

An Analysis of the Effect of Relationship Status on
Self-Esteem and Academic Performance

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Abstract

Self-esteem is a complex construct that has been defined in various ways due to the numerous research studies that have been done in regards to this topic. The purpose of this paper was to present evidence of self-esteem in regards to relationship status and academic performance; both of these variables may be directly related to self-esteem levels in college students. The hypothesis was that the relationship status of an individual positively affects one's self-esteem level and their overall grade point average. Analysis of the data from 100 participants found that there was no significant statistical association between relationship status and self-esteem. However, data collected the participants showed significant statistics that participants involved in a relationship have a higher grade point average. This information is beneficial in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between relationship status, self-esteem, and academic performance.

Keywords: Self-esteem, relationship status, academic performance, grade point average

An Analysis of the Effect of Relationship Status on Self-Esteem and Academic Performance

The relationships that an individual forms throughout their life affect their behavioral characteristics and overall perception of themselves. Forming connections with those in one's environment has the potential to alter one's perception of the world around them. Brendgen, Vitaro, Doyle, Markiewicz, and Bukowski (2002) conducted a research study that analyzed the effects of peer relations among adolescents; their data concluded that relationships, both romantic and friendly, played a role in the way an individual views him or herself. Antisocial behavior and self-esteem levels varied amongst early adolescents depending on how their peers viewed them or their romantic relationship status (Brendgen et al., 2002). Significant transformations take place in the composition of individuals' associations or networks with peers (Brendgen et al., 2002). This evidence indicated the importance that relationship development has on an individual's well-being.

The amount of satisfaction one has in a relationship contributes to the self-esteem and behaviors of those in the partnership. A major reason for the strong scientific interest in relationship satisfaction is its importance for personal and family well-being (Bradbury, as cited in Erol & Orth, 2014). In order to acquire evidence for this notion, Erol and Orth (2014) administered a longitudinal study to analyze relationship satisfaction in couples. The data showed that partners' common relationship contentment led to higher levels of self-worth. This result showed the true importance of having genuine, reciprocal relationships in one's life and a lack of these bonds may potentially lead to negative consequences of low self-confidence. The status of relationships within an individual's environment overlaps in all other aspects of their lives as well.

Satisfactory Relationships

What are the causes of relationship self-efficacy? This question is difficult to answer due to the fact that there are several factors that contribute to this complex construct. Relationship self-efficacy (RSE) is defined as confidence in one's ability to support successful relationships (Cabeldue & Boswell, 2012). The sense of confidence to believe in one's own relationship development skills may be affected by various external factors of their environment. Cabeldue and Boswell (2012) investigated relationship self-efficacy with attachment style, jealousy, self-esteem, and gender; their experiment determined that anxious attachment style, avoidant attachment style, and self-esteem were significant contributors to relationship self-efficacy. Individuals with a greater sense of worth (self-esteem) tended to have greater confidence in their ability to initiate and support romantic relationships (Cabeldue & Boswell, 2012).

Self-esteem is one factor that is affected by the health of a relationship, but Erol and Orth, (2014) discovered that there are other components that alter relationship satisfaction as well. The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model is a framework constructed for understanding how satisfaction in intimate relationships may change or remain stable over time (Karney, 2009). The research of Erol and Orth (2014) concluded that according to this vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, factors influencing relationship satisfaction can be grouped into three areas: 1) personality traits and experiences prior to marriage, 2) stressful events or circumstances during marriage, and 3) emotions or communication skills throughout marriage. This information indicates that several elements contribute to relationship satisfaction and not only do outside issues affect the relationship, but the relationship affects other aspects of one's life as well.

The cause of a satisfactory relationship is an important topic to understand, but the effects of involvement in a healthy relationship are just as imperative. Erol and Orth (2014) discussed

the reciprocal benefits for both partners involved in a romantic relationship. A healthy connection with that person leads to higher levels of self-esteem; however, a strong connection between the two may also be the effect of self-esteem. Strength of a relationship and self-esteem correlated positively with one another (Erol & Orth, 2014). Another aspect that stems from the effects of a romantic relationship is the mood of an individual when their partner experiences a success in their life. Ratliff and Oishi (2013) conducted a study that examined the level of implicit self-esteem of an individual involved in a romantic relationship in which they felt satisfactory. The results of their experiment showed that although the couples had a satisfactory relationship, implicit self-esteem was affected by performance or success of a partner. This study indicated that the behavior of one's significant other may affect the amount of relationship satisfaction.

