

Self-evaluation Maintenance Theory

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Self-evaluation maintenance theory refers to discrepancies between two people in a relationship. Two people in a relationship each aim to keep themselves feeling good psychologically throughout a comparison process to the other person. Self-evaluation is defined as the way a person views him/herself. It is the continuous process of determining personal growth and progress, which can be raised or lowered by the behavior of a close other (a person that is psychologically close). People are more threatened by friends than strangers. Abraham Tesser created the self-evaluation maintenance theory in 1988. The self-evaluation maintenance model assumes two things: that a person will try to maintain or increase their own self-evaluation, and self-evaluation is influenced by relationships with others.

Description

A person's self-evaluation (which is similar to self-esteem) may be raised when a close other performs well. For example, a sibling scores the winning goal in an important game. Self-evaluation will increase because that person is sharing his/her success. The closer the psychological relationship and the greater the success, the more a person will share in the success. This is considered the reflection process. When closeness and performance are high, self-evaluation is raised in the reflection process. If someone who is psychologically close performs well on a task that is irrelevant to a person's self-definition, that person is able to benefit by sharing in the success of the achievement.

At the same time, the success of a close other can decrease someone's self-evaluation in the comparison process. This is because the success of a close other invites comparison on one's own capabilities, thereby directly affecting one's own self-evaluation. This is also strengthened with the closeness of the psychological relationship with the successful other. Using the same example: a sibling scores the winning goal in an important game; the person is now comparing him/herself to the sibling's success and through comparison, his/her self-evaluation is lowered. When closeness (sibling) and performance (scored the winning goal) are high, self-evaluation is decreased in the comparison process.

In both the reflection and comparison processes, closeness and performance level are significant. If the closeness of another decreases, then a person is less likely to share the success and/or compare him/herself, which lessens the likelihood of decreasing self-evaluation. A person is more likely to compare him/herself to someone close to him/her, like a sibling or a best friend, than a stranger. There are different factors in which a person can assume closeness: family, friends, people with similar characteristics, etc. If an individual is not close to a particular person, then it makes sense that he/she will not share in their success or be threatened by their success. At the same time, if the person's performance is low, there is no reason to share the success and increase self-evaluation; there is also no reason to compare him/herself to the other person, decreasing self-evaluation. Because their performance is low, there is no reason it should raise or

lower his/her self-evaluation. According to Tesser's (1988) theory, if a sibling did not do well in his/her game, then there is no reason the individual's self-evaluation will be affected.

Closeness and performance can either raise self-evaluation through reflection or lower self-evaluation through comparison. Relevance determines whether reflection or comparison will occur. There are many different dimensions that can be important to an individual's self-definition. A self-defining factor is any factor that is important to who a person is. For example, an ability or success in music may be important to one's self-definition, but at the same time, being good in math may not be as important. Relevance assumes that a particular factor that is important to an individual is also important to another person. Relevance can be as simple as a shared dimension which he/she considers important to who he/she is. If relevance is high, then one will engage in comparison, but if relevance is low, one will engage in reflection. For example, if athletics is important to a person and that person considers athletics to be an important dimension of his/her self-definition, then when a sibling does well in athletics, the comparison process will take place and his/her self-evaluation will decrease. On the other hand, if athletics is not a dimension he/she uses for self-definition, the reflection process will take place and he/she will celebrate the sibling's success with the sibling; his/her self-evaluation will increase along with the sibling's because he/she is not threatened or challenged by the sibling's athletic capability.

