

The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Aggression

Ashley Silverberg⁵

The purpose of this study was to find whether there was a correlation between self-esteem and aggression. There has been a lot of controversy over this issue in the past. To get a better understanding of this debate, the current study required a within-participant design to evaluate the scores of both self-esteem and aggression. Each participant was recruited ethically from the Lindenwood Participant Pool and given two surveys to complete. The surveys were counterbalanced to make sure that the results would not be bias on order effects. After the data was collected, the participant's scores were compared to determine if there was a positive or negative correlation between the two. The results showed that there was in fact a negative correlation between self-esteem and aggression. Results also showed that there was a negative correlation between aggression scores and personal ratings of control, yet, a positive correlation between self-esteem scores and personal ratings of happiness. This means that those who scored lower on the Aggression Scale ranked themselves as more able to control themselves. Also, those who scored higher on the Self-Esteem Survey ranked themselves as happier with their lives.

There has been much controversy over whether or not self-esteem is related to aggression. Rosenberg's theory was that individuals who have low self-esteem are less attached to society and therefore will decrease the traditional values of social norms causing them to act out aggressively (Rosenberg, 1965). Tracy and Robins agree with this statement and believe that low self-esteem is linked to aggression. They state that individuals protect themselves against feelings of embarrassment by expressing their feelings in an external way. They also blame

⁵ Correspondence concerning this project should be directed to Ashley Silverberg, 209 S. Kingshighway, Saint Charles, MO, 63301, as751@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

others for their failure, which leads to feelings of resentment towards others (Tracy & Robins, 2003).

According to Bynner (1981), people with low self-esteem are overwhelmed with various conflicts in their life. They try to please people such as family members, friends, and teachers or coworkers while attempting to improve their status with their peers. In return, they resort to delinquent and deviant behavior because they think it will make them more popular or improve their situation (Bynner, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1981). In fact, acts of violence are seen as a way of gaining self-esteem (Toch, 1992).

On the other side of this controversy, researchers believe that individuals with low self-esteem don't act out aggressively at all. For example, Baumeister, Bushman, and Campbell (2000) state that people with low self-esteem try to avoid threats or danger. Attacking someone would be seen as a risky behavior and those with low self-esteem would try to stay away from such actions (Baumeister et al., 2000). Baumeister et al (2000) also suggest that people with low self-esteem often submit themselves to an influence, whereas aggressive behavior often includes engaging in resistant behavior. Those with low self-esteem are too afraid to act out or rebel against others, so they merely conform to a group (Baumeister et al., 2000).

Further research on this topic provides even more uncertainty about on what really influences aggression. Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) believe that high self-esteem is the cause for aggressive behavior. Violence has previously been seen in those who have very positive views of themselves and those with high self-esteem have shown the highest tendencies toward hostility and anger (Baumeister et al., 1996).

It is evident that there are many different views of self-esteem and its relation to aggressive behavior. The proposed study was designed to help discover the relationship between these two variables.

Two classic surveys, the Rosenberg self-esteem survey (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Buss and Perry Test of Aggression (Buss & Perry, 1992) were administered to participants recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool and the scores on the two surveys were correlated. The Rosenberg self-esteem survey was used despite its dated origin because it is highly reliable and very well-tested. Also, the Buss and Perry survey was used for its reliability and conventional use. The hypothesis of the present study is that self-esteem has a negative relationship with aggression. Therefore, individuals who have low self-esteem will display higher amounts of aggression.

Method

Participants

For this study, 37 individuals were recruited from the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP). The LPP is a program found on the Lindenwood University campus where undergraduate students can participate in research and studies done by other undergraduates. By using the LPP, all participants were recruited fairly and without coercion. LPP regulations also guaranteed that all participants were undergraduate students at Lindenwood University, were at least 18 years of age, and completed the LPP quiz allowing them to participate. If any participant was under the age of 18, a separate consent form was signed by the participant's parents/guardian so he/she could partake in the study. There were no restrictions on who was allowed to participate; therefore, no one was excluded.

