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Baumeister, Roy F.

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Roy F. Baumeister is a social and personality psychologist whose work spans a wide range of topics, including self and identity, motivation, emotion, social cognition, aggression, sexuality, self-regulation, self-esteem, and self-concept, thinking about the future, consciousness, free will, and how people find meaning in life. He has long sought a broad, integrative understanding, and toward that end he seeks to explore diverse topics. One theme of his career is an interest in understanding the human self. Toward that end, he has published research on self-concept, self-presentation, self-esteem, self-control and self-regulation, identity crisis, self-awareness, and defense mechanism, and this work has included everything from laboratory experiments to interdisciplinary syntheses.

Early Life and Educational Background

Baumeister was born in 1953, as the son of an immigrant businessman and a schoolteacher. His parents were strict, skeptical of letting their offspring spend too much time with peers and insistent on consistent excellence in schoolwork. Apart

from brief episodes of adolescent rebellion, Baumeister was a diligent and successful student. He was valedictorian of his high school class of a thousand students despite having skipped fifth grade, and he graduated summa cum laude from Princeton in 1974. He received his M.A. from Duke and then got his Ph.D. from Princeton in 1978. The return to Princeton was occasioned by his mentor, the great Edward E. Jones, moving from Duke to Princeton while Baumeister was in his lab. His graduate training was focused narrowly on experimentation in social psychology, though he (ever the contrarian) introduced some personality and individual difference aspects into his work.

Professional Career

Faced with a bleak job market, Baumeister was lucky enough to land a postdoc in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and then got a job as assistant professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University. He remained there for 23 years, during which he built his career based on laboratory experimentation. However, his broad intellectual interests could not be easily shoehorned into a laboratory experimentation program, and he discovered that he could address bigger questions with literature review articles and books. Although his training had focused narrowly on laboratory work, much of his

best-known and most influential works have been the books and literature reviews.

When still in his 30s and while building his career, Baumeister reflected on his strategy of writing integrative reviews and books on diverse topics (and even conducting experiments on different topics). He thought this plan would slow the process of gaining recognition, because researchers mostly follow work relevant to their own area, so colleagues would know only a small portion of his work, thus leaving him at a disadvantage when competing for awards – but he predicted it would lead to greater, broader influence in the long run. Both predictions have come true. As evidence, Baumeister did not receive any awards until very late in his career (nearing age 60), but his citation count indicates wide influence. As this is written, his lifetime citation count according to Google Scholar has recently surpassed the 100,000 milestone, which is unusual. He is routinely included among lists of most-cited researchers.

In 2003 Baumeister moved from Case Western Reserve University to Florida State University. Apart from readiness to move, more money, and more resources, a central reason for moving was the opportunity to build a prominent Ph.D. program. Baumeister has spent over a dozen years there and mentored an assortment of promising young researchers. He is now in the process of moving to University of Queensland (Australia), for both professional and personal reasons.

Research Interests

Personality and Individual Differences

Baumeister received his Ph.D. in social psychology during the late 1970s, a time when the two personality and social psychology had been drawing apart and indeed sometimes competing, with hostility, for resources such as faculty positions and student funding. Baumeister's professors were generally dismissive and skeptical of personality, consistent with the Zeitgeist at the time. Unlike their professors, however, Baumeister and many of his age-mates saw the two fields as complementary and mutually indispensable.

Even his dissertation, focused on the social psychology of self-presentation, contained some research on personality differences in self-esteem. Baumeister has generally identified himself with both fields. Students who work with him are routinely encouraged to examine both social context and individual differences as causes of behavior.

Self-Esteem and Narcissism

Self-esteem was Baumeister's first research interest (i.e., his undergraduate senior thesis) and has remained a prominent focus, though his views about it have changed quite radically over the years. In the 1970s, interest in self-esteem was just beginning, and he had a chance to ride the wave, which became a minor tsunami in the 1980s. He used laboratory studies to find how people with high self-esteem respond differently than those with low. One conclusion was that people with high self-esteem seek self-enhancement (pursuing ever new triumphs), while those with low self-esteem emphasize self-protection (avoiding failure and rejection).

Baumeister was gratified to see the field and indeed American society come round to embrace self-esteem as a powerful tool for benefiting people. However, he became disillusioned when the data failed to back up the ostensible, hoped-for benefits of high self-esteem. Although he does not normally use personal experience and intuition as a basis for research, he has since adolescence had a hefty skepticism of the dangers of thinking very favorably of oneself.

A turning point came when he was researching his book on evil. The idea that low self-esteem leads to violence and aggression had been widely repeated throughout the literature, but Baumeister could find no persuasive evidence that it was true, and indeed the evidence seemed to suggest that egotistical, conceited people were most likely to turn aggressive. Having been an enthusiastic contributor to and advocate of self-esteem research, Baumeister became identified as a skeptic and critic. His views changed further when he was appointed by the Association for Psychological Science to lead a team to write a comprehensive review of the evidence about the benefits of high self-esteem. The article concluded that

some specific, circumscribed benefits were well established, but apart from that couple, the benefits were minimal or absent. To be sure, the benefits of high self-esteem are not the only reason to study self-esteem. Self-esteem is still an important dimension along which people differ, producing reliable differences in behavior, emotion, and responses to various situations. The enhancement versus protection idea has held up well over the years.