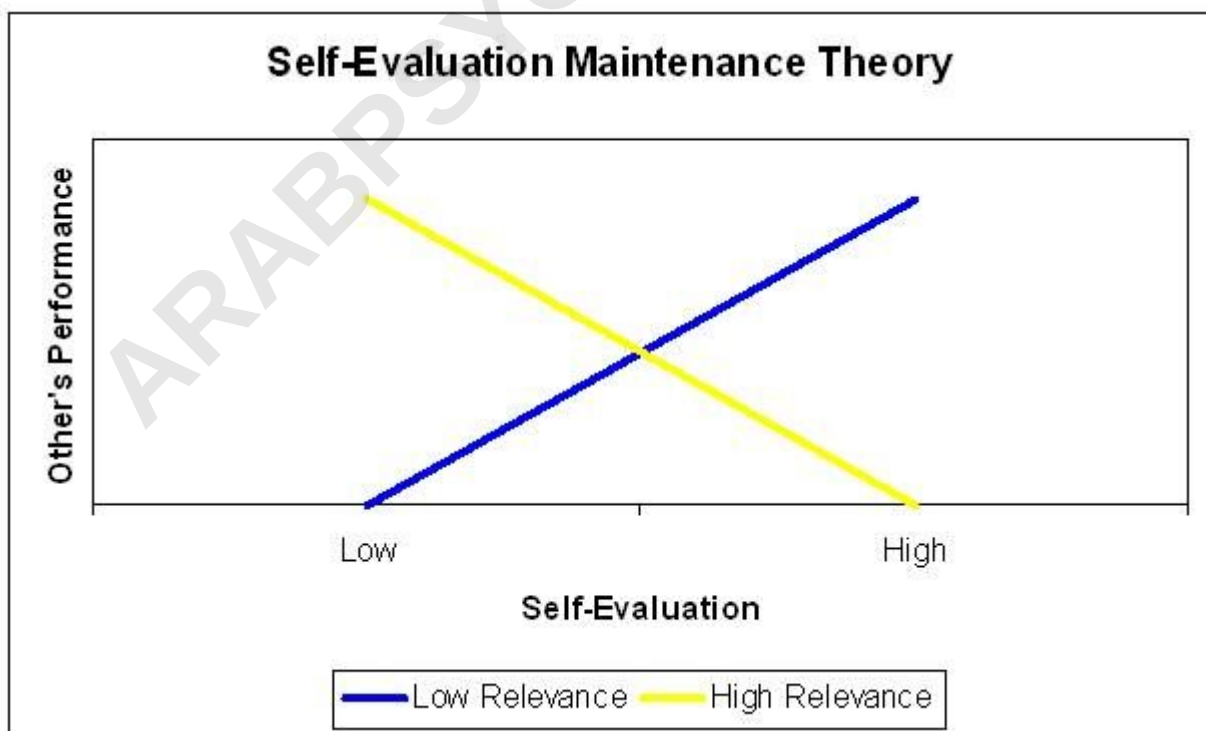
Tesser (1988) suggests that people may do things to reduce the decrease in self-evaluation from comparison. One can spend less time with that particular individual, thereby reducing closeness or one can change their important self-definition and take up a new hobby or focus on a different self-defining activity, which reduces relevance. The third way of avoiding a decrease in self-evaluation through the comparison process is to affect another's performance (e.g. by hiding a sibling's favorite shoes, or believe that his/her performance was based on luck) or one can improve their own skills by practicing more. This theory poses the question: under what conditions will someone get in the way of another's performance? The answer is that it depends on closeness of the individuals and the relevance of the activity. When the relevance is high, the comparison process is more important than the reflection process. When the relevance is high and the activity is high in self-defining importance, the other person poses a larger threat than when the relevance is low.

Research example

Tesser & Smith (1980) experimented with this theory. Men were recruited and asked to bring a friend with them. They were then put into groups of four, Man A and Man A's friend along with Man B and Man B's friend. Half the subjects were told that this activity was measuring important verbal skills and leadership. This was the high relevance group. The other two subjects were told that the task had nothing to do with verbal skills, leadership or anything important. This was considered the low relevance group. The activity was based on the game Password, where persons have to guess a word based on clues. Each man was given an opportunity to guess the word while the other

three gave clues from a list. The other three can give clues that are easy or difficult based on their own judgment and basically whether or not they would like to help the other person guess the word. The clues given to the person were necessary to guess the word. The first pair of partners performed poorly (as instructed in the experimental design). The experiment was looking at the behavior of the second group of men. The next pairing was designed to partner a stranger with a friend. Researchers were trying to see when a friend was helped more than a stranger and when a stranger was helped more than a friend. The research was supported. In 10 out of 13 sessions, when relevance was high (told that this activity measures important verbal and leadership skills) the stranger was helped more than a friend. Also, in 10 out of 13 sessions, when relevance was low (subjects were told that this activity determined nothing of importance) the friend was helped more than the stranger. The prediction of the self-evaluation maintenance theory was strongly supported.

Zuckerman & Jost (2001) compares the self-evaluation maintenance theory to the work of Feld (1991). As the self-evaluatory maintenance theory would lead one to judge a stranger higher than their friends (based on popularity) in order to prevent a drop in self-evaluation, Feld's (1991) research demonstrated that people must have less friends than their friends do in order to remain popular. This is based on a mathematical equation that explains why popular people are involved in more social circles than unpopular people. These are not the only two research examples. For more examples see the references.



This graph illustrates the basic principles of Tesser's (1988) self-evaluatory maintenance model of behavior. Relevance determines whether reflection or comparison will occur. When relevance is low (the factor does not affect self-definition) as the other's performance increases, so does self-evaluation, allowing that person to share in the celebration of the other person (reflection). When relevance is high (the factor is important to self-definition also) as the other's performance increases, self-evaluation decreases because that person is being compared to the other person (comparison). If relevance is high, then one will engage in comparison, but if relevance is low, one will engage in reflection.

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