Research Paper

The Inextricable Influences of Social Environment

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I.   INTRODUCTION

"When you're different, sometimes you don't see the millions of people who accept you for what you are. All you notice is the person who doesn't." In this quotation, Jodi Picoult provides a counterpoint to Eleanor Roosevelt's perspective, highlighting the influence of social environment on humans' perception of themselves. Self-esteem, an individual's assessment of their value, is determined by comparing one's self-perception with how they believe others view them (Consiglio & van Osselaer, 2022). This comparison shapes how individuals interact with their environment, influencing their ability to initiate positive relationships that promote a healthy cycle of self-esteem (APA, 2019). Certain life stages are especially formative for shaping one's sense of self, including childhood, which determines long-lasting emotional patterns, and adolescence, which amplifies susceptibility to external influences (Palenzuela-Luis et al., 2022). While some argue that people can train their mindset to control for external factors and orient self-esteem completely internally, the fact that this mindset is rooted in social influences unravels this argument (Muris & Otgaar, 2023). This essay argues that self-esteem is shaped through one's social environment, and self-perception is, therefore, not something an individual has complete control over, especially during childhood and adolescence.

SELF-ESTEEM IS SHAPED THROUGH SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

As social beings, humans' sense of self-worth is deeply intertwined with interpersonal interactions. The natural tendency to seek strong, stable, and positive relationships makes self-esteem highly sensitive to social acceptance — something largely determined by others and often beyond one's control (Gaertner et al., 2012; Palmonari et al., 1989). This desire for acceptance is so fundamental that even subtle hints of rejection can invoke neural reactions similar to those involved in physical pain (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Such acute emotional responses underscore the deep influence social environments exert on self-esteem and highlight the risks of becoming overly dependent on external validation.

Early childhood experiences play a crucial role in shaping one's capacity to form healthy relationships. Lacking the emotional motivation to experience things on their own or meaningfully influence their social environment, young children do not have the cognitive capacity to form secure and satisfying relationships without first experiencing one from their caregiver (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This dependence on early experiences is highlighted by attachment theory, which states that anxiety and depression originate in children's uncertainty regarding dependence on a caregiver for emotional needs (Bowlby, 1973). Without a supportive caregiver to help regulate emotions and fulfill their fundamental need for belonging, children are more likely to form anxious and insecure attachments, even beyond childhood (Kasser et al., 1995; Williams et al., 2000). These early relational dynamics — established before individuals have any meaningful control over their environment — shape a long-term tendency toward negative relationships that erode and destabilize self-esteem.

Dependence on social relationships to shape self-perception can trap individuals into a negative feedback loop that reinforces low self-worth. Self-verification theory, which claims people are motivated to be perceived by others the same way they perceive themselves, illustrates how individuals with negative self-esteem seek relationships that confirm their negative self-perception (Consiglio & van Osselaer, 2022; Orth & Robins, 2022). These relationships drive hypersensitivity to social interactions and attentional bias toward negative social cues, lowering relationship satisfaction and reinforcing negative self-image (Kavanagh & Scrutton, 2015). Additionally, the absence of a sense of belonging within the relationship intensifies feelings of loneliness and rejection, further undermining self-worth (Lavigne et al., 2011). Therefore, an individual's susceptibility to falling into this negative feedback loop, and the difficulty of escaping it, highlight the dangers of socially determined self-esteem (Brewer & Pickett, 1999; Kavanagh & Scrutton, 2015).

During adolescence, people experience heightened sensitivity to external opinions that make them especially vulnerable to developing low self-esteem. The rapid social, cognitive, and biological developments — especially those associated with puberty — infuse confusion into one's identity, motivating them to seek external validation and approval (Orth & Robins, 2022; Orth et al., 2018). This excessive focus on external opinions diverts attention away from establishing a grounded sense of self and toward an increasing desire for belonging, subsequently lowering self-esteem (Madigan et al., 2013; Trzesniewski et al., 2003). Adolescence is also a period that sees a rapid rise in social media usage. Social media, which promotes an ideal, often unrealistic standard for perfection to which adolescents compare themselves, frequently mars an individual's self-image and instills insecurity, further diminishing self-esteem (Consiglio & van Osselaer, 2022). These examples highlight how the events of adolescence amplify attention towards external opinion, heightening susceptibility to social influences.

Since childhood relationships dictate the social interactions that shape self-perception, positive early experiences are key to initiating and sustaining a constructive cycle of self-esteem. High-quality interpersonal relationships can reinforce positive self-views and facilitate independence from external validation (Cameron & Granger, 2019; Leary, 2003). However, adolescence introduces new challenges that test each individual's ability to continue this cycle and stabilize their self-esteem. These mechanisms showcase the consistent impact one's social environment has on shaping self-worth, often in ways beyond an individual's control or even awareness.