In seeking to break his bias in favor of high self-esteem, Baumeister became interested in narcissism, which seemed to him (at least initially) as a toxic and obnoxious version of high self-esteem. Laboratory experiments on aggression, for example, found only slight effects of self-esteem, whereas narcissism provided many significant and powerful effects. Some research led Baumeister to the suspicion that the problematic aspect of narcissism is not the favorable view of self (as if narcissism were just very high or inflated self-esteem), but rather the sense of entitlement, which impairs interpersonal harmony. Baumeister remains unclear about what is the core of narcissism – indeed, whether it is more about cognition (e.g., favorable opinion of self) or motivation (desire for favorable opinion of self). Open questions like this present a welcome opportunity to investigate further.

Self-Control

When Baumeister reluctantly concluded that self-esteem was not the vital key to understanding human selfhood, he began to study self-regulation and self-control. This has spawned a lively research program. One important part of it involved studying individual differences in self-control. Existing measures were problematic, and so he worked with June Tangney to develop a trait scale. This has become a popular measure of personality differences, and indeed within a decade of first publication, the article containing the original scale has been cited over a thousand times.

Clearly some people have better self-control than others. As with self-esteem, though, one can ask what are the key factors that make people different along that dimension? Theory of

self-control has continued to evolve based on new evidence. The initial assumptions were that people with good self-control have high degrees of willpower that enable them to resist temptation. Those views have gradually been replaced by the view that people with high self-control use their self-control, not especially to resist temptation, but to form good habits (and break bad ones) so that life can run smoothly. In particular, the difference between high and low self-control individuals appears to be in avoiding temptation rather than resisting it.

Ever since graduate school, Baumeister embraced the ideal that science should be value-neutral. The self-esteem area presented a challenge to this, insofar as the assumption was that high self-esteem is better than low self-esteem – but as noted above, the data presented a much less homogeneous picture of the benefits of self-esteem than had been initially assumed. Self-control is however a much more profound and legitimate challenge to the ideal of neutral, impartial, value-free science. Baumeister and colleagues have searched diligently, even eagerly, for downsides of high self-control, but these have been few and far between. Self-control seems to resemble intelligence: although it can be used in destructive ways, in general more is always better. There are very few clear costs or disadvantages associated with having high self-control.

Metatraits

At one point early in his career, Baumeister became excited by the concept of “metatraits,” defined as the trait of having a trait. This idea is now out of fashion (possibly for invalid reasons, so that it might resurface in the future, as the truth will presumably always emerge in the long run), but it was plausible at the time.

The idea of metatraits presented a challenge to the way personality and individual differences are studied. Most researchers who use a trait scale do so on the assumption that the trait is a single dimension of personality and all people can be correctly located at some point on it. Everybody has a level of self-esteem, for example.

Against that view, the metatraits theory proposed that different personalities may be described by different dimensions. Even with self-esteem, it is plausible that some people do not have a particular chronic level of self-esteem. The centrality of self-esteem may make it a poor example, although there is evidence that some people's self-esteem fluctuates more than other people's.

In order to test a hypothesis about a trait effectively, it may be helpful to limit the sample to people for whom that trait dimension is a stable aspect of their personality. Other people are "untraited" on that dimension, and so they mainly add error variance. Some reviewers objected to the idea by saying that personality dimensions are like height: everyone has a height. Baumeister conceded that everyone has a height, but the analogy to personality might have to acknowledge that some people change and fluctuate frequently on personality (less so on height, though weight already allows for fluctuation, and one can appreciate the difference between someone who has weighed the same for 20 years and someone else whose weight has oscillated wildly).

As a method for assessing metatraits, Baumeister and Dianne Tice studied item variance on trait scales. In principle, all the items on a scale measure the same construct in different ways, and so one could consider whether the items all furnish about the same conclusion – or instead fluctuate widely. Standard practice for computing trait scores is to sum across items. But two people might have the same sum yet differ substantially in item variance. Baumeister and Tice published several studies showing that testing hypotheses about traits yielded stronger and clearer results if one focused on people with low item variance, in contrast to the "untraited" others whose responses were all over the scale on different items.

The metatraits line of work came to a disappointing end. Baumeister lacked the expertise in personality measurement to fight the statistical battles that his work started. Some personality researchers remained adamantly opposed to the idea that a particular trait scale score could be more meaningful and relevant for some respondents than for others. Item variance is an imperfect

measure, though to be sure Baumeister thinks all personality measures, and indeed probably all measures of psychological functioning, are imperfect. His interest in metatraits was motivated by the theoretical question of whether all personalities are composed of the same ingredients – or, as the metatraits idea would suggest that different traits are differentially important in different people's personalities. As responses to his work converged on statistical and measurement issues rather than the grand theoretical questions, he decided to abandon this line of work. He hopes others may take it up and develop these ideas, which continue to strike him as having potentially profound implications. In particular, the recent shift in social and personality psychology toward insisting on large samples creates a terrific opportunity to analyze item variance as well as item sums and thereby to see how often and how effectively metatraits moderate the effects of individual differences.

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