

Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Social Cognition

Proponents: Abraham Tesser

1. Core Principles

The **Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) Model**, developed primarily by Abraham Tesser, is a foundational theory in social psychology designed to explain how individuals maintain a positive self-evaluation when interacting with significant others, particularly friends, relatives, or close associates. This model is crucial for understanding the dynamic interplay between interpersonal relationships and self-esteem. The fundamental premise posits that the performance of those close to us can significantly influence our perception of ourselves, leading either to an enhancement or a reduction in our feelings of self-worth. Unlike theories that focus purely on internal consistency, the SEM model explicitly incorporates the success or failure of others as a critical external variable impacting the self-system. The model suggests that individuals are inherently motivated to maintain high self-esteem, and they employ specific psychological processes--**reflection** and **comparison**--to achieve this maintenance, depending on the immediate situational context.

The decision tree within the SEM model is complex, relying heavily on two critical dimensions: the **closeness** of the relationship to the performing individual and the **relevance** of the performance domain to the self-definer's own self-concept. The model predicts that when the domain is highly relevant to one's own identity, the comparison process dominates, which can be ego-threatening if the close other outperforms them. Conversely, when the domain is irrelevant to one's self-concept, the reflection process prevails, allowing the individual to bask in the reflected glory of the close other's success without threat. Therefore, the SEM model is not merely descriptive; it is predictive, detailing the conditions under which a close relationship can either be a source of pride or a source of painful self-discrepancy. This nuanced approach helps explain why people sometimes feel threatened by the success of loved ones but are genuinely proud of them in other circumstances.

Crucially, the SEM model further posits that individuals engage in specific behavioral and cognitive strategies to minimize the threat and maximize the benefit of their social interactions. These strategies include actively altering the relevance of the domain, changing the perceived closeness to the successful individual, or even influencing the performance of the other person. By engaging in such proactive maintenance behaviors, individuals ensure that their self-esteem remains protected from social comparison threats. The entire structure of the theory hinges on the innate human drive toward positive self-regard, utilizing the social environment as both a testing ground and a resource for self-affirmation, distinguishing it from related theories such as Social Comparison Theory which often focuses on objective comparison without the added variables of relevance and closeness.

2. Key Concepts and Components

The SEM model is built upon three core operational concepts that determine the self-evaluation outcome: the processes of reflection and comparison, and the moderating variables of closeness and relevance. These concepts interact dynamically to dictate whether an individual experiences a boost in self-esteem or a threat to their self-worth following another person's performance. Understanding the distinction between these two primary psychological mechanisms is essential to grasping the model's predictive power regarding self-evaluation maintenance within close relationships.

The **Reflection Process**, sometimes referred to as "basking in reflected glory," occurs when an individual gains self-esteem by associating themselves with the success of a close other in a domain that is **not relevant** to their own self-definition. For instance, if one's sibling wins a prestigious award for a sport that the individual does not participate in competitively, the individual can experience pride and an increase in self-esteem simply by association, utilizing the reflected glory. They feel good because someone close to them has succeeded, and this success is not perceived as a direct challenge or threat to their own identity. This process allows the individual to enjoy the positive implications of the success without triggering competitive mechanisms, thus bolstering their image through indirect association. The self-evaluation in this scenario is purely positive, utilizing the success of the close other as an affiliative resource.

In contrast, the **Comparison Process** is triggered when the close other performs well in a domain that is **highly relevant** to the individual's own self-concept and identity. In this situation, the close other's superior performance leads to a direct social comparison, which often results in a decrease in the individual's self-esteem. For example, if your sibling won a sports award and you were also a competitive athlete, you would use self-evaluation to compare yourself to your sibling, and likely feel a decrease in self-esteem if their performance surpassed yours. The comparison process transforms the success of the close other from a source of pride into a threatening standard that the individual feels they have failed to meet. This mechanism explains the often counter-intuitive finding that we sometimes feel worse about ourselves when a close associate succeeds than when a stranger succeeds.

3. Moderating Variables: Closeness and Relevance

The strength and direction (positive or negative) of the self-evaluation effect are profoundly moderated by two primary variables: **Closeness** and **Relevance**. These variables function as situational cues that determine which of the two primary psychological processes (reflection or comparison) is activated, thereby dictating the ultimate impact on self-esteem. Tesser's model emphasizes that these variables interact multiplicatively; the effect of one cannot be understood without considering the state of the other.

