

## SELF-ESTEEM, AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE: WHAT THE INCONSISTENCIES IN RESULTS TELL US

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### Abstract

“So, the question is: are violent people more likely to have low self-esteem or high self-esteem?” (Ostrowsky, 2010). The answer is not as simple as this question implies. What would be considered “common knowledge” is that people who are violent are people with low self-esteem. This logic was challenged in the early 1990s by a series of authors who argue that higher self-esteem is more likely than low self-esteem to be linked to violence and aggression (Baumeister, 1999; Baumeister, R.F., Bushman, B.J., & Campbell, W.K., 2000; Bushman, B.J., Baumeister, R.F., Thomaes, S., Ryu, E., Begeer, S., & West, S.G., 2009). Based on recent publications, it appears that even to modern researchers it remains a controversy. In fact, the whole concept of a violent individual is riddled with contradictions. For example, they are often arrogant but have low self-worth (Ostrowsky, 2010). The literature gives little in terms of help deciding which side to be on. But by considering the intricacies of self-esteem along with aggression, narcissism, and violence and by identifying some of the variables and mediators involved, researchers may be able to design, build, and conduct research on these topics that emits more accurate and valuable results. If future research incorporates the more nuanced dimensions of each variable that they are dealing with, it will lead to stronger evidence overall. The purpose of this theoretical review paper is not to find an answer because, as we will learn, self-esteem can be highly state-dependent, meaning the level of self-esteem can change over time based on social, cultural, and other influences. Instead, this work aims to clarify the research from a perspective that is not biased to either side of the argument.

**Keywords:** *Self-esteem, self-worth, narcissism, violence, aggression.*

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### 1. Introduction

Self-esteem is something that everyone “has”. Often, people are described as “having too much” or “struggling” with it. We possess this level of *amour-propre*, a self-love, that can exist anywhere on a scale from non-existent to overflowing and is heavily influenced by society (Dent & O’Hagan, 1998). Self-esteem is important to us because it is a representation of the value we see in ourselves, *as compared to the others around us* (Dent & O’Hagan, 1998). Also heavily influenced by society, Baumeister described the “myth of pure evil” as a socially influenced stereotypical view of what evil is – something we “know when we see it” (Baumeister, 1999). However, as with a lot of other “trust your gut” feelings, our reliance of the “myth of pure evil” has faults. One common misconception about the “myth of pure evil” is that people with low self-esteem are more prone to violence and aggression (Bushman, Baumeister, Thomaes, Ryu, Begeer, & West., 2009). This may make sense when one considers the popular psychology of North America in the past thirty years (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Take bullies, for example - both in person and online. As the “myth of pure evil” illustrates, the popular belief was that bullies came from broken, possibly abusive families, influencing the individuals to have low self-worth. They treat others as they were treated themselves. This may be true for some, but most certainly not all. It cannot be said that low self-esteem leads to violence and aggression, because not all people with low self-esteem are violent. Literature suggests that low self-esteem being linked to violence and aggression was not empirically established in the first place, but again, perhaps an outcome of pop-culture psychology (Baumeister, 1999; Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000). It is interesting then that one

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also associates the cunning, manipulative, bold and self-assured serial killer with violence, aggression, and evil. This description leans towards high self-esteem. High self-esteem is also associated with adaptive behaviours in empirical research, such as being able to climb the corporate ladder, but as this work will illustrate, it has its own dark side (Okada, 2010). It could be associated with aggression and ego defense (Okada, 2010).

So, what is the missing link? Researchers have grappled over this question for years and there has been no conclusion (Amad, Gray, & Snowden, 2021; Baumeister et al., 2000; Brown, & Marshall, 2006; Bushman, 2009; Jordan, & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Leary, & Baumeister, 2000; Okada, 2010; Ostrowsky, 2010). The purpose of this theoretical review paper is not to find an answer because, as we will learn, self-esteem can be highly state dependent, meaning the level of self-esteem can change over time based on social, cultural, and other influences. Instead, this work aims to clarify the research from a perspective that is not biased to either side of the argument. To accomplish this, variables will be defined, such as “self-esteem”, “narcissism”, “aggression”, and more. The relationship between barometric self-esteem, unstable self-esteem and narcissism will be discussed, followed by a consideration that perhaps, if the answers still elude us, it is the questions one asks that needs to change. Culture and gender influences start to come into play, and a call for further research is made. By considering the mediators of self-esteem’s relationship with violence and aggression, one can better design and distribute effective research on this topic to produce results that answer questions which have been convoluted for decades.

