individuals' intrinsic motivation for the behavior that was rewarded, and this was found especially to be the case with children.

Canfield and Wells (1976) advocated vigorously for the exclusive application of positive reinforcement and never giving negative feedback. As expressed by Canfield and Wells, using red pencils when marking should never be done because it “essentially means: ‘Here, stupid, is where you were stupid!’” (p. 83). According to them, “red symbolizes violence, blood, STOP, (immoral, godless) communism—a whole host of authoritarian, painful, paranoiac associations” (p. 83). This example provides evidence of the lengths to which teachers have been advised to go in monitoring how their actions can hurt students' feelings and how students' feelings must be protected at all costs. Evaluating students' work, for Canfield and Wells, should always focus on what is right with it rather than what is wrong with it. Attention should be drawn to strengths and never weaknesses. As Stout (2000) asserts, never pointing out parts of students' work that are weak inhibits their ability to improve and learn from their mistakes. In addition, some of the other-directed self-esteem strategies suggested by Canfield and Wells could readily lead to a sense of self-importance as well as disconnection from others. One example is an activity called the “Magic Box” that instructs the teacher to put a mirror inside a box and tell the students they will each “have a chance to look inside and discover the most important person in the world” (p. 42). Students then take turns looking into the box, sending the message to each that he/she is the most important person on earth. It is not only nonsensical to suggest that every student is the most important person in the world, it also fosters in students a sense of grandiosity and positions the needs of others as less important than one's own.

While most of the self-esteem strategies they recommended were other-directed, Canfield and Wells, the Borbas, and Reasoner did suggest a number of self-directed self-esteem strategies that fit well with the emerging neoliberal ideology of the late 1970s and early 1980s. All placed importance on developing skills in goal-setting and decision-making under the assumption that self-esteem would result from an individual becoming purposeful and self-reliant. Gaining self-awareness and self-pride also were considered by each to be fundamental for developing self-esteem. Students need to determine and feel proud of their strengths and what makes them unique and special. For example, an activity created by Borba and Borba (1978) instructed: "Give a few raisins to each child and have the children take turns popping the raisins in their mouths and mimicking Leo the Lion. Each child roars (but gently), 'I'm GR-r-r-eat because...,' and completes the statement" (p. 53). In a similar manner, Canfield and Wells (1976) suggested having students take turns boasting to a small group for five minutes about "what they are good at." Canfield and Wells claimed that this activity tends to create "a heightened sense of group rapport" (p. 43), but it is difficult to see how that would be possible. Once again, such strategies would seem likely to have the effect of supporting not community, but rather, an individual sense of self-importance. Even when others are given attention by self-directed self-esteem strategies, they are typically regarded as instrumental in enhancing one's own self-esteem. Reasoner (1982), for example, created a worksheet entitled "Helping Others" that directs students to complete sentence stems about how they helped different people throughout the week. Stress is placed not on the importance of helping others, but rather, on how the helpers did caring things of which they should be proud. It further should be noted that to know what is unique and special about oneself, and to be proud of these characteristics and abilities, makes sense in a neoliberal climate that requires individuals to be competitive and adept at selling themselves. In fact, Canfield and Wells (1976), Reasoner (1982), and Borba (1989) all suggested having students make an advertisement or commercial for themselves, selling their own strengths and skills in the same way that products are sold.

The importance of self-esteem for academic achievement was underlined by all three of these affective educators, but Reasoner (1982) added that low self-esteem is implicated in drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and student absenteeism. Reasoner was one of the first educators to suggest that social problems are caused by low self-esteem and,

from that point on, educational materials for self-esteem enhancement would refer to a growing number of social issues assumed to be associated with low self-esteem. This trend was strengthened once the California Task Force on Self-Esteem began proclaiming that low self-esteem was the cause of a range of social problems (see Chapter Five). Borba (1989), for example, specified that raising self-esteem in students could prevent such issues as teenage pregnancy, violence, vandalism, crime, and student dropouts. Krefft (1993) stated that enhancing self-esteem in students could help society win the “War on Drugs” and prevent suicide and depression. Teolis (2002) contributed to the growing list, declaring that gang affiliation could be prevented by raising self-esteem, and, remarkably, that “gender inequity will cease to be a problem” (p. xiii) if positive self-esteem is instilled in all children. The mounting belief that social issues are caused by individuals with low self-esteem signalled that neoliberalism was firmly in place by this point in time, as, under neoliberalism, social problems are thought to derive from problems with individuals.

The fact that low self-esteem increasingly was being regarded as the cause of a range of social issues intensified the urgency for addressing the self-esteem of students in schools, as did mounting societal fervor for self-esteem. Not only was the significance of self-esteem being emphasized in education, it also was being alluded to in pop music, Hollywood movies, television shows, fictional novels, magazines, and newspapers. By the mid-1980s, the self-esteem movement was in full swing. Self-esteem began to be added to the aims of increasing numbers of school districts and education boards across the United States and Canada, and teacher training programs were underlining the importance of preserving a child’s self-esteem above all else (Twenge, 2006). Educators felt compelled to do whatever they could in their day-to-day interactions to enhance self-esteem.

The idea that all children are entitled to feel good about themselves exactly as they are and must be provided unconditional positive regard irrespective of their behavior or accomplishments was spreading rapidly among educators. A study in 1996 found that 60% of teachers and 69% of school counsellors believed that self-esteem should be increased in students “by providing more unconditional validation to students based on who they are rather than how they perform or behave” (Scott, Murray,

Mertens, & Dustin, 1996, p. 292). Stout (2000) describes this form of self-esteem advocated in schools as “feeling good for no reason” (p. 12), which she warns sends a dangerous message to youth that hard work, accomplishment, and moral and prosocial behavior are unimportant. For no good reason, students were routinely told that they are special and important, and were instructed to recite vague phrases such as “I’m terrific” (Damon, 1995). As well, on being goaded to “praise children often” (Amundson, 1991, p. 9) and “be generous with your praise” (McKay, 1992, p. 243), delivering heaps of indiscriminate praise was becoming standard fare in education. Dweck (2008) observes that it has been common in the self-esteem movement to liberally praise youth not only for their accomplishment and effort, but also for their intelligence, which she argues can be a perilous practice. Mueller and Dweck (1998) found that when children are praised for intelligence rather than for effort, they become less motivated and less able to cope with setbacks, give up more easily, and perform worse. Dweck (2008) explains that praising children for intelligence sends them the message that they are valued for their intelligence, which can make them more concerned with being perceived as intelligent than with achieving and overcoming challenges. Such children, Dweck notes, can become so invested in appearing intelligent that they become unable to admit and correct mistakes and sometimes even lie to others when they perform poorly. Concern for their image takes precedence over honesty with themselves and others, and interferes with their ability to improve.

In addition to overt practices for raising self-esteem, Stout (2000) punctuates that self-esteem was becoming part of the “hidden curriculum” in schools. The pressing need to make schoolchildren feel consistently good, and never bad, about themselves was coming to be reflected in a variety of school policies, practices, and procedures, without explicit reference to self-esteem. Some examples that Stout mentions include increasing tendencies in schools to inflate grades, to use subjective forms of assessment that do not involve number or letter grades, to pass students on to the next grade level regardless of their achievement, to validate all opinions equally, and to avoid forcing students to learn anything that does not interest them. According to Stout (2000), by the 1990s, students’ feelings had come to trump their performance and behavior in school. Academic standards were being lowered on the grounds that expecting too much from students would cause them to fail and feel bad about themselves. Kramer (1996), for



instance, perceived a marked decline in the difficulty level of the New York Regents exams from the 1980s onward, which she attributed to the education system's overconcern with the self-esteem of students. Unfortunately, lowering educational standards, as Stout (2000) points out, means that many students are not adequately challenged, lose motivation, and miss out on opportunities for growth and success, which would seem to suggest a counterproductive effect for self-esteem.

Curriculum materials and educational resources that explicitly aim to increase self-esteem also were becoming ever more popular. With the rise of neoliberalism and its concomitant demand for individuals to be self-governing, suggestions in such educational materials and resources increasingly came to center on learning to be responsible for oneself under the assumption that this would bring self-esteem. Self-directed self-esteem strategies were designed to help students develop skills in monitoring, managing, and working on their thoughts, feelings, abilities, behavior, and goals. For example, acquiring emotion management skills emerged as a particularly salient type of self-directed self-esteem strategy from the 1980s onward. Teolis (2002) provides several activities and worksheets that relate to managing emotions. Central to these activities and worksheets is a formula to help students understand and remember that they are entirely responsible for their emotional responses:  $\text{event} + \text{responses} = \text{outcome}$ . Teolis (2002) states that:

When we are tempted to blame someone else or external events for our bad moods, anger toward others or violent behavior, we need to stop and remember that we alone are responsible for how we are feeling at any given moment. (p. 94)

According to Teolis, external factors have no bearing on our reactions to events and the outcomes that ensue. One worksheet provided by Teolis has students write down an upsetting event that happened to them, what response they chose, and what the outcome was. Then students should list two responses they did not choose and what they expect the outcomes would have been. The idea is that students may then interpret future events through Teolis' formula, and will learn to take responsibility for their emotions and monitor and control their feelings accordingly. Regardless of what the event is—if an individual has been discriminated against or abused, if a loved one has died, or if one's sole parent lost their job and the family is being evicted from their

home—the individual must learn to take it all in stride. If individuals do not keep their emotions in check under all circumstances, they are to blame and must be held accountable for their reactions. Teolis says that if someone tells another person that he is clumsy, and that hurts his feelings, it is because he has inner doubts about himself. If he does not have inner doubts about himself, he would not have been hurt by the comment. For Teolis (2002), this is why “it is so important for students to get in touch with their positive qualities...[and] to be aware of their limitations and be realistic about them” (p. 94). If an individual is self-aware and someone makes a negative comment, it will not bother her because either she knows it is true and accepts that, or she knows it is untrue and ignores it. The implication then is that not only must individuals continuously manage their emotional responses, they also must relentlessly examine themselves to determine what their strengths and limitations are so that negative feedback will not hurt them.

Related to emotion management, another commonly suggested self-directed self-esteem method is “changing self-talk.” Self-talk includes what one says aloud about oneself as well as what one says privately to oneself. In her educational resource, *Affective Self-Esteem*, Krefft (1993) refers to negative self-talk as “garbage thinking” (p. 34). According to Krefft, through garbage thinking, “We talk ourselves into depression by dwelling on sadness, guilt, and rage. We talk ourselves into alcohol abuse and drug use. We may talk ourselves all the way to suicide if we just keep talking long enough” (p. 35). Like Teolis, Krefft maintains that we alone are responsible for our emotions and our thoughts, which implies that depression, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and suicide are entirely the failing of the individual. Changing our self-talk is key to changing how we feel about ourselves and improving our lives. One activity suggested by Krefft is to have students write a list on a piece of paper of garbage thoughts that they say to themselves, and then crumple up the paper and throw it in the garbage. The implication is that eliminating the negative self-talk—which, if let loose to run wild in our minds, can lead to depression or even suicide—is as easy as throwing away a piece of garbage. One can imagine how harmful of a message this can send to, for example, a depressed child who is living in poverty with an incarcerated parent. The child is made to believe that his feelings of depression—feelings that should be understood as completely legitimate given his circumstances—are his own choice and his own fault and can be easily

jettisoned by changing the way he talks to himself. If he tries to change his self-talk and finds that his feelings of depression persist, he must not be doing it correctly and has no one or nothing to blame but himself.