Aspects of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a construct that affects every part of an individual's life, from childhood until death; it has been analyzed in a countless number of ways through research studies in psychology or other fields. However, self-esteem becomes a more crucial characteristic to study when an individual reaches adolescence. Orth, Trzesniewski, and Robins (2010) specifically focused on the development of self-esteem from young adulthood to old age; the purpose of their longitudinal study was to look for any trends of lowering or rising self-esteem throughout different ages. Knowledge about the life course trajectory of self-esteem is useful because it can help build overarching theories of personality development (Orth Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2010). The data they found while administering their experiment was that self-esteem follows a course across the adult life span, increasing during young and middle adulthood, reaching a peak

at about age 60, and then declining in old age. The significance of this data is that one must consider the age of the individual when analyzing self-esteem.

Another aspect of self-esteem is that it can be defined in a variety of different ways; for instance, in Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, and Rosenberg (1995), they explained the different kinds of self-esteem. Their research defined global self-esteem and specific self-esteem as constructs that lead to different outcomes. Their evidence indicated that the two types of self-esteem may have strikingly different consequences, global self-esteem being more relevant to psychological wellbeing, and specific self-esteem being more relevant to behavior (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Most of the research that has been conducted on self-esteem has used global self-esteem rather than specific self-esteem because it is the more familiar construct. However, the concept of specific self-esteem is beginning to become more recognized in research concerning this topic. It is necessary to understand both types of self-esteem in order to successfully conduct a research experiment on this subject matter.

Self-esteem is often applied to occupational or academic settings in order to determine its effect on one's performance in these areas. Oztas (2010) stated that individuals who have high levels of self-esteem are better at organizing the goals they want to achieve and strive for success to the extent their individual values allow. Also, this research concluded that high levels of self-esteem correlate positively with perceived control, optimism, and self-enhancement. Each of these concepts are characteristics that are often necessary to have for occupational or academic achievement. College students are frequently studied in regards to self-esteem due to the fact that a typical college age individual faces a time of great change and exploration. Pettijohn, Naples, and McDermott (2010) conducted an experiment of college students comparing levels of self-esteem, embarrassability, blushing, and interactive anxiousness. Their findings indicated that low

self-esteem and low body esteem were related to higher general embarrassment, blushing propensity, and interaction anxiousness. Also, those in relationships reported greater self-esteem and greater body esteem than those not in relationships (Pettijohn et al., 2010). These research projects regarding occupational and academic settings are important due to the fact that a vast majority of society is included within one of these two groups.

Another aspect of self-esteem that is found in many research studies is self-esteem in regards to marital relationships. Shackelford (2001) dedicated time to exploring the changes that occur in self-esteem due to marriage. This study focused on several elements of marriage, but the overall conclusion led to the indication that self-esteem positively correlates with marital satisfaction. However, Shackelford (2001) stated that although there is progress being made in this field of research, there are several questions regarding marital satisfaction and self-esteem that have yet to be answered. The significance of this statement is that self-esteem is a construct that has new potential research beginning all the time in order to better understand this complex concept.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self; all items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale is a widely used self-report instrument that evaluates self-esteem using the item response theory. It is a well-known measure that has been proven, time and time again, to yield reliable results. The statistical analysis behind the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is extensive and the measure continues to be tested in various ways today. Huang and Dong (2012) conducted an experiment to investigate the factor structure of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The data

revealed that the test items, both initial and reverse score items, showed construct validity as high as .998. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has been viewed in numerous ways in order to maintain validity and reliability, which continues to make it one of the most widely used psychological scales.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has been applied to several independent studies regarding self-esteem. This use is not limited to the United States, but it is also utilized in foreign countries. Vasconcelos, Fernandes, Teixeria, and Bertelli (2012) sought to analyze the Portuguese version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale by collecting data from Portuguese individuals 15 to 20 years old. Their research indicated that the reliability estimate of the measure was .845, which is a significant figure. Also, Vasconcelos et al. (2012) concluded that their results provided evidence that the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has excellent psychometric properties and it is a valid self-esteem measure to be used among Portuguese youngsters. The notion that this scale is applicable for different cultures indicates the overall validity and reliability of the measure.