SELF-ESTEEM CAN BE CONTROLLED THROUGH INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Alternative research posits that adopting a mindset that drives action to heighten life satisfaction allows individuals to foster stable and positive self-esteem. An internally oriented mindset, developed through establishing autonomous motivations and assuming an internal locus of control, enables individuals to act independently of external punishment or reward and interpret life events as results of their own behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2022; Rotter, 1966). This perspective leads people to develop a higher interest in their lives, motivating actions that improve well-being and overall quality of life (Rotter, 1966). As individuals shape their lives towards an ideal image, they experience increased life satisfaction, which promotes a more positive self-image that raises self-esteem (Du et al., 2017; Muris & Otgaar, 2023). Therefore, an internally oriented mindset helps establish a positive self-image that can be maintained and promoted independently of external opinion.

Research also suggests that interpreting memories to fit an ideal self-image allows individuals to shape how social experiences influence them. Rather than provide an objective report of what has transpired in a person's life, memories primarily function to define the self within an ongoing life narrative (Barclay, 1996). Events are only relevant based on how they integrate in this narrative and meaningfully relate to other events in one's life (McAdams, 2001). Therefore, crafting a life narrative that supports positive self-worth allows individuals to shape the emotional impacts of past social interactions, even reframing negative experiences by placing them in a context that highlights positive implications for the self (Gross, 1998). This regulates the impact social interactions have on self-image, compensating for the limited control individuals have over the external environment. As a result, people can establish and sustain a more internally oriented evaluation of self-worth.

Overall, research suggests that individuals can employ certain cognitive methods to modulate their self-esteem. Specifically, adopting a more autonomous mindset and constructing a self-affirming life narrative enables people to shape their lives in ways that reaffirm positive self-worth. This bestows individuals with greater power over their lives and the implicated emotions, allowing one to develop a stable sense of self-esteem that is measured independently of the social environment.

THE LINK BETWEEN INDEPENDENT THOUGHT AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Although some theories hypothesize that adopting a disciplined internal mindset enables control over self-esteem, the reality is that this mindset is inextricably shaped by external influences. Orientation of an individual's locus of control is heavily dependent on their social environment during childhood and adolescence. Parents who are more authoritative and administer rewards and punishments in inconsistent ways encourage the development of an external locus of control (Davis & Phares, 1969). This results in a lack of autonomous motivation that initiates a cycle of low life satisfaction, which lowers self-esteem, highlighting the importance and enduring implications of early childhood experiences.

Similarly, interpreting social interactions to fit a chosen life story does not insulate one from social influence because life stories are inherently psychosocial constructions. In the landscape of one's past, certain memories are highlighted as self-defining, meaning they play a significant role in formulating life narratives and determining personal identity (McAdams, 2001). However, the selection of self-defining memories is always a social enterprise, as other individuals, such as family or friends, play a significant role in shaping one's life experience (Thorne, 2000). Additionally, individuals gradually conform to societal norms over time to counteract the threat of exclusion, causing identity and life narrative to increasingly reflect the social

environment (McAdams, 2001). These processes illustrate how one's construction of their life story ultimately follows the framework provided by prevailing societal values, reinforcing the influence of social factors on self-perception.

Theories that attempt to internally ground self-esteem entirely within the individual often glorify complete control over it; however, this notion is not only unrealistic but also potentially harmful in the long term. Attributing life outcomes solely to personal effort can promote a stronger sense of control and power, but overreliance on the self risks initiating a negative feedback loop that erodes self-esteem. A lack of acknowledgement for uncontrollable, external factors — such as social circumstances, others' actions, or random events — is not only naive and inaccurate but also generates a hopeless outlook on life. When people fail to see desired life outcomes despite putting in their best efforts, this mindset can lead to self-blame and depression. Over time, this robs an individual of autonomous motivation and reinforces a sense of failure, trapping them in a cycle of low self-worth.

Self-esteem during teenage years is particularly important to examine because of its significant implications for the future. Though childhood experiences shape early social frameworks, adolescence brings heightened vulnerability towards external influence, offering a pivotal opportunity to reframe social identity (Trzesniewski et al., 2003). The way social influences are navigated during these turbulent years can alter the trajectory set in childhood, either sparking positive change that expands into a web of healthy relationships or, unfortunately, causing individuals to fall into negative patterns. Holding significant power in shaping lasting self-esteem and future well-being, an adolescent's mindset and behavior are critical to initiating a healthy and fulfilling adult life.

II.   CONCLUSION

Though some argue that self-esteem can be solely rooted in the self, further research shows that the mechanisms for individual thought stem from one's interactions with their social environment. This highlights the significant impact interpersonal interactions have on self-esteem through various unique pathways, especially during childhood, which sets the foundation for early social experiences, and adolescence, which play a major role in shaping self-esteem throughout adulthood. While Eleanor Roosevelt may have felt complete control over her self-esteem, it can be argued that this was largely due to the support and love of her millions of admirers. Those who do not enjoy the same kind of love experience susceptibility to social interactions in a much different, often less positive way, revealing the reality of an unglorified social environment.

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