A total of 19 men and 18 women participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18-35 years old, with 20 years old being the mode. When asked if they were born in the United States, 30 of the 37 reported yes. Those that reported no were from a variety of countries including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Japan, Panama, Peru, Sweden, and the Ukraine. When asked how happy participants found themselves on a scale of 1-10, an average happiness of 8 was recorded. Also, an average number of 7.9 was recorded when participants were asked how much control they feel like they have over themselves on a scale of 1-10. This means that on average participants found themselves both happy and able to control themselves.

Materials and Procedure

Sign-up sheets and a study description form were posted by the experimenter on the bulletin board outside the LPP office. Participants signed up for a particular time slot (up to five people could sign up for one time) and went to their designated location. The study began by having each participant sign in on the List of Participants sheet. This allowed the researcher to have a record of participants to turn into the LPP office. Each participant was given two consent forms to read, understand, and sign. One consent form was for the experimenter and one for the participant to keep for his/her records (see Appendix A). Two surveys were given to each participant after the completion of the consent forms (see Appendices B and C). One was a self-esteem questionnaire including ten questions from Rosenberg's Self Esteem Survey (Rosenberg, 1965). The second survey contained 29 questions from Buss and Perry's Aggression Scale (Buss & Perry, 1992). These surveys were counterbalanced so that the order of the surveys would not skew the results. Participants were ensured that they can stop the experiment at any time if they felt uncomfortable without any penalty. After the surveys were complete, a demographic survey was given to each participant (see Appendix D). The survey asked participants to provide their

sex, age, and where they were born. They were also asked how happy they find themselves and if they think they control their actions in a reasonable way. These questions are important because the results could add more discoveries to the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. After this, the study was complete and a tip sheet and feedback letter was given. The tip sheet contained information on how to improve one's self-esteem as well as guidelines to decrease aggression (see Appendix E). The feedback letter contained information to debrief the participants and provide them with the experimenter's contact information (see Appendix F). Each participant also received an extra credit receipt for contributing to the study.

The room assigned by the LPP contained a few desks and tables so each participant can use it to fill out their survey. A few pens were provided for each participant to use as well.

Results

The goal for this study was to find a negative correlation between self-esteem and aggression. After all the data had been collected, a Pearson Correlation was computed which revealed a negative correlation of $r = -.246$. This means that participants with low self-esteem displayed higher scores of aggression. Although it is not quite of moderate strength, it certainly serves as some relationship.

A Spearman's correlation was also used to determine whether scores from the aggression survey were related to how participants ranked themselves as being able to have control over their actions. A moderately significant negative correlation was found, $r_s = -.406$. Therefore, those who scored lower on the aggression scale reported higher amounts of control.

A second Spearman's correlation was computed to determine whether the scores from the self-esteem surveys were related to how happy participants ranked themselves. A moderately

significant positive correlation was found, $r_s = .441$. This means that the individuals who scored higher on the self-esteem surveys reported themselves as being happy with their lives.

Finally, an independent t-test was conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences between men and women with relation to their demographic information. The results revealed that men reported having greater control over themselves ($M=.656$, $SD=2.859$) than women ($M= .246$, $SD=1.045$), $t(36) = 2.073$, $P<.05$.

Discussion

The results of the present study revealed that the hypothesis that self-esteem has a negative correlation with aggression was supported. Previous research findings indicate that there has been much debate over whether low or high self-esteem has a negative relationship with aggression. Although more recent research is finding that individuals with high self-esteem are acting out more aggressively, the present study's results show otherwise, as suggested by past studies.

There were some limitations within the current study. First, all participants were recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool meaning there was a very limited group of people available to the experimenter. Also, the experimenter was not able to achieve the ideal amount of participants; therefore, the results could have come out different with a larger sample.