Academic Performance

Academic achievement is a concept that is affected by several different factors of the individual and the environment. There has been a vast amount of research published on discovering what factors motivate a student to achieve success in their educational setting. Also, there have been studies focusing on the reasons behind why some students struggle throughout school. Schwinger, Wirthwein, Lemmer, and Steinmayr (2014) studied in particular, the explanation of self-handicapping, a frequently used strategy for regulating the threat of self-esteem elicited by the fear of failing in academic achievement settings. One of the results of their experiment was that younger students show higher relations between self-handicapping and

performance (Schwinger et al., 2014). This may be due to harsher grading procedures towards students in higher grades or personality traits affected by one's age. Self-handicapping is a hindrance of successful academic performance and it is a concept that must be a concern when evaluating academic success.

Underachievement in an academic setting is a widespread problem in the United States, with prevalence estimates ranging from 15% to 50% (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991). The purpose of a research experiment conducted by Carr et al. (1991) was to compare and predict academic performance in achieving and underachieving students on the basis of motivational, affective, and metacognitive processes. The evidence found by this study indicated that for achievers and underachievers, attributions, self-esteem, and metacognition correlated in a similar fashion to predict reading achievement. Also, underachievers (as a group) failed to develop an important connection between prior knowledge and internal attributions about self-efficacy (Carr et al., 1991). To find differences between students according to their motivation to succeed is extremely beneficial in recognizing the reasons behind certain behavior in an academic environment.

Another interesting topic concerning academic achievement is how an individual's development of relationships with their peers affects their overall performance. The people within one's learning environment may cause a difference in behavior. Liem and Martin (2011) studied the role of adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with same-sex and opposite-sex peers in predicting their academic performance and general self-esteem. Their results indicated that adolescents' relationship with their peers seemed to positively impact their academic performance and general self-esteem; the research concluded that school engagement seemed to

be a factor in positive peer relationships (Liem & Martin, 2011). Interactions formed in an academic setting are factors that may influence academic success.

There are several social influences that affect one's behavior or achievement in academics, especially in institutions of higher education; some of these factors are romantic relationships, organizations or clubs, and sports activities (2010). Research evaluating the effect that these factors had on academic performance concluded that each of them had an influence to a certain degree. Romantic relationships had the largest impact on educational success in a negative way due to the psychological barrier it imposes towards the learning process. Also, extra-curricular activities such as clubs or sport teams posed a threat to education due to their time commitment issues, but the threat was not significant (2010). Academic performance is a matter that has been discussed in detail due to its complexity, but it is important to be aware of all of the possible influences of achievement.

Correlation of Variables

As the previously stated research indicated, relationships, academic performance, and self-esteem correlate with one another in several different ways. Each of these variables affects the others by means of behavior, overall well-being, or success. A study conducted by Jaret and Reitzes (2009) investigated how the self-identities of college students affected one's self-esteem and academic performance. Also, the experiment included a comparison among different ethnicities of the students, which was crucial to consider when the sample size is of a diverse population. The results of the study concluded that Black students had higher self-esteem than whites or Asians and that White students had higher grade point averages than either Blacks or Asians (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009). Another study that examined self-efficacy, self-esteem, and academic performance amongst college students concluded significant relationships between

self-efficacy and self-esteem in an academic setting (Lane, Lane, & Kyprianou, 2004). Although this information may not be true of all higher education establishments, it is beneficial to understand the differences among race and self-esteem in college students in regards to academic performance.