Borba (1989) likewise highlights changing self-talk. She suggests teachers post a sign in a visible location in the classroom with the commandment: “Thou shalt not talk negatively about thyself or others” (p. 59). If a student disobeys the commandment, the teacher “says a code word like ‘Zap!’ or uses a signal (such as raising a hand) to remind the student” (p. 59) that only positive statements are allowed. While Krefft refers to throwing out garbage thinking, Borba repeatedly uses the term “eliminate” with regard to negative self-talk. In both cases, the suggestion is that there is no room for ever feeling anything negative about oneself. Negative thoughts should be banished from one’s mind, as thinking positively about oneself is the only acceptable way to regard oneself. Borba (1989) also suggested that positive self-talk can be taught by telling a student one of his positive attributes and having him repeat it back out loud. Such an exercise is provided as one way to “teach students how to praise themselves as well as allow ample opportunities for them to ‘blow their own horns’” (p. 285). Students are taught that it is not enough to have good qualities, but rather, they also should congratulate themselves for having these qualities. McDaniel and Bielen (1990) similarly advise that students should improve their self-talk by learning to compliment themselves when they do well on a test or “do something kind for a friend” (p. 170). This suggestion places the emphasis not on the importance of hard work nor on being kind to others, but instead, on doing these things to feel better about oneself. It also incites children to monitor their behavior so that they do not miss the opportunity to applaud themselves for good behavior. By guiding youth to take responsibility for, work on, and relentlessly monitor themselves, self-directed self-esteem strategies, such as strategies for emotion management and changing self-talk, have functioned as neoliberal technologies of the self. Such strategies serve to shape the thoughts, emotions, and conduct of individuals to meet the needs of neoliberalism.

In the 1990s, a backlash began to mount steadily against the self-esteem movement. There is evidence that the backlash has slowed down the movement somewhat in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (This will be explored fully in Chapter Seven.). Although

self-esteem strategies are still used in educational settings, it appears that the movement has passed its zenith. At present, I believe that where the self-esteem movement still thrives the most, and is most problematic, is with marginalized schoolchildren. Such youth are most often the target of self-esteem strategies because they are considered, and have been found in research, to be the most at-risk for poor self-esteem. Examples include those with learning disabilities (e.g., Kaur, 2014), physical disabilities (e.g., Miyahara & Piek, 2006), hearing impairments (e.g., Theunissen, Rieffe, Netten, Briaire, Soede, Kouwenberg, & Frijns, 2014), and of low socioeconomic status (e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Many well-intentioned educators desire to increase the self-esteem of marginalized youth especially in an effort to empower such youth to be able to achieve the same levels of success as everyone else. Self-esteem enhancement is regarded as a means to cope with challenges and rise above limitations. It is believed that other-directed self-esteem strategies, such as giving copious praise and avoiding criticism, can help such youth come to believe in themselves and aim high in life. As I have discussed, such practices can be detrimental and counterproductive, and this may be particularly the case for marginalized youth (e.g., Hwang, 1997).

Even more disconcerting than the use of other-directed self-esteem strategies is the use of self-directed self-esteem strategies with marginalized youth. As Beane (1991) and Kohn (1994) call attention to, it is problematic to attempt to increase self-esteem by concentrating only on the individual's inner experience and disregarding the social context in which she/he is embedded. Marginalized individuals are more likely to feel badly about themselves than other people precisely because they are marginalized in society. Teaching such individuals how to set goals and manage their emotions will do nothing to address, and moreover will distract from, the social, political, and economic realities that cause much of their distress. As Beane (1991) states, to place the focus on "developing 'coping skills' endorses the status quo and...ignores the fact that having positive self-esteem is almost impossible for many young people, given the deplorable conditions under which they are forced to live by the inequities in our society" (p. 27). The rise of neoliberalism accounts for how self-directed self-esteem strategies have been and continue to be rationalized as solutions for the empowerment of marginalized youth. The expectation in neoliberal society is that everyone has an equal chance at

success and happiness as long as they take responsibility for and govern themselves. In the next section, I underscore the dangers of using neoliberal self-directed self-esteem strategies with marginalized youth by examining the implications of such strategies for girls.

## **Self-Esteem for Girls: The Neoliberal Takeover of Feminism**

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, girls emerged as specially targeted for self-esteem strategies. Although both types of self-esteem strategies have been used with girls, in this section, I focus on self-directed self-esteem strategies. It is likely that girls would not have become a specific target of self-directed self-esteem strategies had it not been for significant changes that have been occurring to feminism—changes related to the rise of neoliberalism. The effects of the growing spread of hyper-individualistic neoliberal ideology in society have been highly significant for feminism, a movement that traditionally has revolved around collectively challenging the social structures that limit females. Several scholars began pointing out in the 1990s that feminism was moving in an increasingly individualistic and consumeristic direction. Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996), for instance, noted a growth in self-help literature for women that draws on feminist discourse, but counsels women to fight gender inequality by changing themselves. A case in point is a self-help book entitled *Women & Self-Esteem*, which presents a number of self-directed self-esteem strategies for women. The feminist authors indicate that one of the premises of the book is that the advancement of women as a group is contingent on the development of self-esteem in individual women. As Sanford and Donovan (1985) put it, “for a woman to hold herself in high esteem in a world where women are held in low esteem is to tacitly challenge the prevailing social, political and economic order” (p. xv). In this view, women are obligated to challenge the prevailing social, political, and economic order not through collective effort, but through changing their attitudes towards themselves. Perhaps the most notable example of an individualistic and feminist self-help book from the 1990s is *Revolution From Within*, written by well-known feminist Gloria Steinem. Steinem (1992) had been a particularly vocal activist for women’s rights for decades but, in *Revolution From Within*, to the

dismay of many feminists, she shifted her focus away from external barriers toward internal ones, trading the political for the personal.

The individualistic and consumeristic feminism demonstrated by Sanford, Donovan, and Steinem is indicative of what Rotterdam (2014) calls *neoliberal feminism*, a form of feminism co-opted by neoliberalist ideology, which has been mounting since the emergence of neoliberalism. According to Rotterdam, neoliberal feminism is converting gender inequality from a structural issue into an individual and entrepreneurial affair. Gender inequality is regarded decreasingly as a problem to be addressed through collectively challenging the social structures that perpetuate gender discrimination. Rather, a neoliberal feminist overcomes gender barriers by being enterprising and working on herself. A neoliberal feminist, as described by Rotterdam, is aware of the inequality between men and women, but accepts full responsibility for her own well-being. Where her power lies is over herself, and it is there that she will invest her time, energy, and money. She can level the neoliberal playing field and rise to the same level of economic success as men by becoming educated, gaining confidence, managing her emotions, being bold and ambitious, and raising her self-esteem.

The rise of neoliberal feminism enabled girls' low self-esteem to emerge as a problem that needs to be solved. In the 1990s, the problem of girls' low self-esteem was spotlighted as part of a rapidly expanding national conversation about a "girl crisis" in the United States (Hains, 2012). Throughout society, girls were coming to be regarded and discussed as being "in crisis," as disempowered and psychologically wounded by rampant gender discrimination in society. Gender bias was identified as the underlying issue of the girl crisis. But, over time, girls' self-esteem came to overshadow gender bias as the problem that needed to be addressed. Particularly influential in the girl crisis discourse was a report issued by a leading feminist organization, the American Association of University Women (AAUW). The report was based on a study conducted by the AAUW, which centered on the issue of gender bias in schools and the effects it has on girls. It was found that teachers unconsciously reinforce negative stereotypes about girls' abilities, thus constraining what girls think they are capable of, dampening their aspirations, and limiting their success (American Association of University Women, 1994). The effect of gender bias that was particularly highlighted by the AAUW report

was the sharp drop in self-esteem that girls experience during adolescence. Although it was found that the self-esteem of both genders declines in adolescence, the decrease was said to be far more dramatic for girls than boys.

While most of the recommendations made by the AAUW (1994) related to eliminating gender discrimination in schools, the report nonetheless called attention to girls' low self-esteem as a problem that must be solved. According to the AAUW, the issue of girls' low self-esteem has economic implications for the country. Girls' low self-esteem, the AAUW alleged, will diminish their aspirations, and society will miss out on the contributions they may have made if they had been inspired to expand their horizons. Therefore, "if we are to meet the pressing need for an increasingly skilled work force" (p. 5), it is a matter of "economic urgency" (p. 5) to solve the problem of girls' low self-esteem, lest America "lose its competitive edge" (p. 5). There are two points to note here. First, the AAUW states variously that both gender bias and girls' low self-esteem stifle girls' aspirations, that low self-esteem is both a cause and an effect of the diminished aspirations and achievements of girls, and that the problems to be solved are both gender bias in schools and girls' low self-esteem. These inconsistencies had the effect of obfuscating what issue actually should be targeted. In the end, what was most commonly reported in the media was that girls' low self-esteem was the problem that needed to be addressed. What followed the AAUW study were numerous feminist initiatives, which, consistent with neoliberal feminism, aimed not to eliminate gender discrimination in schools, but rather, to boost girls' self-esteem (Mahaffy, 2004). Second, the AAUW's stress on the economic implications of girls' low self-esteem evidences an underlying neoliberal market logic. The idea put forth is that girls are powerful agents of social change and that investing time and money on raising their self-esteem is a smart economic move for the country (Shain, 2013).

It since has been pointed out (e.g., Farady, 2010; Mahaffy, 2004) that the drop in girls' self-esteem is not as dramatic as was reported by the AAUW. One meta-analysis, for example, discovered that girls experience more of a decrease in self-esteem during adolescence than boys, but that the difference is slight (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). Twenge (2006) also found that there was little difference between boys and girls in terms of how much their self-esteem falls during adolescence. Nevertheless,

the discourse that prospered was that there is a problem of low self-esteem in girls. In fact, so entrenched has this notion become that Goodkind wrote in 2009 that “the association between low self-esteem and adolescent girls has become a cliché” (p. 408). The widely publicized conclusion by the AAUW that girls’ low self-esteem is a problem that needs to be solved, and that has economic implications, enabled a market for girls’ self-esteem. From that point on, self-directed self-esteem strategies would be targeted increasingly at girls.

Educational initiatives (e.g., after-school programs, workshops, camps, and mentorship programs) for girls that were inspired by the AAUW study proliferated in the 1990s. Most were described as feminist initiatives, facilitated by feminist instructors, or at least rooted in feminist ideas, and tended to take a neoliberal feminist approach. Many of these initiatives acknowledged gender discrimination as the underlying problem of the girl crisis, yet endeavored to change not how girls are limited in society, but rather, how girls conduct, manage, and understand themselves. Changing and managing themselves was seen as the antidote for dealing with and standing up to the gender discrimination over which girls were perceived to have no control. While many of these initiatives were described explicitly as self-esteem programs, they also were described sometimes as programs for empowerment, confidence, and leadership. However named, self-esteem typically was mentioned as one of their central aims, and the self-directed strategies they used were similar. These initiatives tended to focus on developing entrepreneurial skills in self-awareness, leadership, decision-making, and goal-setting. Learning to change self-talk was another common skill that was taught to girls. The AAUW had specified that low self-esteem results from limitations being imposed on girls with regard to their capabilities, and so often accentuated in these neoliberal feminist initiatives was the notion that girls must adopt a “Yes, I can!” attitude (e.g., Sills, 1994). The idea is that if someone tells a girl that she cannot do or be something, she should declare emphatically either aloud or to herself that she can do it. However, simply telling oneself that one can do or be anything does not remove any of the personal limitations or external factors that may prevent an individual from achieving her goal. The idea that one can be or do anything simply is not true, and internalizing this belief may guide some individuals gratuitously to spend time, energy, and money pursuing unrealistic goals with a result of failure, rejection, and frustration.