In the future, there are a few revisions that could be made to this experiment. The most important would be to acquire a larger sample size. Also, instead of allowing the participants to write in their scores, they would have to circle or check a box for the appropriate answer. This is because some individual's handwriting was more difficult to read than others which allowed for the experimenter to decide which answer it indeed was. By circling or checking a box, it would be easier for the experimenter to determine the appropriate answer.

Another possible revision for the future would be to find different surveys to give to the participants. Although these surveys were highly reliable and there was no doubting their accuracy, individuals might have felt overwhelmed or self-conscious about them. It was obvious what each survey was trying to establish and even though the surveys were anonymous, participants could have felt guilty for recording their true feelings. If the surveys had more questions that were disguised, perhaps participants would have felt more comfortable answering honestly.

One last suggestion for this research would be to extend the variables. The current study was focused on physical aggression and self-esteem. However, as found through research, there are many different types of aggression. It is very possible that the results could have fluctuated if a different aspect of aggression was being focused on. The findings of the current study are more in tune with the definition of aggression from past studies; solely physical aggression. The more current research done on this topic, however, included other aspects like verbal aggression and hostility, both separate categories of aggression. This could be the reason why this study corresponds with the older findings.

The results of the current study could be very beneficial to help individuals reduce their aggressive actions. For example, if an aggressive person is aware that self-esteem has a strong link to their violent behavior, they can potentially use tools to increase their self-esteem, in turn reducing the aggression. Feeling positive towards yourself can be helpful in a multiple of avenues, not just in relation to aggression. This is why the tip sheet information was so valuable. As an unknown author said, "You must love yourself before you love another. By accepting yourself and fully being what you are, your simple presence can make others happy."

References

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete two surveys; one measuring self esteem and the other measuring aggression. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 15 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the LPP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

_____ Date: _____
 (Signature of participant)

_____ Date: _____
 (Signature of researchers obtaining consent)

Student Researcher Name and Email:

Ashley Silverberg: as751@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Supervisor:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair 636-949-4371 mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix B

Rosenberg's Self Esteem Survey

Rosenberg, M. (1965). Society and the adolescent self-image. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <http://www.yorku.ca/rokada/psycstest/rosenbrg.pdf>

Please rate each of the following items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree) in terms of how characteristic they are of you.

1	2	3	4
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself
7. On the whole, I ma satisfied with myself
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself
9. I certainly feel useless at times
10. At times I think I am no good at all

How to Grade: FOR RESEARCHER

Items: 1,2,4,6,7

Strongly agree = 3

Agree = 2

Disagree =1

Strongly disagree = 0

Items 3,5,8,9

Strongly agree=0

Agree = 1

Disagree =2

Strongly disagree =3

Appendix C

Buss and Perry's Aggression Scale

Buss, A. H., & Perry, M. P. (1992). The aggression questionnaire. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 452-459.

<http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/Scales/BussPerry.pdf>

Please rate each of the following items (1-7: 1 = extremely uncharacteristic, 7 extremely characteristic) in terms of how characteristic they are of you.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Extremely Uncharacteristic</i>					<i>Extremely</i>	
<i>Characteristic</i>						