Closeness refers to the strength of the psychological bond between the individual and the successful other. This variable ranges from very close (e.g., immediate family, best friends) to distant (e.g., strangers, distant acquaintances). The SEM model posits that the effects, both positive (reflection) and negative (comparison), are magnified as closeness increases. If a stranger succeeds in a relevant domain, the threat to self-esteem is minimal. However, if a person very close to you succeeds in that same relevant domain, the threat is maximized because the comparison is more salient and personally meaningful. Similarly, basking in reflected glory feels better when the successful person is a close loved one than when it is a distant acquaintance.

Relevance (or domain importance) is the degree to which the performance area is central to the individual's self-concept, identity, or desired future self. If an individual defines themselves as a great writer, then writing ability is a highly relevant domain. If an activity is not central to their identity (e.g., cooking, if they are not a chef), then it holds low relevance. The SEM model establishes that relevance is the pivot point: high relevance activates comparison, while low relevance activates reflection. Individuals are motivated to increase the relevance of domains in which they excel and decrease the relevance of domains in which close others outperform them, as a strategic maintenance behavior.

The interaction between these two variables defines the resulting self-evaluation outcome. When closeness is high and relevance is low, the outcome is positive (reflection/PRIDE). For example, if your sibling wins a major award in a field you are not competitive in, your self-esteem is bolstered. When closeness is high and relevance is high, the outcome is potentially negative (comparison/THREAT). If you have close ties to a person who has interest in similar factors, it is more likely your self-esteem will suffer if they perform better than you. If closeness is low, regardless of relevance, the impact on self-evaluation is generally minimal, as the psychological processes are not strongly activated.

4. Behavioral Strategies for Self-Evaluation Maintenance

Because individuals are motivated to maintain positive self-regard, the SEM model predicts that people will actively engage in cognitive and behavioral maneuvers designed to ensure that the reflection process is maximized and the comparison process is minimized. These strategies demonstrate the proactive nature of self-esteem regulation within social contexts, transforming the model from a purely descriptive framework into one that predicts behavior aimed at reducing social threat.

One primary strategy involves influencing the **closeness** variable. If a close friend or family member begins to consistently outperform the individual in a highly relevant domain, one way to reduce the resulting self-threat is to decrease the psychological closeness to that person. This might manifest as avoiding the person, spending less time together, or simply redefining the

relationship as less intimate. Conversely, if a close other is succeeding in an irrelevant domain, the individual might seek to increase closeness, maximizing their ability to bask in that reflected success. This flexibility in defining social bonds serves as a crucial defensive mechanism against ego threat.

A second crucial strategy involves manipulating the **relevance** of the domain. If a close other is performing exceptionally well in an area where the individual is only mediocre, the individual can protect their self-esteem by cognitively redefining that domain as less important or less central to their identity. For example, a professional might minimize the importance of networking skills if a close colleague outperforms them significantly in that area, thus reducing the relevance of the colleague's success to their own self-concept. Conversely, if the individual themselves is performing well, they will increase the perceived relevance of that domain, ensuring that their own success yields maximum psychological benefit and self-affirmation.

Finally, and perhaps most subtly, the individual might engage in behaviors that influence the **performance** of the close other. In highly relevant domains, the model predicts that individuals may covertly undermine the other person's performance or subtly withhold crucial information or assistance, thereby reducing the risk of a threatening comparison. This mechanism, though seemingly negative, is a direct consequence of the self-maintenance drive. Experimental evidence supports this by showing that individuals are often less helpful to close friends than to strangers when success in the task determines self-relevant success.

5. Historical Development and Empirical Evidence

The Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model was formally introduced by Abraham Tesser in the early 1980s, building upon earlier work in social comparison and attribution theories, most notably Festinger's 1954 Social Comparison Theory. While Festinger focused primarily on the human desire for accurate self-evaluation through objective comparison, Tesser shifted the focus toward the affective consequences of comparison, particularly within established social networks. The SEM model provided a necessary refinement by introducing the critical roles of closeness and relevance, explaining why social comparison is not a uniformly ego-threatening process.