## 2. Definitions

Self-esteem is people’s tendency to feel positively or negatively about themselves or see themselves as having a value or worth as a human (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). Low self-esteem as a cause of violence and aggression, which was briefly touched on, can be *only somewhat* dismissed as a series of publications over the past two decades have illustrated that the link between self-esteem, violence, and aggression is more present in higher, not lower self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 2000, Bushman et al., 2009). High self-esteem has found some levels of support, but it is still complicated. There are many studies which show links between high self-esteem and narcissism, some even showing that different kinds of self-esteem predict different kinds of aggression (Amad et al., 2021). Aggression is defined as a “behavior aimed at harming others physically or psychologically” (Bushman, & Huesmann, 2010). It is differentiated from the term anger “in that anger is oriented at overcoming the target but not necessarily through harm or destruction” (Bushman, & Huesmann, 2010). Aggression is a behaviour that often leads to violence, but not always (Bushman, 2023). Violence, on the other hand, is seen as an extreme form of aggression. Therefore, all violence is aggressive, but not all aggression is violence (Bushman, 2023). What is arguably most significant are the studies that consider unstable self-esteem (Jordan, & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Baumeister et al., 2000) In order to understand the results of studies such as these, definitions need to be specific. What is narcissism? What is unstable self-esteem?

For this work’s purposes, narcissism is defined as one’s orientation towards being self-aggrandizing, dominant, egocentric, and manipulative (Cisek, Sedikides, Hart, Godwin, Benson, & Liversedge, 2014). Narcissists have an inflated self-view that is often unrealistic, and sometimes very sensitive (Cisek et al., 2014). This sensitivity is referred to by a few names, but most commonly it is called “threatened egotism” (Baumeister et al., 2000) or “unstable self-esteem” (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). Self-esteem instability “refers to one’s dispositional tendency to experience fluctuations in context-specific feelings of self-worth” (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). According to some researchers, narcissism and unstable self-esteem are the most effective in predicting aggression, which often leads to violence (Baumeister et al., 2000). To understand violence, one needs to comprehend the perpetrator. Often it is only the victim’s perspective that is considered (Baumeister, 1997, Burris, 2022).

## 3. Unstable self-esteem and narcissism

### 3.1. Barometric self-esteem

It is important to distinguish the difference between baseline instability and barometric instability in self-esteem. Baseline instability refers to the long-term, gradual changes in one’s trait level self-esteem, which is often referred to as “global” self-esteem (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018; Brown & Marshall, 2006). Global self-esteem often remains mostly consistent over time (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Barometric instability, or “state” self-esteem is the more erratic, short-term changes that one experiences in reaction to context specific events, such as feeling “sky high” after a promotion, or “down in the dumps” after a breakup (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Sensitivity to barometric, short-term changes is what has been studied as unstable self-esteem (Brown & Marshall, 2006). People who display this fragile self-esteem often experience more anxiety, more depressive symptoms, poorer social adjustment, and

lower life satisfaction (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). In addition to this poor psychological functioning, there is reason to believe that sensitivity to barometric instability, or unstable self-esteem, may also lead to violence and aggression - especially amongst those with narcissistic personalities (Baumeister et al., 2000; Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018).

### **3.2. Narcissism and unstable self-esteem**

Individuals with high trait self-esteem are not always narcissists, but most narcissists have high trait self-esteem. Those with high self-esteem do vary in the extent to which their self-esteem is stable or fragile, though (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). According to Leary and Baumeister's (2000), Sociometer Theory, individuals with high global (trait) self-esteem are least likely to lower their state of self-esteem, even when confronted with a negative relational evaluation. Sociometer Theory suggests that self-esteem is a "sociometer"; an "internal monitor of the degree to which one is valued or devalued as a relational partner" (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). Stable high self-esteem is not easily changed in the context of a situation, or even over a long period of time. These people do not lower their self-esteem to rejection very easily (Okada, 2010). Interestingly, fragile self-esteem (however high it may be) is sensitive to more frequent and drastic fluctuations and is highly vulnerable to threat. High self-esteem individuals are more self-aggrandizing in their social interaction and display more anger and hostility (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018). It may be that they are experiencing "wounded pride", and the potential for aggression and violence is greater because of the need to assert and defend their high opinion of themselves (Baumeister et al., 2000).

