Is Self-Regard a Sociometer or a Hierometer?:
The Impact of Manipulating Status and Inclusion on Self-Esteem and Narcissism

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1. Why do we possess self-esteem?

Self-esteem or how we feel about ourselves is one of the most popular topics in psychology. But what evolutionary function does it serve?

One theory, namely, Sociometer Theory (SMT; Leary, 1999) proposes that because inclusion in social groups was crucial to our ancestors’ survival, self-esteem evolved to track our level of inclusion in social groups, and raise this level of inclusion when it got too low.

In support of SMT, being included raises self-esteem and narcissism were measured in response.

2. Hierometer Theory

Most primates and human societies possess social hierarchies and competition: Apes fight for status

HMT proposes that self-esteem and narcissism track people’s position in the social hierarchy, and motivate behaviour suitable to their social role (Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & De Waal-Andrews, 2016).

3. Hypotheses

1. Higher status and higher inclusion both predict higher self-esteem.
2. Higher status but not higher inclusion predicts higher narcissism.

Self-esteem operates as both a sociometer and a hierometer, tracking both status and inclusion.

Narcissism operates predominantly as a hierometer, chiefly tracking status.

Study 1

Experimental Study
(Conducted at the University of Southampton, UK)

Participants: 104 undergraduates (17 ♂♂, 87 ♀♀)

Measures:
Self-esteem: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES); Narcissism: Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16)

4 Feedback Conditions (2x2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Narcissism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>F(1, 103) = 9.10**</td>
<td>F(1, 103) = 4.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>F(1, 103) = 4.59*</td>
<td>F(1, 103) = 1.08 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher status and higher inclusion both predicted higher self-esteem. Higher status predicted higher narcissism; however, inclusion did not affect narcissism.

Study 2

Experimental Study
(Conducted at the University of Southampton, UK)

Participants: 259 undergraduates (60 ♂♂, 199 ♀♀)

Measures:
Self-esteem and Narcissism: Specially-constructed single-item measures

4 Feedback Conditions (2x2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Narcissism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>F(1, 255) = 87.42***</td>
<td>F(1, 255) = 5.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>F(1, 255) = 38.95***</td>
<td>F(1, 255) = 8.52**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher status and higher inclusion both predicted higher self-esteem. Higher status predicted higher narcissism; however, higher inclusion predicted lower narcissism.

5. Conclusions and Implications

1. This research sheds light on the function of self-regard. It shows that self-esteem operates not only as a sociometer that tracks inclusion, but also and no less strongly, as a hierometer that tracks status.
2. It proposes and tests a functional role for narcissism in addition to self-esteem, showing that narcissism operates chiefly as a hierometer that tracks status.
3. It establishes, for the first time, independent causal links between these constructs: changes in status cause corresponding changes in self-esteem, independent of inclusion. Changes in inclusion cause corresponding changes in self-esteem but not narcissism, independent of status.
4. It adds to recent work on state narcissism.
5. Future research should examine the second part of the causal chain, that changes in self-esteem cause changes in assertive behaviour, and that self-esteem mediates the link between status and assertive behaviour.

6. References