Many studies have applied the variables of self-esteem, relationship status, and academic performance in order to investigate the correlation between them. One study in particular, Whitesell, Mitchell, and Spicer (2009), evaluated these constructs in a longitudinal study of students. The data collected in this experiment indicated that self-esteem has the most influence on academic performance. Also, the analysis suggested that this relationship was more related to the effects of self-esteem on achievement than to the effects of achievement on self-esteem (Whitesell et al., 2009). A common theme among research involving these variables was that they correspond with one another positively and negatively. However, there is little disagreement in the notion that high self-esteem leads to higher levels of motivation to achieve.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis for the current study was that the relationship status of an individual positively affects one's self-esteem level and their overall grade point average. Relationship status is defined in this experiment by two descriptions: an individual involved in a monogamous romantic relationship and an individual not currently involved in a romantic connection. Although there is a great deal of evidence to support this prediction, there has also been negating research studies to consider. It seems as if a healthy relationship status causes a higher level of self-esteem, which in turn may lead to a developed motivation to succeed in academics. However, there are several factors that need to be taken into considerations while conducting this experiment. Some of these external influences are age, ethnicity, self-identity, and self-

handicapping in an educational settings. It is crucial to focus on the overall hypothesis for this research study, yet remain aware of the external factors that may influence the results.

Method

Participants

One hundred undergraduate students from a Midwestern university participated in the study. Their mean age was 20 years old, with a range of 18 to 42 years. Twenty-five percent of the sample reported they were 18 years old, 30% were 19 years old, 19% were 20 years old, and 26% were 21 years or older. Fifty-four percent of the sample was female and 46% was male. Seventy percent of the sample reported they were Caucasian, 15% reported they were African American, 2% reported they were Asian, and 6% reported they were Hispanic. Fifty-three percent of the sample reported they were in a relationship, whereas 47% reported they were single. Also, the mean grade point average reported by the sample was 3.34, with a range of 1.60 to 4.0.

Materials

A survey of 15 items was administered to the sample (See Appendix), with ten of those items consisting of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Five demographic questions were used to determine the gender, age, ethnicity, relationship status, and grade point average of the participant. Both the ethnicity and the relationship status items allow for several different responses. The levels of ethnicity offered as choices were Caucasian, African American, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, and a space left for other responses. The levels of relationship status offered were single, in a relationship, engaged, married, divorced or separated, widowed, and a space for other responses as well.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed in 1965 and it is a ten-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self (Rosenberg, 1965). All of the items are answered using a four-point Likert scale format, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has been used and analyzed in numerous research studies, making it the most widely used self-report instrument for measuring global self-esteem (Vasconcelos-Raposo, Fernandes, Teixeira, & Bertelli, 2012). The measure was originally produced in order to measure the level of adolescents' self-esteem, but it is able to be applied to all ages; also, the scale is believed to be one-dimensional, which supports the notion that it is very direct with its purpose of measuring self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). The consistent reliability and validity of the RSES appear to be the driving forces behind the popularity of the measure. The scale has presented high ratings in reliability areas with an internal consistency of 0.77 and the minimum Coefficient of Reproducibility was at least 0.90 (Statistical Solutions, 2014). Also, a varied selection of independent studies each using such samples as – parents, men over 60, high school students, and civil servants – showed alpha coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.87 (Statistical Solutions, as cited in Silber & Tippett, 1965). Test-retest reliability for the 2-week interval was calculated at 0.85 and the 7-month interval was calculated at 0.63 (Statistical Solutions, as cited in Shorkey & Whiteman, 1978). These numbers indicate the dependability of the measure and contribute to its widespread use throughout the years.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has also been tested cross-culturally, being administered in 28 different languages across 53 nations; the results of this evaluation indicated that the RSES has a high level of cross-cultural equivalence (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). The significance of this

notion is that the RSES may be utilized in diverse locations and applied to a wide variety of individuals.

Procedure

The measure used in this study was administered to 100 undergraduate students from a Midwestern university in classrooms, computer labs, and the university café. Before administering the measure, an informed consent document was supplied to the participants in order to ensure the confidentiality of their responses throughout the experimental process. After receiving the informed consent signatures, the measure was administered and the participants were given as much time needed for them to complete the surveys; the measure took approximately ten minutes for the students to complete. Also, after collecting the data from each group of individuals, the administrator notified the participants of their contact information and overall purpose of the experiment to express openness to questions or concerns pertaining to the data.

