Self-Esteem Tracks Mate Value

Christopher Bale
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Synonyms
Romantic desirability; Self-worth

Definition
Self-esteem is an individual’s overall evaluation of their worth. It includes both attitudinal and affective components.

Mate value refers to the desirability of an individual as a long- or short-term sexual partner, relative to intrasexual competitors.

Introduction
Sociometer theory (Leary and Baumeister 2000) proposes that self-esteem is an evolved adaptation which functions to monitor the quality and quantity of individuals’ interpersonal relationships, together with their perceived desirability as a relational partner. Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2004) extended this theory, arguing that since different types of relationships present different adaptive challenges, there may be multiple sociometers, each functioning to monitor individuals’ status and desirability in a specific domain. Given that successfully reproducing is a primary adaptive challenge in humans, it is likely that the sociometer system, and thus self-esteem, should be especially sensitive to assessments of individuals’ sexual or romantic desirability, and accordingly, Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2004) suggest that there are specific long- and short-term mating sociometers. This perspective predicts that individuals’ self-esteem should reflect both their romantic relational status and their perceived eligibility as a long- or short-term partner, which is termed their mate value.

Self-Esteem and Romantic Relationships

The prediction that self-esteem should be sensitive to individuals’ relational status and evaluations of their romantic relationships has found empirical support. For example, in an analysis of narrative accounts of various relationship experiences, it was found that romantic rejection strongly undermines self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 1993). Similarly, individuals who have divorced experience lower self-esteem than those in intact marriages (MacDonald et al. 1987). Furthermore, individuals who report higher satisfaction with their romantic relationships (Hendrick et al. 1988), and who perceive a greater level of commitment from their current partners (Rill et al. 2009), experience higher levels of self-esteem, and men who doubt the fidelity of their
spouses have lower levels of self-esteem (Shackelford 2001). Such findings suggest that self-esteem is sensitive to both individuals’ relational status and their evaluations of the quality and stability of their current relationships, supporting a mating sociometer perspective on the romantic relational monitoring function of self-esteem.

**Self-Perceived Mate Value**

In addition to responding to individuals’ assessments of their existing relationships, a mating sociometer perspective suggests that self-esteem should also reflect individuals’ assessments of their eligibility for such relationships: their self-perceived mate value. A wealth of empirical evidence supports this prediction by demonstrating that individuals’ self-perceptions in domains relevant to mate value predict their levels of self-esteem.

For example, Feingold (1992) conducted a meta-analysis of both published and unpublished studies which measured physical attractiveness, which forms an important component of mate value in both sexes (Buss 1989), and self-esteem. In this analysis of 38 samples, with a total of 4942 participants, Feingold found a significant moderate positive average correlation \((r = .32)\) between self-rated attractiveness and self-esteem. The analysis also found that the correlation was significantly stronger in women \((r = .32)\) than in men \((r = .27)\).

Historically, this sex difference in the relationship between self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem has been explained in terms of cultural values that emphasize women’s physical attractiveness over men’s (e.g., Mathes and Kahn 1975). However, the mating sociometer perspective predicts that since physical attractiveness contributes more to mate value in women than in men (Buss 1989), women’s self-esteem should be more strongly related to their self-perceived attractiveness than is men’s.

Bale and Archer (2013) reasoned that if individuals’ perceptions of their physical attractiveness influence their self-esteem because they reflect their mate value, the relationship between self-perceived attractiveness and self-esteem should be mediated by romantic self-confidence. Specifically, they argued that individuals who believe that they are highly physically attractive should have greater confidence in their ability to establish and maintain romantic relationships, and this in turn should increase their self-esteem. Bale and Archer (2013) found support for these predictions by demonstrating that in both men and women, romantic self-confidence significantly mediated relationships between a variety of measures of self-perceived facial and bodily attractiveness, and self-esteem.

In addition to research indicating that self-perceptions in domains of specific relevance to mate value, such as physical attractiveness, predict self-esteem, studies have examined relationships between global evaluations of mate value and self-esteem. For example, Brase and Guy (2004) asked participants to rate themselves on a single item measuring their overall desirability, which described a range of attributes which contribute to mate value, including physical attractiveness, social status, and intelligence. They found that participants’ ratings on this item significantly and positively correlated with their self-esteem. Similarly, Penke and Dennisen (2008) found strong significant positive correlations between a multiple-item measure of mate value and self-esteem in both men and women.