Initiatives that aimed to increase girls' self-esteem continued to flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but have changed in some ways from the initiatives of the 1990s. In general, there have been three new interrelated trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An example of a current and particularly prominent self-esteem initiative, the *Dove Self-Esteem Project*, is provided below and serves to substantiate and elaborate these three trends. First, corporations have emerged as major players in the marketplace for girls' self-esteem. While most of the self-esteem initiatives for girls in the 1990s were non-profit or government-funded, corporate-funded initiatives have become ever more common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Corporations have caught on to the fact that girls' self-esteem is a "hot commodity" (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 86) and have begun funding and developing self-esteem initiatives as part of a marketing strategy to establish consumer brand loyalty.

Second, self-esteem initiatives for girls are largely no longer feminist endeavors. While many initiatives do often appropriate feminist ideas such as empowerment and choice, at the same time, they tend to distance themselves from the word "feminist" and circulate messages that are counter to feminist thought. The way in which feminism is often used, but also rejected by self-esteem initiatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, provides evidence of *postfeminism*. Following Gill (2007), I consider postfeminism a distinctive sensibility that characterizes an increasing number of cultural media products in contemporary society, including advertisements, marketing campaigns, television shows, and films. A postfeminist position generally holds that feminism is no longer necessary because gender equality has been achieved. Females are seen as empowered and in complete control of their lives. Postfeminism bears some similarity to neoliberal feminism. Both are examples of the influence of neoliberal ideology on feminist thought. Central to both are neoliberal values of individualism, self-governance, and consumerism. However, whereas neoliberal feminism is a neoliberal takeover of feminism from within, postfeminism is partially a neoliberal takeover of feminist ideas circulating outside of the movement in media culture. Like neoliberal feminism, postfeminist discourse stresses that females need to monitor and discipline themselves, but places particular emphasis on the need for females to scrutinize and work on their bodies. Postfeminist discourse promotes the notion that the body is the key source of identity for females and that females must adhere to traditional conventions of femininity (e.g., women should be thin, have no body hair, and wear make-up). The body is

presented “simultaneously as women’s source of power and as...requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007, p. 149). Gill highlights that postfeminist discourse contains profound contradictions. It centers on female empowerment and choice, yet also obliges females to engage in relentless self-surveillance and self-discipline of both their bodies and their minds.

Third, 21<sup>st</sup> century self-esteem initiatives tend to focus not on gender discrimination as the cause of girls’ low self-esteem, but rather, on the unrealistic beauty ideal depicted in the media. It is believed that this ideal puts considerable pressure on girls to look a certain way and damages girls’ self-esteem by making them feel that they do not measure up. Issues relating to how girls feel about their appearance (e.g., body image, satisfaction with appearance, and body dysmorphia) and how they manage their appearance (e.g., exercise, fashion, beauty products, diet pills, cosmetic surgery, and eating disorders) increasingly have become connected to girls’ low self-esteem and emphasized by self-esteem initiatives. The aim in such initiatives is not to oppose any of the social structures that contribute to an unrealistic beauty ideal, but rather, to alter the way girls think and feel about their body and appearance.

### **Dove’s Postfeminist Self-Esteem Education for Girls**

Dove’s crusade into the world of girls and their self-esteem has been part of a highly successful, long-term marketing and rebranding campaign. Dove is a subsidiary brand of Unilever, one of the world’s largest multinational consumer goods companies. Initially a purveyor of soap, Dove was appointed in 2000 by Unilever to undergo a significant expansion of the brand to sell a range of personal care products. In concert with Ogilvy & Mather, one of the most powerful marketing organizations in the world, Unilever determined that expanding the Dove brand would need to entail a full rebranding (Deighton, 2008). It was decided that Dove would need to stand for something. A problem that affects females, its target consumer, would need to be found so that Dove could take a stand against it in an effort to generate revenue through brand loyalty.

Unilever indeed did find an issue of concern to females that it could exploit. Market research with women and consultation with feminist experts unearthed a deep discontent among women regarding the unattainable beauty standards that are portrayed in consumer advertising and packaging (Deighton, 2008). This initial research prompted Unilever to conduct a global study in consultation with two prominent feminist scholars to investigate empirically how women understand and feel about beauty. It was called the *Real Truth About Beauty* study and its main finding was that most women do not feel, or describe themselves as, beautiful (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2004). The study concluded that unattainable beauty standards communicated through mass media make it difficult for women to see themselves as beautiful, which can contribute to low self-esteem and unhappiness. The women expressed belief that popular culture and mass media can be a force for reconfiguring beauty standards to allow for a wider definition of beauty.

Following the study, Dove launched two interrelated initiatives. The first was an awareness-raising campaign called the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty (DCRB)*. Dove proclaimed that the campaign was initiated to start a global conversation about the need for a wider definition of beauty (The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, n.d.). To spotlight the issue, the campaign has used advertisements on billboards, in magazines, and on television. The advertisements consist of photographs and video clips of “real women” who do not fit the common profile of women in the media (e.g., women with stretch marks, wrinkles, or belly fat). The *DCRB* also has created short, well-produced videos that were released on YouTube. The first major success came when the campaign released a video called *Evolution*. To demonstrate how unrealistic the images we see in the media can be, the video shows the process of an ordinary-looking woman being made to look like a supermodel in a photograph, by having her hair and make-up done and then a series of extensive adjustments made to the photograph. Most of the *DCRB* videos focus on exposing the unrealistic beauty standard portrayed in the media and illuminating the effects it has on females, especially girls. For example, another video entitled *Little Girls* shows a series of young girls with captions that describe each girl's particular insecurities about her appearance (e.g., “Hates her freckles,” “Wishes she were blonde,” and “Thinks she's fat”). The campaign videos have garnered millions of views and much attention toward the campaign. As Gill and Elias (2014) suggest, using

YouTube as a platform for advertising can bring far greater exposure than traditional means for advertising if the video is made to be emotionally touching and to contain a “feel good” factor because people then will be inclined to share the link with family and friends and on social media.

The *DCRB* advertisements and YouTube videos direct the audience to the website for its related initiative, the *Dove Self-Esteem Project (DSEP)*, which focuses on delivering self-esteem education to girls. While the *DCRB* is concerned with raising awareness among adults, the *DSEP* offers practical means for empowering the next generation of women. Experts have been enlisted by Dove to create educational resources for raising self-esteem in girls, which are made available free of charge on the Dove website for educators, parents, mentors, and youth group leaders. Since 2004, the *DSEP* has created countless offshoots. For example, in 2008, Dove organized a mass sleepover event all across Canada called *Sleepover for Self-Esteem*. Girls aged 8-14 were encouraged to host sleepovers with their friends and mothers, during which they were to discuss self-esteem issues and tune in to special programming on select channels that included a discussion by a self-esteem expert. The *Dove Movement for Self-Esteem* was launched in 2010, and called on girls and women to sign a declaration on Dove’s website stating that they would commit to playing an ongoing role in building positive self-esteem in the girls and women in their lives (Murray, 2013). Those who signed the declaration would be sent regular updates from Dove with self-esteem building tools and opportunities to become more involved in the movement. The annual *Dove Weekend for Self-Esteem* at the United Nations also began in 2010, and is meant to be an educational experience for mothers and daughters on self-esteem issues and strategies for raising self-esteem. In 2013, the *Let’s Make Girls Unstoppable* campaign was initiated as part of Dove’s mission to reach 15 million girls with self-esteem education by 2015. The list goes on.

Dove purports to help raise girls’ self-esteem in two main ways. First, through the *DCRB*, Dove is making efforts to expand the beauty paradigm that is depicted in the media. By using images of ordinary, diverse, and unretouched women in its own advertising, Dove is trying to set a precedent. Research has shown that girls’ self-esteem is affected by what they see in the media (e.g., Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006;

Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002), so the belief is that the more girls see realistic images of females, the less likely they are to feel bad about their own appearance. Dove's advertisements have received a great deal of attention in the media and there is evidence to suggest that other companies may be following suit. Rayworth (2014) points to a recent surge in advertisement campaigns with images of unretouched "real women," which she attributes to the example set by Dove. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Dove has been called out several times in the media for being disingenuous about its "real women" adverts. Dove was exposed in 2010 for posting on Craigslist in New York City seeking women to appear in an advertisement. Demanded in the posting was: "MUST HAVE FLAWLESS SKIN...Nice Bodies...NATURALLY, FIT Not too Curvy Not too Athletic" (Odell, 2010, para. 5). In addition, one photographer who worked for Dove claimed that he extensively retouched photographs used in the *DCRB*, and emphasized what a challenge it was "to keep everyone's skin and faces showing the mileage but not looking unattractive" (Collins, 2008, para. 47). On a recent episode of the reality television show *America's Next Top Model*, it was revealed that the current trend in advertising is in response to the public becoming critical of retouching practices (Banks, 2015). Photographs are no longer to be retouched so much that the models do not look like ordinary people because this is a turn-off for educated consumers. However, photographs should be retouched enough to eliminate major flaws because such flaws apparently distract from the product that is being advertised. Dove was not mentioned by the show, but it is quite possible that this trend was initiated by Dove. If this is the case, it would seem that the precedent set by Dove is not so much widening the beauty ideal as it is creating an advertising strategy that exploits the public's desire for a reconfiguration to the beauty standard.

The central way that Dove claims to aid girls' self-esteem is through the *DSEP*. The idea is that girls' self-esteem suffers because of an unrealistic beauty standard, so Dove wants to help them feel better about themselves through self-esteem education. Like the self-directed self-esteem strategies that have been used in public schools, Dove's self-esteem strategies function as neoliberal technologies of the self that work to produce apolitical and self-responsible citizens. The strategies used in the *DSEP* are highly individualistic, revolving around getting girls to change themselves. For example, ubiquitous in *DSEP* educational resources are exercises, discussions, and/or activities

that are designed to expose the manipulation that goes on in the media in an effort to alter how girls think about and react to what they see in the media. So although Dove does place blame on the media and claims to be tackling the unrealistic beauty standard head-on through the *DCRB*, its efforts to increase girls' self-esteem through the *DSEP* shift the responsibility away from external factors like the media and onto girls, who are to change the way they react to the beauty standard and relate to themselves. According to Dove, the *DSEP* was founded "to ensure the next generation of women grows up to be happy and content, free from misconstrued beauty stereotypes and the burden of self-doubt" (Our mission in practice, 2013), which implies that the problem ultimately lies with girls' inability to see through the standard. Furthermore, Dove presents the beauty standard issue to girls in a simplistic manner that conceals the issue's institutional underpinnings (Murray, 2013). No mention is ever made to the girls about the underlying issues of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and classism that fuel the unattainable beauty standard. This is for good (financial) reasons, as Dove sells beauty products. It certainly is not in the best economic interests of the company to expose the structural factors that put pressure on females to buy products that Dove sells.