It would not be fair to say that all narcissists are violent. Studies reflect that a narcissist's aggression was no different than others when there was no insult provocation (Baumeister et al., 2000). Therefore, narcissism does not cause aggression directly, but should instead be considered a "risk factor" (Baumeister et al., 2000). The role of provocation is important because it differentiates narcissists from sadists, authoritarians and other "risk factors" of aggression. When someone challenges the flattering self-perception of a narcissist with unstable self-esteem, they turn aggressive, but only towards the specific person who challenged them (Baumeister et al., 2000). In addition, it is not so much simple vanity as it is the inflated sense of being superior to others (Baumeister et al., 2000). Simple vanity, loving oneself quietly, is quite acceptable. It is the interpersonal manifestations of narcissism that are the ones associated with violence. What this means is that when peoples self-worth is highly sensitive, not only to their own judgement (contingent self-esteem (Jordan & Zeigler-Hill, 2018)) but to others judgement as well, they are more prone to violence and aggression (Baumeister et al., 2000).

Unstable self-esteem is arguably one of the most important links between self-esteem, violence, and aggression that researchers have identified. This sensitivity to change is a part of the "most explosive recipe for violence" (Baumeister et al., 2000). Are researchers trying to find the "recipe for violence", though? Is the goal to typify people to the point of risking labeling them "violent" simply because of personality traits?

## **4. Change how we ask these questions**

### **4.1. Gender, self-esteem, and aggression**

Up until recently (within the past twenty years) research on these topics did not differentiate results based on gender. It is recognized that gender is a socially constructed category - but that is why it is important to include these individual differences in research. Gender dynamics studies surrounding the association between aggression and unstable self-esteem are far and few between (Amad et al., 2021). Yet research in this area does not hold conclusive results. This could explain some of the inconsistencies in all results regarding self-esteem and aggression and could have been remedied by treating anyone other than men with equal importance within research.

Future research in this area should include gender demographics because as our societies are shaped by our gender roles, and our gender roles are in turn shaped by our society, it is simply fair to say that there could be gendered differences in the outcome of a study of this nature. One incredibly important consideration to make when dissecting others' decisions is "how does this person perceive themselves?" because one cannot claim to comprehend if they do not first put their feet in others shoes. Gender differences are important because of the variance in power relations and social norms in different contexts.

### **4.2. Culture, self-esteem, and aggression**

Another variable that is too little studied in this research area is that of culture, and it may not be clear as to why this is important to consider. Although aggression is a "universal feature" (occurs in all cultures, across all peoples) of human social relations, it varies across cultures (Amad et al., 2021).

Anthropological evidence suggests that some societies are more aggressive than others (BCcampus, 2014). A good example of how culture plays an important role in molding aggression is to look at homicide rates across countries. “Rates of intentional homicide per 100,000 are 26.7 for Brazil, 4.9 for the United States...and 0.3 for Japan” (Amad et al., 2021). The reason for this massive fluctuation is convoluted and still debated, but as one may expect, the identification of individualist versus collectivist cultures plays a role (Amad et al., 2021).

Research shows that societies which are more individualistic are also more accepting of aggressive behaviours (Amad et al., 2021; Bergeron & Schneider, 2005; Forbes, Zhang, Doroszewicz, & Haas, 2009). Aggression as an aid to achieving personal goals is widely accepted within individualistic, “western” cultures such as the United States and Canada. Opposite to this, collectivist cultures would consider aggression a disruption of social harmony (Amad et al., 2021). However, most research on this topic is focused only on “western” samples and therefore may be limited in its applications to other cultures and societies (Amad et al., 2021). Further research in this area should always encourage cultural diversity within its target population.

## 5. A call for further research

It cannot be ignored that people with low self-esteem are also vulnerable to instability (Amad et al., 2021). Some researchers found that women are more susceptible to low global (trait) self-esteem, and this was a stronger predictor of aggression in women than in men (Canning, Andrew, Murphy, Walker, & Snowden, 2017). To only study high, unstable self-esteem would be to ignore the potential reality for a large part of the population. Another issue that needs to be confronted is the measurement of unstable self-esteem. Often, these research designs require a large amount of cooperation, effort and time from the participants which can make collecting such data difficult (Okoda, 2009). Further research should thoroughly define the topics and variables that are being considered. Research should ideally attempt to gather longitudinal data, measuring both state and trait self-esteem. It should also consider gender and cultural individual differences as they may play a part in the understanding of unstable self-esteem, as it is highly state dependent and therefore influenced by external evaluations (Amad et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

The relationships between self-esteem, violence, and aggression as well as their mediators is convoluted and messy, but with creative and carefully planned research designs, a clearer understanding of the topic is possible. By considering research on the topics of self-esteem, aggression, narcissism, and violence, it becomes clearer the need for further research in this area. If future research incorporates the more nuanced dimensions of each variable that they are dealing with, it will lead to stronger evidence and reader comprehension overall.

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