

# This Week's Citation Classic®

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Rosenberg M. *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965. 326 p.

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Self-esteem is an important determinant of psychological well-being that is particularly problematic during the adolescent life stage. This study utilizes a sample of over 5,000 adolescents to explore social structural, cultural, contextual, and interpersonal influences on self-esteem. The effect of self-esteem on socially relevant behavior is also examined. [The SSC® indicates that this book has been cited in over 1,470 publications.]

## Determinants of Self-Esteem

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*Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* was the first large-scale sample survey of the self-concept ever undertaken. This is curious, since the idea of such a survey obviously demands little imagination and the scientific preconditions for such a study had existed for some time. By 1960 sample survey methodology was well developed, and research on the self-concept had emerged from the doldrums into which it had plunged during the reign of behaviorism in psychology between the two world wars. Given the substantive interest in the topic and the availability of appropriate methodology, it was difficult to understand why no such studies had been undertaken.

The answer, I suspect, lies in the characteristic foci of attention of both sociologists and psychologists. Sociologists, though interested in how variations in social structure, culture, context, and interaction affected attitudes and behavior, were not inclined to think of self-esteem as a sociologically relevant topic. Psychologists, though interested in self-esteem, were not inclined to search for social sources of variation in self-esteem in the population at large. Research in this area thus fell between the cracks. I suspect that the history of science is strewn with similar examples.

As I compare my feelings toward the book then and now, I can say that I have substantially greater confidence in the findings today than I had when the book was first published. By the time I undertook the study, I had enough research experience under my belt to know that one could not repose too much confidence in any single survey. Only when one is able to detect consistencies across a broad range of differing studies can one feel reasonably sure about one's conclusions.

For this reason I have been particularly pleased and, quite frankly, surprised that the great majority of subsequent studies, though varying in many ways, have consistently supported the original findings. This is true even of the counterintuitive findings—those results that not only run counter to the conventional wisdom but to well-regarded theoretical principles as well.

There is no way to know for certain, of course, why the book is often cited. In part, no doubt, it is attributable to the fact that it was the first study of its kind. More important, I suspect, is the popularity of the self-esteem measure that I developed for that study. Unlike most measures developed by psychologists, this self-esteem measure is brief and simple. Whereas psychologists, conducting research under clinical or laboratory conditions, are able to devise lengthy research instruments, to explore their factorial structure, and so on, survey investigators rarely have this luxury. By necessity, measures must be simple and economical. In order to conduct this study, then, it was necessary to develop a brief self-esteem measure that could quickly and easily be administered to a large and diverse sample of respondents. Because the reliability and validity of this instrument compared favorably with that of more elaborate measures,<sup>1-4</sup> it was readily adopted by many investigators interested in a concise research instrument.

Book reviews are a mystery. When the book appeared, the reviews ranged from highly enthusiastic to totally devastating. So varied was the response that I came to wonder whether the printing press had stamped out identical copies for distribution. Despite some critical reviews, however, I was reassured by the fact that the book, in manuscript, was awarded the American Association for the Advancement of Science Sociopsychological Prize.

1. Crandall R. The measurement of self-esteem and related constructs. (Robinson J & Shaver P, eds.) *Measures of social psychological attitudes*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 1973. p. 80-2. (Cited 165 times.)
2. Wylie R C. *The self-concept*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. (In press.)
3. Rosenberg M. *Conceiving the self*. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1986. 319 p.
4. Carmines E G & Zeller R A. *Reliability and validity assessment*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979. 71 p. (Cited 90 times.)

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