The Benefits of Self-Esteem: Reply to Krueger et al. (2022) and Brummelman (2022)

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Abstract

Krueger et al. (2022) argue that our review (Orth & Robins, 2022) finds benefits of self-esteem primarily for subjective outcomes and largely fails to demonstrate any "objective" benefits. We disagree with this portrayal of the findings, and highlight research that provides evidence for the benefits of self-esteem using objective measures. We also address Krueger et al.'s claim that positivity bias in self-reports can account for the effects of self-esteem on subjectively assessed life outcomes, and explain how the statistical analyses used to document these effects substantially control for this bias. We maintain that there is now a large body of evidence from meta-analyses and large-scale longitudinal studies that suggests high self-esteem has adaptive consequences for social relationships, school, work, mental health, physical health, and antisocial behavior. Brummelman (2022) presents a compelling theoretical framework that can guide the design of effective interventions to improve children's self-esteem. We agree with his concerns about the need for randomized controlled trials to evaluate the efficacy of self-esteem interventions and the importance of ensuring that children's self-esteem can be raised without causing them to become narcissistic. The research reviewed in our article indicates that high self-esteem is adaptive for children, adolescents, and adults, suggesting that well-designed and effective self-esteem interventions might be beneficial for individuals of all ages.

Keywords: self-esteem, life outcomes, longitudinal research, self-esteem interventions

William James coined the term "self-esteem" in 1890, but it truly entered the American vernacular in the 1950s and 60s, and since then zealous proponents have touted self-esteem as a panacea for virtually everything while vehement naysayers have rejected self-esteem as a vacuous construct with no concrete benefits. In our view, both sides were misguided, given the dearth of compelling empirical data. However, we have finally reached the point where the science of self-esteem has provided clear evidence: An avalanche of research accumulating over the past two decades indicates that self-esteem has tangible benefits in multiple life domains (Orth & Robins, 2022).

Krueger et al. (2022) attempt to undermine this conclusion by asserting that the benefits of self-esteem do not truly hold for "objective" outcomes. However, the voluminous body of research reviewed in our article provides evidence for the benefits of self-esteem using objective measures. Examples include standardized test scores, school dropout, and obtaining a college degree (school); employment status (work); behavior observation (social relationships); prescription of antidepressants (mental health); cardiorespiratory health (physical health); and criminal convictions (antisocial behavior). Thus, self-esteem has objective benefits in all six domains reviewed in our article.

Moreover, despite Krueger et al.'s portrayal of objective measures as the gold standard for reality, these measures often have serious limitations. For example, criminal records may have limited validity for measuring antisocial behavior because many, if not most, delinquent acts are never detected by police or do not lead to criminal conviction. Thus, objective measures are imperfect indicators of many life outcomes, which may explain why the effects of self-esteem are often weaker for these measures.

Krueger et al. also argue that research linking self-esteem to subjectively assessed life outcomes is largely meaningless because these associations are driven by the tendency for people with high self-esteem to show a positivity bias in their ratings of life outcomes (e.g., to have an unrealistically positive view of their relationships, work, health, etc.). We agree that this bias could inflate correlations between self-esteem and life outcomes, but our findings are not based on simple correlations. Instead, we examined the ability of self-esteem to predict a future life outcome while controlling for prior levels of that outcome. For example, we found that high self-esteem predicts future reports of relationship quality, while controlling for prior reports of relationship quality. This finding cannot simply reflect the tendency for high self-esteem individuals to view their relationships in an overly positive light, because this tendency would also influence their earlier reports of relationship quality, which are being statistically removed from their future reports of relationship quality. Thus, it is unlikely that positivity bias could cause self-esteem to predict future levels of an outcome while controlling for prior levels of that bias. This is true regardless of whether one conceptualizes positivity bias as method variance or, as Krueger et al. contend, a "general mental outlook"; no matter how one interprets this bias, our analyses decrease the plausibility of this alternative explanation.

In their earlier work (Baumeister et al., 2003), Krueger et al. repeatedly critiqued research supporting the benefits of self-esteem by raising the possibility that high self-esteem is a consequence rather than a cause of life outcomes. They noted that one way to address this concern is by showing that "if self-esteem at Time 1 predicts school performance at Time 2 after differences in school performance at Time 1 are controlled statistically . . . then causal inferences may be made, albeit somewhat tentatively" (p. 9). They go on to state that this kind of analysis – which is precisely the approach taken in Orth and Robins (2022) – is a "highly conservative way

of testing" (p. 9) the causal effects of self-esteem (see Orth & Robins, 2022, for a detailed discussion of the degree to which causal inferences are warranted in this context).

In sum, we disagree with Krueger et al.'s contention that research has not provided convincing evidence for the benefits of self-esteem, except for positive feelings and happiness. There is now a large body of evidence documenting the consequences of self-esteem using the kind of longitudinal models that they previously recommended as an effective way to evaluate the benefits of self-esteem. Thus, the concerns raised by Krueger et al. do not undermine our conclusion that high self-esteem has adaptive consequences for social relationships, school, work, mental health, physical health, and antisocial behavior.

Brummelman (2022) uses our finding that self-esteem has benefits in multiple life domains as a launching point for outlining how to design effective interventions to improve children's self-esteem. We are particularly impressed by his theoretically-informed approach to designing interventions (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2020), and we agree with his concerns about the need for randomized controlled trials to evaluate interventions and the importance of ensuring that children's self-esteem can be raised without causing them to become narcissistic. Meta-analytic evidence supports the effectiveness of self-esteem interventions in children, adolescents, and adults (Haney & Durlak, 1998; Niveau et al., 2021; O'Mara et al., 2006). However, more robust knowledge is needed with regard to whether these interventions work across sociodemographic groups, how lasting the effects are, and whether they lead to longterm improvements in life outcomes. The meta-analyses reviewed in our article indicate that high self-esteem is adaptive for children, adolescents, and adults, suggesting that well-designed and effective self-esteem interventions might be beneficial for individuals of all ages.

In conclusion, our comprehensive review of the literature supports what most parents, teachers, coaches, and therapists already seem to believe, that high self-esteem contributes to success in a wide range of life contexts and low self-esteem can interfere with optimal functioning. We eagerly await the availability of evidence-based interventions to raise self-esteem, which our research suggests will benefit individuals and society as a whole.

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