Results

The participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) as the measure for self-esteem. The 10-item scale asks respondents to rate on a 4 point Likert scale (1 = "strongly agree" to 4 = "strongly disagree") statements such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself." Scores on this scale range from 10 to 40. The overall mean level of self-esteem recorded was 18.92 with a standard deviation of 5.09.

Due to lack of variety in responses regarding the independent variable of relationship status, the options for the item were condensed as follows: "Engaged" or "Married" responses were absorbed into the "In a Relationship" category whereas the "Divorced/Separated" option was then treated as part of the "Single" category. After entering the collected data from the

participants, the statistical analysis was interpreted by completing a one-way analysis of variance with relationship status as the independent variable and self-esteem as the dependent variable. The results indicated a non-significant difference in self-esteem based on relationship status ($F = [1, 98] = .080, p = .777$). The mean level of self-esteem for participants who reported they were single was 19.06, with a standard deviation of 5.28. The mean self-esteem for those individuals who reported they were in a relationship was 18.77, with a standard deviation of 4.92. These findings point out that there is not a significant difference in self-esteem in regards to relationship status.

A statistical investigation was then completed by means of a one-way analysis of variance with relationship status as the independent variable and grade point average as the dependent variable. The results indicated a significant difference in grade point average based on relationship status ($F = [1, 98] = 6.34, p = .013$). The mean grade point average on a 4 point scale for those who indicated they were single was 3.24, with a standard deviation of .50. The average grade point average for those who identified as in a relationship was 3.46, with a standard deviation of .36. These findings indicate that there is a significant difference in grade point average in regards to relationship status.

Discussion

The hypothesis of this experiment was that the relationship status of participants positively affects one's self-esteem level and their overall grade point average. A statistical analysis of the data showed no significant difference between participants "in a relationship" and those who indicated "single" in regards to self-esteem. In other words, there was no significant difference in levels of self-esteem among the individuals, no matter the relationship status of the person. However, statistical analysis of the data showed that there was a significant difference in

grade point average between those who indicated “single” and those “in a relationship.” The data pointed out that those “in a relationship” reported higher grade point averages. The results and relationships between the variables involved in this experiment proved to be very interesting; the hypothesis was partially supported, yet not fully reinforced.

One potential problem with the experiment was that the sample size was not large enough and also, the demographics of the sample were not very diverse. It would have been beneficial to increase the number of participants in the study and to strive for diversity within the sample in order to have a better representation of the population of university students. Also, another limitation to the experiment may have been lack of definition in regards to the independent variable of relationship status. In current times, there are several gray areas that may be possible when referring to relations with others and it would have been valuable to include, within the scale, a specific definition of the relationship status variable to reduce the amount of confusion the participants may have while completing the measure. Another solution to this particular issue may be to utilize a scale that measures relationship status or relationship satisfaction.

A modified version of the present experiment may provide more insight on the link between one’s relationship status, grade point average, and self-esteem. However, the data collected from this study indicated that relationship status did not have a significant effect on one’s self-esteem level, but grade point averages were shown to be higher for individuals who described themselves as “in a relationship.” To organize for future research on this topic, it would be extremely interesting to plan for a larger, more diverse sample size in order to better represent the population and to strive for collected more data that supports the hypothesis that relationship status, specifically being involved in a romantic relationship, positively affects one’s self-esteem level and academic performance.

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Appendix

Please indicate the following responses by [X] choosing the most suitable option:

1. What is your gender?

Female

Male

2. What is your age? _____

3. Which of the following best describes you?

Caucasian

African American

Asian

Hispanic or Latino

[] Other: _____

4. What of these options best describes your current relationship status?

[] Single [] In a Relationship [] Engaged [] Married
[] Divorced/Separated [] Widowed [] Other: _____

5. What is your approximate grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale?

First-years may use high school GPA

INSTRUCTIONS: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement by circling the most suitable answer.

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

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

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

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree