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PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT ON HOW THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT INFLUENCES SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Moraru, Laura - Maria¹
Martins, Dora²

***Abstract:** This paper aims at presenting the defining aspects of the concepts of self-image and self-esteem, as well as the main studies and researches in the field. An important objective included in the purpose of the paper was to conduct an experiment on how the negative feedback we receive from the social environment in which we are active influences our self-image and self-esteem. The type of experiment we used was the confirmation one, starting from a hypothesis, where we assumed the existence of a relationship between a stimulating action and a specific response. The end of the research and therefore its main result was that the experimental hypothesis was confirmed, thus demonstrating that the negative feedback influences a person's self-image. The paper also presents the main implications of this phenomenon.*

Keywords: self-esteem, self-image, psychological experiment

Jel Classification: E71

1. Introduction

This paper aims at presenting the defining aspects of the concepts of self-image and self-esteem, as well as the main studies and researches in the field. **An important objective included in the purpose of the paper was to conduct an experiment** on how the negative feedback we receive from the social environment in which we are active influences our self-image and self-esteem.

In order to achieve the aim of the paper an experiment was carried out on the students of the first year of Psychology, from the University of Pitesti. The experiment was conducted during the Experimental Social Psychology seminar.

The subjects of the research were 2 students from the first year, the Faculty of Psychology, aged between 19 and 20 years old.

The hypothesis on which the study was based was the following: negative feedback influences a person's self-image.

The type of experiment we used was the confirmation one, starting from a hypothesis assuming the existence of a relationship between a stimulating action and a specific response.

The **expression "self-image"** is usually used with reference to the perceptions and attitudes that individuals have on their bodies, although some authors claim that, in fact, the term is much broader and includes aspects that accompany our behaviour, such as weight loss attempts or other investment indicators in self-appearance (Banfield & McCabe, 2002). As a rule, women have a lower self-image compared to men (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998).

Self-image is defined by how we perceive our own physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual characteristics that outline and strengthen the dimensions of our self.

Depending on our perception at a given moment of our development, of what we would like to be, or what we might become, we can distinguish more hypostases of our self: the present ego, the ideal ego, and the future ego.

Two expressions (moments) can be found in its formation, taking into account the fact that:

- a) Self-image is factual – an individual is considered fat, smart or hardworking based on facts, data, comparisons;
- b) These are interpreted – if it seems disgusting to be fat or useless to be smart or diligent, the self-image is low.

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Self-esteem, interdependent with self-image, can be most simply defined as how people perceive themselves (Steinberg, 1999). Self-esteem is also seen as the difference between true esteem and ideal esteem (Pettus, 2001). The more people are closer to the ideal they want to achieve, the more likely they are to have a greater self-esteem than if they consider themselves to be far from achieving the proposed goals (Wohlford, Lochman, Barry, 2004, pp. 575-582).

2. Experiments, studies and research on self-esteem

Coopersmith (1967) conducted experiments on self-esteem on a group of American boys aged 10-11 years old. He built his experiments based on: his own assessment of the boys; the teachers' reports on them; psychological tests. In the end, he distinguished three groups after scaling up self-esteem as high, medium and low. He found the following differences between the three groups:

a. **The group of boys with low self-esteem** presented as general characteristics that their parents were little concerned about them and they presented low levels of aspirations for their future. In infancy, the boys had been sick. The boys did not make "big dreams" of life, nor aspire to success.

b. **The group of average self-esteem** was composed of optimistic boys who accepted criticism from others. Unlike those in the high self-esteem group, they were conventional, showing the tendency of conformism and rallying to the opinions of the majority or of the leaders.

c. **Those with high self-esteem** were active, they expressed themselves easily, they obtained and were confident in success. Parents were generally concerned about them, restrictive and with clear rules for their program.

Coopersmith concluded that the sources of high self-esteem are complex, dependent on the parenting styles and the early setting goals in life. It is important in building self-esteem for individuals to be respected as early as the age of the first childhood, to have well-defined values and to be oriented towards solving problems.

Self-esteem prolongs life. A study on the winners of the Oscar Academy Award made by researchers at Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre has shown that actors who won just once a prize in this category tend to live longer. Donald Redelmeier, the author of the study, explains that not the prize is the cause of their longevity, but the self-esteem that it has generated and the social benefits that have followed.

3. Methodology of the scientific research

Self-image is the way we see ourselves, with our physical, emotional and social characteristics, our own opinion about ourselves, about who we are now, but also about how we could be.

The feeling of self-image is the central unit of our existence, to which we ultimately relate everything.

The steps we performed to complete the experiment are the following:

- observing the facts;
- establishing the hypothesis;
- the experimentation itself;
- processing and interpreting the results.

Through this experiment, we aimed to highlight an immediate effect to a negative reaction to the surrounding environment (hypothesis). Absolutely everything we do, we undertake in order to maintain the sense of self-image, to preserve it or to improve it.

Two female subjects took part in the experiment; they are students in psychology, in the first year. The experiment took place within the Socio-Human Faculty, in Pitesti, within the seminar of experimental social psychology.

The subjects were not informed about the methods of carrying out the experiment.

We randomly chose a subject from the room, invited her to sit on a chair (in front of us) and asked her to enumerate ten animals and what they do, for example: *the dog barks, the cat meows, the mouse chews and so on.*

At the first animal named by that person, we nodded encouragingly. With the second example, we started the experiment itself.

At each enumeration we frowned in astonishment or vexed, nodded disapprovingly (that is, we sent a negative feedback) and then we waited. At the fourth animal listed, the subject began to lose her patience, and at the end of the experiment, said something like “Was there a trick?”, “What happened?”, “I do not know exactly what you want from me,” etc.

The type of experiment we used was the confirmation, starting from a hypothesis, in which we assumed the existence of a relationship between a stimulating action and a specific response.

4. Data analysis

Subsequent to the experiment, the following responses from the subjects were highlighted and these are quantified in the following tables:

Subject 1

	Negative feedback from the experimenter	Response to feedback
Enumeration 1	NO	NO
Enumeration 2	YES	NO
Enumeration 3	YES	NO
Enumeration 4	YES	YES
Enumeration 5	YES	YES
Enumeration 6	YES	YES
Enumeration 7	YES	YES
Enumeration 8	YES	YES
Enumeration 9	YES	YES
Enumeration 10	YES	YES

Subject 2

	Negative feedback from the experimenter	Response to feedback
Enumeration 1	NO	NO
Enumeration 2	YES	NO
Enumeration 3	YES	NO

Enumeration 4	YES	NO
Enumeration 5	YES	YES
Enumeration 6	YES	YES
Enumeration 7	YES	YES
Enumeration 8	YES	YES
Enumeration 9	YES	YES
Enumeration 10	YES	YES

The analysis of the data confirms the established hypothesis; in the sense that, as we can see, at most to the fourth animal listed the subjects began to lose their patience, reacting to the negative feedback from the experimenter.

5. Conclusions and final assessments

Thus, the hypothesis of the experiment, that the negative feedback influences a person's self-image, has been confirmed.

The psychological interpretation of this experiment lies in two possible explanations, namely:

- Self-image is factual – an individual sees himself/herself as fat, smart or hardworking based on some facts, data, comparisons;
- Social Reflection – expresses the fact that the others are mirrors in which we see our own image. The self is the product of social interaction. As George Herbert Mead argued in 1934, we often get to know ourselves by imagining what other people, whose opinion we consider important, think of us, incorporating their appreciations into the self-image.

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