In addition to serving as neoliberal technologies of the self, Dove's self-esteem strategies advocate a distinctly postfeminist position. The postfeminist position is particularly obvious in the *DSEP's* emphasis on the body and appearance. While *DSEP* materials do employ some of the common self-directed self-esteem strategies that have been used in public schools, such as developing skills in emotion management and goal setting, the majority of the exercises, activities, and suggestions prescribed by the *DSEP* are addressed to girls' physical appearance and how they feel about their bodies. In fact, nearly all of the *DSEP's* exercises and suggestions make some reference to beauty/appearance or something related to beauty/appearance, such as eating, dieting, exercising, cosmetic surgery, makeup, fashion, or hair removal. Take, for instance, the *Self-Esteem Activity Guide* (2012) for girls aged 10-14. Of the three sections in the activity guide, two sections are devoted to matters of the body and of image. The third section, which is about feelings—and so would not seem to be appearance- or body-related—still has activities that refer to emotional eating, excessive dieting, and skin damage, as well as an activity that involves looking at photographs of everyone else in the group and giving compliments to each other (presumably that would be mainly

appearance-related). Even the stated aim of the *DSEP* is not to help girls feel better about themselves, but rather, “to help the next generation of women grow up feeling happy and confident about the way they look” (Our Vision, n.d.). The implication here is that how girls feel about themselves is largely a product of how they feel about their appearance. In a postfeminist manner, the “self” in girls’ self-esteem is almost entirely reduced to the body by the *DSEP*.

The endorsement of a neoliberal postfeminist position also is exemplified in how the *DSEP* advises girls to self-govern their bodies and minds. For example, one activity called “Me Inside and Out” (uniquely ME!, 2008) highlights the importance of making healthy choices by taking care of the mind and body—with heavy emphasis on the body. The facilitator of the activity is instructed by Dove to say to the girls aged 10 or 11: “If you never thought about what you eat, how active you are, how much sleep you get each night, or how you deal with something that stresses or bothers you, it’s time to start!” (p. 9). Whereas in previous times, girls at this age probably would not be urged to think about such things, the *DSEP* wants young girls to learn to take responsibility for themselves and their bodies. A more disturbing example of the promotion of self-monitoring of the body and mind is an activity called “Take a Look at Me,” which is purportedly about “helping girls to talk openly and confidently about their bodies” (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012, p. 24). Girls are to take a photograph both of a part of their body that is changing due to puberty, and a part of their body that is not changing, and for each, they should come up with words to describe how beautiful these parts are. The girls then make a poster with their photographs and write their positive messages next to each. The activity also tells girls to use a mirror to “look at bits of you that are tucked away, like your shoulders or the back of your knee” (p. 25), for which they also should come up with positive statements. The insinuation is that scrutinizing and evaluating your body is key to achieving body confidence and self-esteem. However, the more one inspects and reflects on one’s body, the easier it is to notice and focus on aspects that one does not like. Dove even reported in another *DSEP* resource that “more than four in 10 girls and young women only see their flaws when they look in the mirror” (uniquely ME!, 2010, p. 5), which suggest that at least 40% of girls who participate in this activity are likely to experience a great deal of anxiety. Even for girls who do not only see flaws when they look in the mirror, being directed to scrutinize one’s body can readily cause

unease, especially for a young girl whose body is going through many changes. It does not help that the guide also suggests to girls that they should feel confident doing such an activity and talking about their changing body with other people, and that they should be able to think of positive statements for any part of their body. The more uncomfortable a girl feels from doing an activity like this, and the more a girl focuses on parts of her body that she does not like, the more likely she is to want to change her body. An activity like this may lead a girl to feel not only anxious about her body, but also feel that there must be something wrong with her if she does not love every aspect of her body, and may contribute to her feeling compelled to go on a diet, restrict caloric intake, purge food, exercise excessively, take diet pills, or get cosmetic surgery.

Consistent with postfeminism, *DSEP* materials additionally underscore that girls can choose how they want to look and what they want to do in their lives, while paradoxically doing little to challenge, and often perpetuating, idealized notions of femininity. For instance, one *DSEP* activity centers on body hair. The aim of the activity is described as becoming comfortable talking about hair removal and “questioning whether hair removal is the right thing to do” (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012, p. 28). It is insinuated that hair removal is optional, but no mention is ever made of why a girl may choose not to remove body hair. The activity even involves having a group discussion “about why it is OK for men to have hairy legs and armpits, but it’s not for women” (p. 29), which implies that hair removal for women is compulsory. The description for another activity starts off by talking about gender-stereotyping with the toys that girls and boys are encouraged to play with—pointing out that girls are usually given dolls and dress-up clothes while boys are given toy cars and guns—and then the girls are to be asked how this gender stereotyping affects people’s view of themselves (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012). The activity nonetheless involves each girl getting a doll, which they are to alter the appearance of however they want. Thus, it is implied that Dove is challenging the way girls and boys are given stereotypical toys, and then girls are not only given a stereotypically feminine toy to play with, but also, they are told to alter its appearance, which reinforces the idea that females’ appearance can be changed. Looking at the *DSEP* as a whole, on one hand, Dove claims to contest the social understanding of beauty, and stresses the idea that girls are much more than just their looks and can choose on what basis they want to value themselves. On the other hand,



Dove reproduces and legitimizes the idea that girls have to feel good about their appearance, which implies that girls' identity is largely based on their appearance (Johnston & Taylor, 2008).

Another postfeminist theme that permeates the *DSEP* materials is emphasis on consumerism. Postfeminism incites females to link “meanings of empowerment and choice to ideological and material consumption” (Murray, 2013, p. 86). Females' primary sense of agency is to come through the consumer choices they make (Powell, 2013). A few of the activities in Dove's *Self-Esteem Activity Guide* involve discussing and learning about how products are marketed and sold so that girls can learn to make empowered consumer choices. Girls also are prompted in several activities to name, package, and advertise their own products. The description for an activity called “Pack It” makes a parallel between food packaging and girls' bodies by saying “it's not just you who has a shell, the foods you eat do too!” (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012, p. 35). Then girls are instructed to make a new food product, as well as packaging to market it, subtly implying that how we present our bodies is how we sell ourselves. Moreover, how we present our bodies can be enhanced through consumerism. Products relating to body and appearance, such as hair removal products, skin care products, and fashion accessories are peppered throughout the activity guide, and are connected unambiguously to self-esteem. Dove suggests, for instance, that “clothing is a positive and healthy way to...show the world our identities” (p. 48). In the “Take a Look at Me” activity mentioned above, an example Dove provides of a positive statement about a body part is: “I love my earlobes because they are soft, curved and great for fancy earrings” (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012, p. 25). In this example, not only does Dove link consumerism to self-esteem, the notion that girls should wear (not to mention, should like to wear) fancy earrings also is reinforced. In another example of a positive statement about a body part, while no specific Dove products are referred to or advertised, the statement relates to enjoyment with using hair products (which Dove does sell): “I love my hair. It may be a bit greasy but that means I can spend more time washing and styling it!” (Self-Esteem Activity Guide, 2012, p. 25).

Dove ultimately does not need to advertise its products to girls. The primary goal of the *DSEP* is to build brand loyalty. It is quite possible that some girls come out of

*DSEP* workshops feeling empowered, with beliefs that they have learned to make better choices, will no longer be duped by the media, and will be able to keep their self-esteem intact in the face of an unrealistic beauty standard. Their parents too may feel that Dove has equipped their daughters with skills that they can use for life and that will enable them to feel more confident and be more successful than they would otherwise have been. In such cases, both the girls and their parents may be inclined to become loyal customers of Dove and even to persuade others to buy Dove products. Girls and parents aside, anyone that is heartened by Dove's efforts to increase girls' self-esteem may choose to buy Dove products to support the initiative. As Dove states on its website, "Each time you buy Dove, you help us and our charitable partners provide inspiring self-esteem programming for girls" (Your Purchase Counts, 2015). Even though it may be obvious that Dove's primary objective is to make money, Banet-Weiser (2012) notes that in neoliberal society, there is nothing unusual about a company exploiting a cause to further its bottom line. Under neoliberalism, individuals are convinced to act politically by supporting brands that are attached to certain political and social goals (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In the same way that choosing to drink Starbucks coffee is pitched to consumers as a way to support fair trade practices for coffee farmers, one can support the empowerment of girls by choosing to buy Dove products.

In supporting a neoliberal postfeminist position, Dove arguably is disempowering girls. *DSEP* materials serve to distract attention from structural factors that limit girls and to perpetuate stereotypical notions of femininity. Girls are influenced through the *DSEP* to understand their lack of self-esteem (body confidence) as a personal failing that can be remedied through consumption and through governance of their body and mind. Given that Dove's website claims that the *DSEP* has globally reached 17 million girls and counting (A girl should feel free to be herself, 2015), the scope of its impact has been substantial.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the normalization of self-esteem in schoolchildren; more specifically, initiatives intended to make youth meet the social and political requirement for increased self-esteem. Other-directed self-esteem strategies for schoolchildren first

began to be suggested in the 1960s by humanistic educational psychologists such as Rogers and Combs. For Rogers and Combs, it is crucial for educators to provide students with unconditional positive regard and opportunities for success, and to avoid situations in which students can fail. Affective educators Canfield and Wells (1976), Borba and Borba (1978), and Reasoner (1982) contributed additional other-directed self-esteem strategies such as providing students with ample praise, giving students rewards, and avoiding criticism of students' work. What underlies such strategies is the belief that making people feel important and capable invariably contributes to self-esteem, and that any kind of failure or criticism makes people feel bad about themselves. These beliefs gave rise to other educational practices like inflating grades and promoting students to the next grade regardless of achievement. In effect, protecting and boosting students' feelings about themselves took precedence over learning academic material, which likely has implications for how successful the affected students have been able to become.

With the rise of neoliberalism came an increase in self-directed self-esteem strategies that have served as neoliberal technologies of the self. The assumption with these strategies is that being responsible for one's feelings, thoughts, plans, and choices will make individuals successful and accepted in neoliberal society and so will bring them self-esteem. A major problem with the use of self-directed self-esteem strategies is that it obscures the influence of external factors and places sole responsibility for one's wellbeing on the individual. In the second section of this chapter, girls were discussed as an example of a marginalized group constrained by social structures but, through the use of self-directed self-esteem strategies, can be helped to understand their self-esteem as entirely within their control. Contemporary self-esteem initiatives for girls not only are consistent with neoliberalism, they also tend to endorse a postfeminist position. The *Dove Self-Esteem Project* was analyzed as an example of a current postfeminist self-esteem initiative that potentially disempowers girls by perpetuating idealized notions of femininity and guiding girls to take responsibility for themselves by governing their bodies and minds.