- 1) Once in a while I can't control the urge to strike another person.
- 2) Given enough provocation, I may hit another person.
- 3) If somebody hits me, I hit back.
- 4) I get into fights a little more than the average person.
- 5) If I have to resort to violence to protect my rights, I will.
- 6) There are people who pushed me so far that we came to blows.
- 7) I can think of no good reason for ever hitting a person.
- 8) I have threatened people I know.
- 9) I have become so mad that I have broken things.
- 10) I tell my friends openly when I disagree with them.
- 11) I often find myself disagreeing with people.
- 12) When people annoy me, I may tell them what I think of them.
- 13) I can't help getting into arguments when people disagree with me.
- 14) My friends say that I'm somewhat argumentative.
- 15) I flare up quickly but get over it quickly.
- 16) When frustrated, I let my irritation show.
- 17) I sometimes feel like a powder keg ready to explode.
- 18) I am an even-tempered person.
- 19) Some of my friends think I'm a hothead.
- 20) Sometimes I fly off the handle for no good reason.
- 21) I have trouble controlling my temper.
- 22) I am sometimes eaten up with jealousy.
- 23) At times I feel I have gotten a raw deal out of life.
- 24) Other people always seem to get the breaks.
- 25) I wonder why sometimes I feel so bitter about things.
- 26) I know that "friends" talk about me behind my back.
- 27) I am suspicious of overly friendly strangers.
- 28) I sometimes feel that people are laughing at me behind me back.
- 29) When people are especially nice, I wonder what they want.

1-9 Physical Aggression; 10-14 Verbal Aggression; 15-21 Anger; 22-29 Hostility

Appendix E

Tip Sheet**To Increase Self Esteem:****Antcliff, Lyndon. 2007. Positive Thinking.**

- 1. Do what you love** - Everyone loves to do something, when you indulge yourself in your love you improve the way you feel about yourself. You improve your self esteem.
- 2. Help others out** - Nothing makes you feel a warm glow than when you unselfishly help others.
- 3. Acknowledge your strengths** - There is no one who has no strengths. Everyone is good at something, know what your good at and give yourself a pat on the back.
- 4. Don't put up with crap** - There is no reason you should tolerate other people being mean to you. Even if they say they are doing it with love. Make sure people know they should be nice to you and if they refuse, walk away from them.
- 5. Drop your negative friends** - Hang out with people who are positive and support you.
- 6. Do your research** - A lot of self help books are a waste of time in the sense that the only person who can change you is you.
- 7. Learn to accept compliments** - It's hard to accept a compliment and not to dismiss it as being ridiculous. Someone has an opinion and it should be respected, even if you do not agree with it. If people think good about you then maybe you should too.
- 8. Include positivity in your life** - Take a positive slant on everything automatically.
- 9. Compare yourself against yourself** - If you look at how you were yesterday and how you are today and there is an improvement then that is great.
- 10. There is no need for you to put yourself down** - By seeing yourself in a negative light you are only reinforcing your low self esteem.

To Manage Aggressive Behavior:**livestrong.com**

- 1. Address the behavior as soon as it happens** by talking to the person directly and letting him know that you cannot tolerate his behavior. Delaying this communication could send a message that the behavior is okay.
- 2. Set a boundary around the behavior** by communicating why the behavior is inappropriate and informing the aggressor that it will not be tolerated.
- 3. Discuss how the behavior impacts you** and others by telling the aggressor how it makes you feel. Shaming or chastising the person may incite more aggression.
- 4. Identify and communicate consequences** that will be enforced if the behavior continues. For example, let an aggressive friend know that you will cease all communication with him if he continues to be aggressive toward you.

Appendix F

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in this study. The goal was to find out whether self esteem has a relationship with aggression. In the past, there has been a lot of controversy with this issue. Historically, it is believed that individuals with low self esteem express more aggression. However, more recent studies have said the opposite; that those with high self esteem act out more aggressively. Within this study, I am trying to illustrate the validity of historic beliefs.

My hypothesis states that individuals who display lower amounts of self esteem will act out more aggressively than those who have a high amount of self esteem. Those with low self esteem are more likely to put up with bullies and internalize their emotions to the point where they break. Likewise, individuals with high self esteem think too highly of themselves to act out towards others.

This information is a very beneficial tool for those who play a major role in society. The results will allow for people to understand why people are acting out so aggressively and find a solution to the problem. It will also help those in social situations become more aware of themselves and how they act out toward others.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the results of a large group of consumers, of which you are now a part of. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact me and I will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Principal Investigator:

Ashley Silverberg

as751@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Supervisor:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair 636-949-4371 (mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)