**Experimental Studies**

In addition to the correlational studies described above, recent experimental studies have demonstrated that manipulating participants’ self-perceived mate value, and leading them to believe that they have either been accepted or rejected by potential mates, influences their self-esteem.

Pass et al. (2010) asked participants of both sexes to complete fake personality inventories and then provided them with false feedback relating to either their capacity as a romantic partner, which was designed to influence their self-perceived mate value, or their capacity as a friendship partner. Participants who received negative
feedback regarding their mate value reported lower subsequent levels of self-esteem than those who had received negative feedback regarding their friendship capacity, and controls (who received no feedback). These results suggest that influencing individuals’ beliefs about their desirability as romantic partners, and hence their mate value, has particularly strong effects on their self-esteem, supporting a mating sociometer perspective.

Kavanagh et al. (2010) examined the effects of perceived romantic acceptance or rejection on self-esteem in a study which was ostensibly concerned with people’s perceptions of potential dating partners. Participants who indicated their relationship status as single responded to questions posed by attractive members of the opposite sex who were in fact confederates in the study. They were then provided with false feedback indicating whether these individuals would be interested in meeting up with and dating them. Participants who received positive (accepting) feedback showed increases in self-esteem compared with their pretest scores on this, and also higher levels of self-esteem than those who received negative (rejecting) feedback, who experienced decrements in self-esteem compared to their pretest scores.

These results were subsequently replicated by Kavanagh et al. (2014) who used the same experimental paradigm in a sample of men and women who were involved in ongoing romantic relationships and found similar increases or decreases in self-esteem following false mate value feedback.

Further support for the finding that inducing participants to experience either romantic acceptance or rejection influences their self-esteem was provided by a study by Zhang et al. (2015). This study involved men and women being presented with descriptions of social scenarios involving romantic acceptance or rejection, and then asked to imagine how they would feel in that situation, and recall and describe their own similar previous experiences. Participants who had been presented with romantic rejection scenarios subsequently reported lower levels of self-esteem than those who had considered accepting scenarios.

Thus, the available evidence from experimental studies supports the mating sociometer perspective by demonstrating that self-esteem is sensitive to experimentally induced manipulations of self-perceived mate value.

**Other-Rated Mate Value**

In comparison to studies examining relationships between self-perceived mate value and its constituents and self-esteem, there are fewer studies of how others’ perceptions of attributes relevant to mate value relate to individuals’ sense of self-worth, perhaps due to the relatively greater complexity of employing this method. These studies typically find much lower correlations between other-rated mate value and self-esteem than self-report studies. For example, in his meta-analysis of the literature, Feingold (1992) found only a very weak, albeit significant average correlation ($r = .06$) between other-rated physical attractiveness and self-esteem. Such findings accord with other research which suggests that in general, people are not very good at accurately appraising their own level of physical attractiveness (e.g., Santor and Walker 1999) and present a challenge for a mating sociometer perspective on self-esteem.

The sociometer system is supposed to take relevant self-evaluations of mate value as its input, and use these to produce an overall level of self-esteem, which subsequently guides adaptive relational behavior. However, if these initial self-evaluations are inaccurate, this could potentially lead to maladaptive behavioral responses, and so further research into the discrepancy between self- and other-evaluated mate value is needed to address the conditions and variables which might influence the accuracy of self-evaluations.

**Conclusion**

The evidence presented here supports a mating sociometer perspective by demonstrating that self-esteem relates to self-evaluations of mate
value and related attributes, and is sensitive to experimental manipulations of these. However, there may be discrepancies between self- and other-rated mate value in this regard, and this warrants further investigation. Moreover, given that it is proposed that the sociometer system adaptively regulates interpersonal behavior in response to self-evaluations and self-esteem, differences in self-esteem should predict differences in the strategies individuals employ to establish and maintain mating relationships. At present, there is a lack of research which directly examines this prediction, and so future studies are needed to address this and examine whether and how self-evaluations of mate value and self-esteem influence interpersonal behavior in mating relationships.

Cross-References

- Mate Value
- Self-Concept
- Self-Esteem Reflects Assessments of Valuation
- Self-Evaluations Track Perceived Mate Value
- Sex-Specific Link Between Self-Esteem and Mate Value
- Sociometer Theory
- Women’s Mate Value

References