James (1890) held that negative self-feelings can inform the individual, but with the rise of neoliberalism, such feelings are now regarded as useless and invariably

undesirable. In addition, counter to James' belief that the modification of self-esteem is idiosyncratic, it is generally supposed at present that anyone can rid themselves of pesky negative self-feelings with generic self-esteem strategies. One no longer need reflect on and address particular influences or experiences in life that may be contributing to negative feelings about oneself. Rather, one needs only apply generic strategies that target increased self-esteem. However, without addressing such influences or experiences, individuals are likely to continue feeling bad about themselves. Negative feelings about ourselves should be understood as serving a purpose. They can inform us that we may need to change something in our lives or take a different approach in the future. Perhaps we made an unwise choice, had a bad attitude, hurt another person's feelings, took advantage of someone else, did not try hard enough, did something harmful to the environment, or got into an unhealthy relationship. These are mistakes that we should not ignore, but rather, learn from. In the same manner that physical pain serves a purpose when we touch a hot stove element, it is useful to feel bad about oneself when one does something wrong or makes a mistake. Both physical and psychological pain are forms of feedback that can help us learn, improve, and grow. However, negative self-feelings are not necessarily an indication that the individual needs to make a personal change. They also could be signalling that something in the individual's circumstances needs to change. Individuals should not always be regarded as exclusively responsible for their own negative self-feelings. External factors like limiting social structures can affect how individuals feel about themselves, and should be seen as at least partially to blame. Recognizing the culpability of limiting social structures can shift people's attention and energy away from what's wrong with them and toward actively challenging unfair and/or oppressive practices. If we follow the advice of contemporary conventional wisdom to address negative self-feelings through generic self-esteem strategies, we may miss opportunities to learn and grow, and get stuck in a cycle of self-blame.

Finally, far from connecting people with others, self-esteem strategies foster excessive focus on one's own needs, concerns, experiences, and feelings to the extent that one is distanced from the concerns of others. There is the assumption that placing one's own needs and concerns above those of everyone else is key to one's self-esteem. With the rise of self-directed self-esteem strategies that direct individuals to take

responsibility for, monitor, and manage their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, self-esteem has come to be equated with self-responsibility and self-management. Preoccupation with and surveillance of the self have become desirable and required. It is particularly dangerous to nurture this level of self-focus and self-absorption in children. Humans are egocentric from birth, understanding the world only from their own personal perspective. To be able to co-exist and cooperate with others, we must learn that our needs are not necessarily of utmost importance and that other people's needs and viewpoints must be taken into account. By sanctioning self-absorption, self-esteem strategies seem to have the opposite effect. As Hewitt (1998) puts it, "whatever natural tendency the child may have to be self-centered or self-preoccupied, such exercises make this inclination seem quite appropriate, and to some extent they demand such activities from the child" (p. 84). Martin and McLellan (2013) advance that the excessive self-focus fostered by self-esteem strategies used in schools runs counter to the educational mandate in the West to produce socially responsible citizens. For a free and democratic society to flourish, people must be communally oriented and committed to collective goals. Martin and McLellan argue that the use of self-esteem strategies in schools is in opposition to the goals of responsible citizenship, collective pursuits, and civic virtue. Further, it is not only society that suffers. As Damon (1995) affirms, the children suffer as well:

Self-centered goals cannot provide a constructive foundation for a child's development. Children will not thrive psychologically until they learn to dedicate themselves to purposes that go beyond their own egotistic desires. They will not thrive unless they acquire...devotion to concerns that are considered larger than the self. (p. 81)

Contrary to what is claimed by self-esteem advocates, it would appear that self-esteem strategies are antagonistic to both personal and social wellbeing.

In the final chapter, I will argue that the engines of quantification, idealization, and normalization constructed the contemporary understanding of self-esteem, which is empirical, idealized, and neoliberal. This modern understanding enabled the making up of a kind of person that I refer to as the "low self-esteemee."

## **Chapter 7.**

### **Discussion**

The preceding three chapters explored three main changes to the understanding of self-esteem using the description provided in 1890 by William James as a contrast. First, contrariwise to James' belief that self-esteem is an abstract and multi-faceted experience of persons that cannot be reduced or quantified, by the 1960s, self-esteem had become thought of as concrete, reducible, and measurable. Self-esteem is now believed to be a universal trait that functions in the same way across individuals and is possessed by all individuals to varying degrees. I call this conception of self-esteem "empirical self-esteem." Second, whereas James regarded self-esteem a by-product of success and accomplishment, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-esteem became idealized as a cause of personal and social success. Self-esteem has come to be considered an end in itself because it is believed to bring benefits to the individual and all of society. I refer to this conception as "idealized self-esteem." Third, James believed that self-esteem changes in relation to the particular individual's goals in life. However, with the rise of neoliberalism, it became understood that self-esteem can be modified with generic self-esteem strategies. Self-directed self-esteem strategies, in particular, linked the pursuit of self-esteem with taking responsibility for oneself and with relentless self-surveillance and self-management. I refer to this conception which holds that self-esteem is to be achieved through generic strategies of self-management as "neoliberal self-esteem."

To conclude this critical analysis of self-esteem, let us revisit historical ontology, the approach to inquiry applied in this thesis. Following Sugarman (2009, 2013, 2015a), historical ontology is employed here as a neo-Foucauldian study of psychological description that applies the approaches of both Hacking and Rose. Historical ontology is premised on the notion that people understand and relate to themselves through

psychological descriptions. When a psychological description emerges and changes, it brings new possibilities for personhood. It “creates new ways for people to be” (Hacking, 2002, p. 100); that is, new possibilities for how people think about, understand, relate to, and conduct themselves. Hacking (1995) calls this way in which psychological descriptions can bring into being new kinds of persons “making up people.” Historical ontology seeks to uncover what historical, cultural, and social conditions and practices enabled a certain kind of person to exist. Exposing these contingencies can both shed light on what the consequences are for personhood and open up the possibility to be and do otherwise. Rose’s approach adds to neo-Foucauldian historical ontology emphasis on ways in which power relations are involved in making up people in contemporary society. According to Rose, psychological language and interventions have served as neoliberal tools that induce and shape individuals to be enterprising and self-governing. Individuals are driven to use these interventions on themselves, and adults are motivated to use them with children, because enterprising and self-governing capacities are highly valued and rewarded in neoliberal society. These interventions are neoliberal technologies of the self that govern us “at a distance.” In adopting and applying them, our ways of conducting and evaluating ourselves are brought in line with the neoliberal agenda. Not only is this a form of individual and social control that stays largely concealed, but also, it is particularly potent because technologies of the self are freely adopted by the individual and appear to be empowering.

In this final chapter, I begin by examining the two classifications that are associated with the concept of self-esteem: “high self-esteem” and “low self-esteem.” These classifications began as research categories in the late 1950s but were not used outside of a research context for several decades. It was following the pronouncements of the California Task Force on Self-Esteem that the terms “high self-esteem” and “low self-esteem” began to be used as labels by the public. While I believe that both of these classifications have given rise to a new way to be a person, my discussion focuses primarily on low self-esteem. What is unique about low self-esteem as a classification (versus autism, for example) is that it is not imposed formally on a person based on psychological assessment or diagnosis. Many tools for measuring self-esteem exist, but these generally are not used outside of research settings. Most of the time, individuals are labelled unofficially as having low self-esteem by another person or by themselves. I

focus in this chapter on schoolchildren; more specifically, the ways that they have come to be interpreted by educators as having low self-esteem, how they come to understand themselves through the label of low self-esteem, and with what consequences. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss what is paradoxical about the contemporary pursuit of self-esteem. Third, I explore the backlash against the self-esteem movement that began in the 1990s. While the backlash has had some effect on public perception, I suggest that self-esteem still remains a strong value that people feel compelled to pursue in Western society. Lastly, what this historical ontological investigation uniquely contributes to our knowledge about self-esteem will be considered.

## **The Making Up of the Adolescent Low Self-Esteemer**

“High self-esteem” and “low self-esteem” emerged as psychological classifications in the late 1950s when inventories and scales first were created to measure self-esteem. These were convenient categorizations that could be used to contrast empirically those individuals who fell on either extreme end of the self-esteem continuum. Self-esteem measures, such as Coopersmith’s *Self-Esteem Inventory* (1967) and the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (1965), usually have a third category in between the two extremes that constitutes an average level of self-esteem. However, the groups of most interest to researchers have been those with high and low self-esteem because these are the kinds of people that psychologists desire to know about. It was thought that studying these groups could enhance understanding of self-esteem—what factors inhibit and enhance it and what influence high and low self-esteem has on behavior. Given that they were not used to classify people outside of a research context, for the most part, the terms “high self-esteem” and “low self-esteem” did not yet provide lenses through which people could understand themselves and their experiences. It would take some time for the classifications to be used outside of empirical research as well as to become ways of being. Humanistic self-esteem advocates such as Abraham Maslow, Nathaniel Branden, Jack Canfield, and Michele Borba were idealistic and concerned with the upper limit of human potential. In the 1960s and 1970s, these psychologists and educators tended to refer generally to self-esteem and assumed it is something of which one can never have enough. They did not wish to speak of imperfection except to



caution of the perils of falling too far from the ideal, in which case they typically would refer to a lack or deficiency of self-esteem.

It was in the 1980s that the terms “high self-esteem” and “low self-esteem” would start to be used outside of research settings. By citing empirical research, self-esteem advocates began to point to the benefits of high self-esteem and the dangers of low self-esteem to provide rationale for programs of self-esteem enhancement. Robert Reasoner (1982) was one of the first educators to refer to high and low self-esteem. In developing his materials for his guidebook, *Building Self-Esteem*, Reasoner consulted with empirical researcher Stanley Coopersmith and adopted the terms from him. Citing research by Coopersmith, Reasoner asserted that individuals with high self-esteem accept and recognize their strengths and the strengths of others, feel secure, respond to challenges with confidence, achieve a high degree of success, take pride in themselves, and are goal-oriented. Individuals with low self-esteem, by contrast, are afraid to take risks, are preoccupied with what others think of them, and are unable to face demands that are placed on them. As mentioned in Chapter Six, Reasoner was also one of the first educators to connect low self-esteem with social problems. According to Reasoner, low self-esteem can account for drug and alcohol abuse, student absenteeism, and a decline in achievement scores in schools.

Reasoner’s connection between low self-esteem and social problems may have influenced California politician John Vasconcellos, whose Task Force on Self-Esteem would become the most impactful force in focusing concern on low self-esteem. Vasconcellos was a political representative for the Silicon Valley, which is a short distance from the school district in San Jose that Reasoner presided over as superintendent. Vasconcellos (1989) read widely on the topic of self-esteem and was well networked with educators in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition, Reasoner would be asked to serve as one of the practicing experts for the California Task Force on Self-Esteem, which suggests that Vasconcellos was aware of his work and considered him an expert on the topic of self-esteem. In any case, Vasconcellos (1989) stated that in the 1980s, practitioners and researchers increasingly were referring to low self-esteem as a factor that was central in social problems, which got him thinking about the

potential for self-esteem enhancement as a tool for the prevention of costly social issues.

Profoundly influenced by humanistic psychology and the human potential movement, Vasconcellos was highly idealistic. Like humanistic self-esteem advocates who preceded him, he did not distinguish between high and low self-esteem. For Vasconcellos, self-esteem is something invariably good and unlimited, a personal attribute that everyone constantly should strive to increase. He subscribed wholeheartedly to the humanistic notion that people are inherently good and trustworthy, and he equated self-esteem with an unconditional self-love that enables personal and social responsibility. He believed that the more self-esteem everyone has, the better the world will be. His political vision, decidedly neoliberal, also depended on all citizens taking up the goal of self-esteem. He believed that individuals should be trusted and free to govern themselves, but that for society to prosper under these conditions, citizens must be personally and socially responsible. For Vasconcellos (1990), to be constantly engaged and committed to the pursuit of self-esteem—to be, as he put it, “self-esteeming” (p. x)—was key to achieving the personal and social responsibility necessary for a healthy and prosperous society. His own deeply cherished humanistic beliefs and political vision likely would not have been enough to convince the state to implement social policy initiatives for self-esteem enhancement. Having been tasked with handling the state’s budget, Vasconcellos could use the connection between low self-esteem and social problems that was being alluded to by practitioners and researchers as justification on financial grounds to launch a task force. If a task force could firmly substantiate this connection, it would provide evidence that the state could prevent costly social problems by funding self-esteem enhancement initiatives. The creation of a task force could help Vasconcellos realize his political vision, improve all of society, and save the state money.

Although the Task Force ultimately was unable to validate empirically a link between low self-esteem and social problems, it was proclaimed to the public that low self-esteem “is central to most personal and social ills plaguing our state and nation” (California State Department of Education, 1990, p. 4). High self-esteem, conversely, was said to empower people to live responsibly and to protect them from being

overwhelmed by life's challenges. Vasconcellos continued to eschew the distinction between high and low self-esteem and to place the emphasis on how beneficial morally and fiscally it will be for all of society if everyone was to engage in the pursuit of self-esteem. However, most other members of the Task Force embraced the terms "high self-esteem" and "low self-esteem" and liberally used them in the official publications. Following the proclamations of the Task Force, these terms became part of the public's vernacular.

Vasconcellos' humanistic and neoliberal beliefs would be carried forward by the entire Task Force. Under the assumption that having self-esteem necessarily enables personal and social responsibility, the Task Force held that to be responsible citizens, individuals are obligated to continually work on and improve their self-esteem. Emphasized was that self-esteem is under the control of the individual and is a matter of choice. As the Task Force put it, "there is no benefit in...blaming others for our low self-esteem....[People can] choose to move from futility of despair to hopeful responsibility, from self-hatred to self-love, from fear and mistreatment of others to a life of inclusiveness, appreciation, and respect" (California State Department of Education, 1990, p. 13). In this view, external forces have no bearing on people's self-esteem. To feel good about oneself, one must simply make the decision to be self-esteeming.

It is with the California Task Force that we first see a coalescence of the three different understandings of self-esteem. This has formed the contemporary understanding of self-esteem. First, the contemporary understanding of self-esteem is empirical. It is believed that self-esteem can be known empirically (i.e., through the instruments and methodologies of psychological self-esteem research) and is a universal trait that functions and is experienced in the same way across individuals. Its homogeneity is presumed to lend it to modification with generic self-esteem strategies. Although self-esteem is assumed to exist on a continuum and to be possessed by individuals to varying extents, high self-esteem and low self-esteem are the two general classifications. Second, the contemporary understanding of self-esteem is idealized. Self-esteem is unconditional positive regard for oneself that enables personal and social responsibility and that brings benefits to the individual and all of society. Third, self-esteem is rooted in neoliberalism. Self-esteem, whether high or low, is regarded entirely

as under the control of the individual and entails self-surveillance and self-management. One is politically obligated to monitor constantly one's feelings, thoughts, and behavior to ensure maintenance of unconditional positive regard for oneself. To have high self-esteem is to meet, and to have low self-esteem is to fail to meet, the neoliberal obligation of upholding unconditional positive regard for oneself.

The California Task Force on Self-Esteem made numerous recommendations for families, communities, and businesses, but it was in education that its recommendations were heeded most. Educators took up the responsibility to help students develop self-esteem for their own good and for the good of society. The use of self-directed self-esteem strategies in schools became more prevalent, and these strategies prompted students to monitor, manage, and work on their thoughts, feelings, actions, abilities, and goals. Generally, these strategies convey to students that they must always feel and demonstrate unconditional positive regard for themselves, regardless of what other people think of them or how they behave or perform; that only positive, and never negative, thoughts toward, and utterances about, themselves are acceptable; and that they are fully responsible for themselves.

With the introduction of the term "low self-esteem" to the public and its connection to personal and social ills, educators also were beginning to interpret many of students' difficulties as a consequence of low self-esteem. Professor of education William Damon wrote in 1995, "Most teachers...I know refer immediately to 'low self-esteem' when children in their charge are having problems" (p. 71). Damon did not specify any particular problems that stood out to teachers as signs of low self-esteem. However, in relating the experience of attending a series of seminars for teachers in the early 1990s, Dewhurst (1991) alluded to several characteristics that teachers believed were symptoms of low self-esteem. According to Dewhurst:

Those participating in the seminars took it to be the case...that there is a pervasive lack of self-esteem among pupils, and they believed that it was their responsibility to do something about it. Various strategies and techniques were recommended to this end. Children were to be encouraged to recognise and value their own talents and capabilities, the timid and shy were to become confident, the withdrawn communicative, the overly compliant were to become assertive, the despondent hopeful and unsociable sociable....How did the teachers know that their

pupils...lacked self-esteem? Not apparently on the basis of the students saying so. It is an interesting resting fact that those to whom...low self-esteem is imputed are unlikely to say 'I lack self-esteem' or 'I have low self-esteem'. Typically it is the teachers who say of the students that they lack self-esteem; the students do not say it of themselves. (p. 3)

There are three points to note from Dewhurst's account. First, it appears that teachers were imposing a label of low self-esteem on students who did not personally identify in that way. Second, teachers felt obligated to use strategies to change those students who they interpreted as having low self-esteem. Third, the problematic characteristics assumed to indicate low self-esteem were shyness, timidity, reticence, compliance, and despondence. The belief is that changing these characteristics and behaviors will increase self-esteem. A recent study similarly found that the behaviors and characteristics that teachers interpreted as manifestations of low self-esteem in their students were: quiet, shy, or withdrawn behavior in class, a negative outlook, lack of motivation, general reluctance to try new things, a tendency to give up easily, and lack of ease when communicating with adults (Miller & Moran, 2005). Other characteristics commonly believed to be symptomatic of low self-esteem include hypersensitivity, self-consciousness, dependence, pessimism, cautiousness, indecisiveness, as well as a lack of self-confidence, assertiveness, spontaneity, and risk-taking (Mruk, 2006; Rosenberg & Owens, 2001).

It is significant that the characteristics associated with, and used informally to identify, low self-esteem are diametrically opposed to those of the neoliberal enterprising self. The enterprising self is bold, confident, extraverted, optimistic, competitive, driven, active, decisive, and self-reliant. Characteristics commonly associated with high self-esteem match those valued by enterprise culture. This is no coincidence. Teachers, parents, and others tend to reinforce and reward enterprising behaviors and characteristics because these are believed to be fundamental for success and acceptance in neoliberal society. Confident and self-reliant children are rewarded for their behavior, sending them the message that they are acting in the correct way, which is likely to contribute to positive feelings about themselves. Children who demonstrate shyness and insecurity, conversely, are met with concern and disapproval, sending them the message that they are doing something wrong and need to change, which is likely to contribute to negative feelings about themselves. In this way, self-esteem is restricted to,

and a reward for, those who conform with neoliberal norms. Therefore, it is not simply that shyness, passivity, and pessimism are symptoms of low self-esteem, but rather, the rejection of these characteristics in neoliberal society leads to low self-esteem. In other words, low self-esteem is a symptom of failing to meet social expectations. Although my focus here is on neoliberal norms, it should be noted that there are other social standards, such as gender norms, that dictate how one is to be and act in society, and, consequently, also can influence one's self-esteem.

Being made to feel badly about oneself for breaking a social norm or expectation can sometimes serve a helpful purpose by teaching an individual, for instance, not to behave recklessly. Many of our social norms serve to promote social harmony and should be enforced. However, the requirements imposed by neoliberalism not only serve mainly the economy, and are antithetical to social harmony, but also they tend to be unfair and disempowering for many individuals. For example, unenterprising qualities are not universally regarded as negative, which suggests that they are not inherently bad and undesirable traits. Some non-Western cultures regard unenterprising characteristics such as shyness and reticence as positive characteristics thought to contribute to social harmony (Chen & French, 2008). In such cultures, shyness and reticence have been correlated with positive outcomes, such as social and academic success and positive self-worth (Chen & French, 2008). It is within the context of competitive and hyper-individualistic neoliberal society that such characteristics stand out as problems and are met with disapproval. Moreover, neoliberal society not only makes unenterprising characteristics problematic, but it also can produce and exacerbate them. For example, Aho (2010) argues that shyness is a “normal, perhaps even healthy, response to an increasingly isolated, harried, and meaningless existence” (p. 201). As Hickinbottom-Brawn (2013) points out, to be able to sell oneself and be successful in a competitive neoliberal marketplace, one needs to monitor how one is perceived by others. Relentless self-monitoring is likely to bring to light as a problem any perceived inability to function with confidence and boldness in the social realm. According to Hickinbottom-Brawn, this is part of why increasing numbers of people are coming to be considered pathologically shy (i.e., receive diagnoses and treatment for social anxiety disorder). In addition, the sense of powerlessness one can experience from being marginalized in neoliberal society can serve to draw out unenterprising behaviors and characteristics like

despondence and pessimism. It is inevitable that people living in poverty would feel hopeless and pessimistic in a society that both conceals the influence of social structures that marginalize them and sends the messages that success is equally available to all and that one's lack of success is attributable solely to oneself. Nevertheless, such people tend to be marginalized in neoliberal society for their failure to be unflinchingly hopeful and optimistic about themselves and their circumstances.

It therefore is mistaken to assume that changing unenterprising behaviors and characteristics is key to increasing the self-esteem of a child. To enforce neoliberal norms is to encourage conformity to inequitable standards, which is likely to produce in children who do not measure up to these expectations the very low self-esteem that educators desire to correct. As well, targeting self-directed self-esteem strategies at such children leads them to monitor and express unconditional positive regard for themselves. They are guided to become hyperaware of their feelings and thoughts, and told negative feelings towards themselves should not be permitted and the opinions or responses of others should never affect their self-esteem. However, the assumption underlying the Rogerian notion of unconditional positive regard for oneself is that it is internalized through being unconditionally accepted and valued by close others. Unconditional acceptance from close others is indeed important for children when they are growing up because how they come to understand and make sense of themselves will be a reflection of how others treat and respond to them (Coopersmith, 1967).<sup>9</sup> Unenterprising children are unlikely to receive this unconditional acceptance. Instead, they are more likely to be repeatedly sent the message that who they are is not valued and accepted in society. Over time, they may come to internalize not unconditional acceptance, but rather, a feeling of worthlessness. They may develop not an inherent sense of self-worth, but an inherent sense of inadequacy and inferiority. All of this adds up to a highly confusing situation for such children. They are told that they must unconditionally love themselves and yet this is made nearly impossible for them under neoliberalism. They must accept themselves for who they are and, at the same time, are

<sup>9</sup> This is far from suggesting that there should not be clear boundaries for children. Coopersmith (1967) outlined three chief antecedents of children's self-esteem: "total or near total acceptance of the children by their parents, clearly defined and enforced limits, and the respect and latitude for individual action that exist within defined limits" (p. 236).

made to feel that they are inadequate and must change. They are directed to be hyperaware of, but are not supposed to feel, the negative feelings that result from rejection by others.

It takes time for youth to come to understand themselves through the label of low self-esteem. Research has shown that young children tend to regard themselves highly and that self-esteem tends to decline during adolescence (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2013). Thus, it seems as though it is typically during adolescence that individuals first apply a label of low self-esteem to themselves. It is well established that during adolescence individuals become far more self-conscious and aware of their emotions than they were as young children. Differences between them and others become more apparent, as do both the ways in which they fail to meet certain social criteria and the negative self-feelings that ensue. Neoliberal pressures also are likely to increase during adolescence. Unenterprising characteristics and behaviors are more likely to be excused in young children than in adolescents. As children grow older, adults may sense greater responsibility to instill enterprising abilities in them in preparation for becoming an adult in a competitive and hyper-individualistic society. Monitoring and managing their thoughts, feelings, and body are progressively encouraged. They are urged to love themselves unconditionally, to be confident in who they are, and not to care what others think about them. At the same time, unenterprising characteristics like shyness, unassertiveness, and indecisiveness increasingly become regarded by others as unacceptable, and are met with greater concern and rejection. Not only is this likely to make individuals with such characteristics feel negatively about themselves, but also, they may berate themselves for feeling bad about themselves and for having these traits.

Taking on the label of low self-esteem can provide a certain release for an adolescent who feels this way. The label can help such individuals make sense of themselves, their actions, and their experiences. It furnishes them with an explanation for the frustrations they feel and the struggles they have, an explanation for why they do not like themselves even though they are supposed to. The lack of power they experience due to limiting social expectations/structures becomes understood as attributable to low self-esteem. In a sense, they can feel more in control by knowing what



can account for these unwanted negative self-feelings, frustrations, and struggles. The problem lies with themselves. There is something wrong with them and it needs to be corrected. In taking on this label, not only do they accept responsibility for the negative feelings they have for themselves, but also, they assume a lens through which to understand themselves and their experiences. They become what I refer to as “low self-esteemers.”

There were no low self-esteemers prior to the 1980s. This is certainly not to suggest that it was impossible to have a negative opinion of oneself before this time. Rather, low self-esteem was not yet a psychological description through which individuals could relate to themselves and understand their experiences, nor was it a way in which people could interpret and explain the behavior of others. To claim that the label of low self-esteem enabled a way of being in the 1980s also is not to suggest that everyone who has felt poorly about themselves over the past 30 years is a low self-esteemer. The low self-esteemer is a certain way to be a person that has arisen in relation to the contemporary understanding of self-esteem, which is empirical, idealized, and neoliberal. Low self-esteemers are highly conflicted. They feel poorly about themselves due to marginalization in society, but take full responsibility for their low self-esteem. They are desperate to feel socially accepted and valued, but understand this desperation as a need for self-esteem. They are excessively concerned with how they come across to other people—are hyper-aware and preoccupied with themselves, their images, and their bodies—and yet chastise themselves for caring so much about what others think. Low self-esteemers feel obligated to accept and love themselves for who they are, and yet persistently feel plagued by self-doubt and compelled to change themselves. They believe that raising their self-esteem is the answer to all of their problems. They constantly seek strategies to boost their self-esteem, but find, at best, they lead to fleeting feelings of self-satisfaction. They are trapped in a never-ending and fruitless pursuit of self-esteem.

There is evidence to suggest that when people take on the label of low self-esteem, they come to interpret experiences and act in ways consistent with the label. Particularly since the late 1980s, when the term “low self-esteem” was starting to become widespread amongst the public, research has shown that low self-esteem can

be a self-perpetuating condition that is rife with contradictions. According to Baumeister (1993), individuals with low self-esteem want self-esteem but tend to interfere with fulfilling that desire in several different ways. For example, believing that they are incompetent, they are likely to set humble goals that may block enhancement of their self-esteem by achieving less than that of which they are capable. Swann (1996) observes that such individuals “often add to their misery by paradoxically thinking and acting in ways that preserve their negative thoughts and feelings about themselves” (p. 2). Multiple studies have shown, for instance, that individuals with low self-esteem tend to monitor the environment for rejection rather than acceptance, which perpetuates negative feelings about themselves (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996; Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004). Although they greatly desire acceptance, “the warmth produced by favorable evaluations is chilled by incredulity” (Swann, 1996, p. 14). Negative feedback is highly threatening and they are particularly sensitive to it, but they are not surprised by it, as it is interpreted as confirmation of personal deficit (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Kernis, Brockner, and Frankel (1989) found that when people with low self-esteem receive negative feedback, they tend to overgeneralize implications to other aspects of their identities. Although they desperately desire closeness with others, such individuals are inclined to have trouble forming and maintaining close relationships (Baumeister, 1993). Individuals with low self-esteem tend to interpret the responses of other people in overly negative ways, expect that they are undesirable to others, and doubt they have anything worthwhile to contribute to conversations (Rosenberg & Owens, 2001). They tend to want constant reassurance from their partners and respond with hostility when they feel rejected by them (Schutz, 1998).

The conflicted and self-defeating nature of the low self-esteemers, I argue, is largely the consequence of tensions embedded in the contemporary understanding of self-esteem. All are obligated to have unconditional positive regard for themselves, but it is not available to all. Those who are deprived of it because of the unfair demands of neoliberalism are expected to take full responsibility for their failure to meet this obligation. It is them who need to change. The label of low self-esteem offers a sense of release and control, and yet taking on the label leads to perpetuation of their struggles and masks the role of external forces for their condition. Ultimately, it is in the best interests of neoliberalism for those who are unenterprising to be low self-esteemers. The

neoliberal status quo can be maintained if marginalized individuals are focused on themselves, accept responsibility for their own struggles, and are distracted from the forces that marginalize them.

## **The Paradoxical Quest for Self-Esteem**

People are right to be concerned about low self-esteem in youth. Adolescent low self-esteem has been associated with depression, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies (Overholser, Adams, Lehnert, & Brinkman, 1995; Wild, Flisher, & Lombard, 2004). Rosenberg and Owens (2001) wrote that to have low self-esteem “is to live a life of misery” (p. 409). Low self-esteem is a self-defeating affliction that colors every experience, interaction, feeling, and thought the individual has. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that low self-esteemers can overcome their problems by pursuing self-esteem. In fact, the pursuit of self-esteem is likely to maintain, or even worsen, their problems. First, the tools that are available to them for self-esteem enhancement are generic self-directed self-esteem strategies. As discussed in Chapter Six, these strategies are highly individualistic and stimulate excessive self-focus. What the low self-esteemers need most is connection and acceptance, and these strategies tend to be counterproductive to these needs. Such strategies additionally guide low self-esteemers to become hyperaware and critical of their negative self-feelings which can potentially exacerbate their low self-esteem. Any instance of self-doubt becomes further confirmation of personal inadequacy. Moreover, generic self-directed self-esteem strategies not only fail to be effective because they counterproductively promote self-absorption and self-monitoring, but they also do not address the limiting social expectations/structures that give rise to and maintain the individual’s low self-esteem. The external forces are concealed, the individual immobilized. The pursuit of self-esteem through self-directed strategies may lead to a sense of hopelessness for low self-esteemers because such strategies are unlikely to produce the desired results, and they have only themselves to blame.

The larger issue is that pursuing self-esteem as an end in itself is a paradoxical endeavor. Self-esteem is connected to a certain kind of self-concerned happiness, which

several notable thinkers have pointed out is counterproductive to pursue as an end in itself. Philosopher John Stuart Mill (1875) famously wrote in his autobiography:

Those only are happy...who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way. The enjoyments of life...are sufficient to make it a pleasant thing, when they are taken *en passant*, without being made a principal object. Once make them so, and they are immediately felt to be insufficient. Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life. (p. 142)

Mill's point is that if a person's ultimate goal is to be happy, she never will feel satisfied because it always will seem like she can be happier than she is now. Further, to pursue happiness is to monitor, instead of fully experience, one's happiness. Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1984) likewise held that happiness:

cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen...you have to let it happen by not caring about it. (p. 17)

For both Mill and Frankl, happiness is an incidental by-product of contributing to other people's happiness and the betterment of humankind. In other words, committing to a cause greater than oneself is what brings happiness, but only when the commitment is made for its own sake, rather than as means to happiness.

I argue that the same holds true for self-esteem. It seems that our societal concern for self-esteem has made us lose sight of the kinds of goals most worth pursuing in life. Genuine self-esteem results when we are not concerned with our own self-esteem. Ask yourself if you like yourself enough and you will never feel satisfied. As Whoolery (2015) highlights, the pursuit of self-esteem is a never-ending burden. We always want more self-esteem, but our constant concern with it both trumps more fulfilling pursuits and disconnects us from others. Whoolery advises that people stop thinking about their self-esteem and put that time and energy into the much more meaningful pursuit of helping and showing kindness to others. Crocker (2002) similarly

suggests that pursuing self-esteem requires relentless self-monitoring and maintenance, which interferes with the ability to have close relationships, inhibits learning and growth, and can take a toll on the people around us. Far from enduring self-esteem, the result is an endless cycle of isolation, frustration, insecurity, and unhappiness. Crocker proposes that we “shift away from self-focused, self-centered, ego-based goals of...[enhancing] self-esteem toward goals that connect the self to others or to something larger than the self” (p. 611).

The viewpoints of Mill, Frankl, Whoolery, and Crocker converge with those of Taylor (1991), Guignon (2004), and Cushman (1995) (which were presented in Chapter Five). Following their lead, I hold that to feel truly fulfilled and happy with oneself, individuals must not focus on themselves and their own needs, but instead, must find a meaningful way to contribute to the social good and connect with others. Not only is such an approach to life better for the wellbeing of individuals, it is also better for the welfare and prosperity of all of society. The implication for educators is not to stress to youth that they must feel good about themselves, nor to focus on instilling in them self-esteem per se. Instead, the focus should be on encouraging youth to be communally oriented and concerned for the needs and welfare of others. This is what will help them build genuine self-esteem. To this end, I direct the reader to Martin and McLellan (2013) for a sound alternative approach to education, rooted in the ideas of George Herbert Mead, which aims to produce communal agents who “understand themselves as tied to their communities and others” (p. 178). Their approach does not reject the importance of building self-esteem in youth, but rather, places the emphasis on shaping youth to lead the kind of communally-oriented life that gives rise to a legitimate kind of self-esteem.

## **The Backlash and Legacy of the Self-Esteem Movement**

In the 1990s, a backlash began to mount against the self-esteem movement. There was growing concern that self-esteem is not the personal and social panacea its advocates claim. Three scholars have been particularly potent figures in the backlash. The first is psychologist Roy Baumeister. Originally a believer of the importance of self-esteem, Baumeister began to have doubts following the extravagant claims made by the California Task Force on Self-Esteem (Storr, 2014). With colleagues, Baumeister

conducted two widely cited studies that refute some of the central tenets of the movement—that high self-esteem is invariably beneficial for society, that low self-esteem is the cause of social problems, and that the use of self-esteem strategies brings personal and social benefits. The first study concluded, counter to what was declared by the California Task Force, that low self-esteem is not the cause of aggression, crime, and violence (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Instead, individuals with inflated high self-esteem were found to be most likely to engage in violent behavior. The second study analyzed the relationship between self-esteem and a number of variables including academic performance, job performance, interpersonal relations, and happiness. The authors found that, with the exception of happiness, self-esteem only was weakly to modestly correlated with these variables (Baumeister et al., 2003). It was concluded that although high self-esteem may be associated with some benefits for the individual (such as personal resilience), it can have negative effects on others. People with high self-esteem were found to be more likely than those with low self-esteem to bully others, to retaliate with aggression when challenged, and to discriminate against others. Baumeister et al. (2003) criticized the way that schools teach students to unconditionally love themselves no matter how they behave or perform. They argued that such an approach sanctions antisocial behavior and a poor work ethic, and is more likely to contribute to inflated self-esteem rather than genuine self-esteem. Baumeister et al. (2003) also evaluated the use of school programs that aim to increase self-esteem, and concluded, on the whole, such programs are not beneficial. In fact, there was some evidence to suggest that such programs can have counterproductive effects on academic performance. Baumeister investigated this further in a field experiment with college students and found that when low-performing students were given a self-esteem boosting message before their next exam, their marks tended to drop even lower (Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette, & Baumeister, 2007).

Two other important figures in the backlash have been psychologists Carol Dweck and Jean Twenge. Dweck (2008) has been researching praise for almost 20 years and has been quite vocal that the indiscriminate and constant praise advocated by the self-esteem movement increases people's reliance on praise, fosters a sense of entitlement, and decreases their abilities to persist in the face of difficulty and receive corrective feedback. She argues that the commonly held belief in the movement that

criticism should be avoided at all costs has been harmful. Dweck (2008) specifies that avoiding criticism deprives children of helpful feedback that is fundamental for their learning and growth, and can decrease their ability to tolerate constructive feedback. Twenge has written two widely read books that have been critical of the self-esteem movement, *Generation Me* (2006) and, with colleague Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009). Based on intergenerational research data, Twenge has shown that contemporary youth are more self-absorbed, entitled, and narcissistic than ever before in history, and she implicates the self-esteem movement in these trends.

According to Twenge and Campbell (2009), hyper-individualistic self-esteem strategies are unfortunately still ubiquitous in schools, and most teachers and parents seem completely unaware that they may be harmful. For these reasons, Twenge and Campbell claim that the backlash against the self-esteem movement has not had much of an impact. However, their claim that the backlash has been largely ineffective in changing the conversation on self-esteem may be overstated. There is evidence that public opinion about self-esteem is changing (albeit slowly). Recently published educational books on self-esteem have been more likely to acknowledge the backlash and take a less individualistic approach than in previous times. In their book *Self-Esteem: A Guide for Teachers*, for example, Miller and Moran (2012) set out to create “a meaningful self-esteem enhancement programme” (p. 6) that includes a moral dimension and eschews practices that artificially inflate self-esteem, such as overusing praise and making every child feel special. Educators recently appear to have become more aware of research and commentary critical of the movement, and increasingly are making changes to their approach in the classroom in light of this awareness. For instance, Chandler (2012) wrote in the *Washington Post* of a spreading awareness among educators in Maryland of Dweck’s research on praise and of a growing trend to push children to work through mistakes and take on more challenges. The research of Baumeister and Twenge also has been steadily spreading. Both are cited regularly in popular news outlets such as *New York Magazine* and *Time* (Bronson, 2007; Stein, 2013). In addition, cognitive psychologist Art Markman pointed out that the recent popular Pixar animation movie *Inside Out* challenges the self-esteem movement’s notion that everyone must feel good about themselves all the time (Timberg, 2015). Kenny (2015) writes that *Inside Out* is “part of a counter-cultural movement which is looking at

the valuable aspects—particularly for children and young people—of failure, of risk, of struggle, and of vulnerability” (para. 3).

Although public opinion may be slowly changing, it would appear that Twenge and Campbell are correct in saying that the majority of the public still believes self-esteem to be crucially important and that generic self-esteem strategies have far from disappeared from schools. The societal ardor may have abated somewhat, but the concept of self-esteem has been absorbed into Western culture and common parlance and remains embedded in many common educational and parenting practices. Countless people who were in school during the height of the self-esteem movement in the 1980s and 1990s grew up believing that self-esteem is of utmost importance—that children need to be praised and their feelings protected, no matter what—and these beliefs are reflected in the ways that they treat today’s children. Indeed, the notion that self-esteem must be preserved at all costs continues to be fixed in the minds of many educators, as demonstrated by a recent study that found that teachers in Australian public schools tend to inflate grades to protect the self-esteem of their students (Bita, 2015). As well, numerous educators may still liberally use both other- and self-directed self-esteem strategies with their students (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). As a personal example, my niece and nephew (both under 9 years old) regularly receive award certificates at school for exhibiting good behavior, despite the fact that research (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001) suggests that this may reduce their inclination to behave well when there is no chance of being rewarded. If the tide is truly turning, it will likely take a long time for significant changes to occur in how self-esteem is understood by the public at large, as well as for such changes to be reflected in the approaches that educators, parents, and other adults take with youth.

## **Conclusion**

Starting with William James in 1890, psychologists have endeavored to shed light on the phenomenon of self-esteem in myriad ways. James used introspection. Humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow theorized about the nature of self-esteem. Increasingly since the 1960s, psychologists have been inclined to study self-esteem using correlational research (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965), experimental research



(e.g., Dijksterhuis, 2004), survey research (e.g., Soriano, O'Sullivan, Baer, Phillips, McNally, & Jenike, 1996), and longitudinal study (e.g., Sowislo & Orth, 2013). The most recent research trend is to use brain imaging techniques to determine the neural underpinnings of self-esteem (e.g., Chavez & Heatherton, 2015). It is difficult to deny that all of this research has helped us better understand self-esteem. However, what has been problematic about the psychological investigation of self-esteem to date is that underlying almost all research is an implicit assumption that self-esteem is a static and universal feature of persons. Self-esteem rarely has been analyzed historically, and, perhaps with the exception of Ward (1996), what little attention has been paid to the history of the concept has been told in the form of what Rose (1998) refers to as "recurrent history." This is a straightforward treatment of history that assumes that reality has remained the same, but that we have gotten better at explaining and understanding it.

This thesis has attempted to show that self-esteem is not a transhistorical and static phenomenon. Psychological investigations of, and interventions for, self-esteem can transform the understanding of the concept, and such transformations have implications for how individuals experience self-esteem and themselves. We need to go beyond studying self-esteem as a fixed phenomenon because, properly understood, self-esteem is a moving target, and when the target moves people change. Historical ontology provides an approach for studying self-esteem as the moving target that it is. Given that self-esteem has been a central concept in the discipline of psychology, informing many educational and self-help practices over the past five decades, it would seem that such a line of inquiry is long overdue.

With the aid of historical ontology, in this thesis, I have attempted to uncover sociohistorical conditions, practices, and technologies that made possible our contemporary understanding of self-esteem, which I have claimed is empirical, idealized, and neoliberal. In addition, I have endeavored to reveal what the consequences are for how people interpret, understand, and conduct themselves. This final chapter looked at how the contemporary understanding of self-esteem enabled the making up of the low self-esteemers. Individuals often voluntarily take on the label of low self-esteem because it gives them a sense of power in the face of limiting social expectations/structures. Their

desperation to feel socially accepted and valued is understood as a need for self-esteem. Low self-esteemers search for ways to increase their self-esteem to put an end to their struggles and frustrations. I contend that this quest is misguided. Not only will it fail to address the factors that are contributing to their negative self-feelings, but it also may exacerbate their low self-esteem. All the while, neoliberal goals are supported, and the self-blaming low self-esteemer is distracted and disempowered. But it does not have to be this way. One of the central purposes of historical ontology is to expose unnecessary limitations to personhood in order to open up the possibility to be and do otherwise. An historical ontological investigation can empower the kinds of people that have been made up, like low self-esteemers, to reclaim agency from the sociohistorical and political forces that shaped them. As Sugarman (2013) puts it, “persons are able to interact with, and resist, those classifications and practices devised to describe, study, and control them” (pp. 98-99).

Hacking (2007) refers to how certain kinds of people like individuals with high-functioning autism have resisted their classifications and taken back power. In the case of high-functioning autism, labeled individuals became frustrated and angry about being classified as pathological. They have argued that society needs to allow for a wide breadth of human characteristics, tendencies, and capabilities, and that their autism ought to be judged within the bounds of normality. Given that low self-esteemers willingly label themselves as such, their form of resistance would look quite different from that of individuals with autism. Low self-esteemers take responsibility for their struggles and are distracted from the forces that subjugate them. A starting point for reclaiming agency is for them to become aware that they are not to blame entirely for their low self-esteem and to recognize the inequitable social expectations/structures that limit them. For the adolescent low self-esteemee, parents, teachers, and other adults in his/her life would be crucial in this regard. If we were to stop regarding low self-esteem as a psychological problem that resides within the individual and, instead, recognize it as a symptom of social marginalization, it would enable us to help adolescent low self-esteemers break out of a vicious cycle of self-blame and self-sabotage, and prevent adolescents who feel badly about themselves from entering such a cycle in the first place. If we could help low self-esteemers understand that they are constrained unfairly by external forces, and help them pinpoint what these forces are, it would offer low self-esteemers new avenues for

healing. They would no longer be restricted to individualistic generic self-esteem strategies that perpetuate their struggles. Instead, they could direct their energy into connecting with other people and opposing the forces that limit them and others. We would much better serve all youth if we stopped emphasizing how important it is for them to love and feel confident in themselves, and instead guide them towards finding a cause greater than themselves to which they can commit.

A main limitation of historical ontology is that the issues made evident by such an undertaking do not lend themselves to simple solutions. I have indicated how I believe low self-esteemers can begin to reclaim agency. However, getting these individuals to recognize that they are being manipulated by external forces and that they need to drop the pursuit of self-esteem is no easy task, especially considering most of Western society still believes self-esteem to be vitally significant. Noteworthy scholars in the backlash against the self-esteem movement, like Baumeister, Dweck, and Twenge, have raised much needed awareness that self-esteem is not the personal and social panacea that its advocates have claimed it to be, and that there are dangers to using generic self-esteem strategies in schools. My hope is that the present analysis can help move our growing societal awareness beyond recognition that self-esteem is not inherently good and that strategies for its enhancement tend to be overly individualistic and counterproductive. Psychological discourse on self-esteem and generic strategies for self-esteem enhancement have implications for how people in contemporary society think about and govern themselves. This discourse and these strategies are neoliberal tools of control. They induce and shape us to be the kind of selves necessitated by a rationality of government that centers on the economy and the bottom line—an instrumental self that is isolated and pitted against everyone else and that is required to take responsibility for its circumstances however constrained they may be. There needs to be recognition that in contemporary society, the pursuit of self-esteem does not serve the individual. It serves neoliberalism.

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