Early empirical validation of the SEM model relied heavily on experimental designs manipulating the variables of relevance and closeness. Tesser and his colleagues conducted classic studies, such as the "password game," which illustrated how participants' willingness to help another person was contingent upon the domain's relevance and the recipient's relationship to them. When the task was relevant to the participant's self-concept (e.g., intellectual ability), they were less likely to help a friend succeed than they were to help a stranger, demonstrating the comparison effect overriding altruistic motivations. When the task was irrelevant, they helped the friend more, demonstrating the reflection effect.

Subsequent research has extended the model into various applied settings, including academic achievement, workplace competition, and family dynamics. The model has proven robust in predicting interpersonal conflict and feelings of jealousy or resentment within close relationships, particularly when both partners share high aspirations in the same career field. The SEM model provided a powerful framework for interpreting competitive behaviors that appear irrational from a purely cooperative standpoint but are entirely rational from the perspective of self-esteem maintenance.

6. Applications and Examples

The principles of the SEM model are widely applicable across numerous social domains, providing insights into relationship choices, career decisions, and emotional responses to others' success. The model helps explain complex social phenomena where loyalty and competitive drive conflict, particularly within familial or professional partnerships.

In **Family Dynamics**, the SEM model is often cited to explain sibling rivalry. If two siblings both aspire to be professional musicians (high relevance), the success of one sibling is likely to cause self-esteem distress in the other (high closeness + high relevance = comparison). Conversely, if one sibling is a musician and the other is an accountant (low relevance overlap), the accountant sibling can genuinely celebrate the musician's success without feeling threatened (reflection). This explains why parents often encourage children to pursue distinct hobbies or interests--it reduces the chances of high-relevance comparisons.

In **Professional Settings**, the model predicts that professionals are generally happier for the success of a distant competitor or someone in a completely different field than for the success of a close colleague who is vying for the same promotion or resource. This often influences professional networking; individuals strategically cultivate relationships with those who complement their skills rather than those who directly compete, optimizing for reflection benefits over comparison threats. Managers must often manipulate the perceived relevance of tasks to manage team cohesion, ensuring that highly collaborative teams do not engage in destructive self-threatening comparisons.

The model also influences **Relationship Formation and Maintenance**. People may sometimes gravitate toward partners who are less successful in domains important to them (e.g., a highly successful academic might unconsciously choose a partner who values family life over career achievement) to minimize comparison threats and maximize their own sense of self-worth in relevant domains. When a partner starts excelling in a domain that suddenly becomes relevant to the individual (e.g., both partners start training for the same marathon), the relationship may experience tension as the comparison process takes hold, requiring cognitive adjustment of either closeness or relevance to maintain self-esteem and relationship stability.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

While the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model offers a compelling and empirically supported framework for understanding self-esteem regulation in social contexts, it is not without its criticisms and limitations, particularly regarding its scope and the complexity of its variables.

One major criticism relates to the **narrow focus on self-esteem** as the sole motivational driver. Critics argue that human motivation is multi-faceted, encompassing goals related to accuracy, mastery, and affiliation, which are sometimes prioritized over strictly maintaining a positive self-image. For example, a person might genuinely help a friend succeed in a relevant domain, even if it temporarily threatens their self-esteem, due to strong altruistic drives or long-term relationship maintenance goals. The model is sometimes criticized for presenting individuals as overly strategic and purely ego-centric, failing to account for complex social norms that mandate cooperation.

Another limitation lies in the operationalization of **closeness and relevance**. Defining and measuring these variables consistently across different cultural and social contexts can be challenging. What constitutes "close" varies significantly, and the relevance of a domain is often fluid and subject to change based on immediate feedback or social reinforcement. Furthermore, the model tends to simplify the nature of performance outcomes, often treating success and failure as binary, whereas real-world performance exists on a continuum and is subjectively interpreted, potentially weakening the model's predictive accuracy in ambiguous situations.

Finally, the SEM model primarily addresses dyadic interactions and may struggle to account for self-evaluation maintenance within large group settings or complex organizational structures where social comparisons are numerous and highly decentralized. While it excels at predicting outcomes in tight, high-stakes relationships, its explanatory power decreases when the social environment becomes diffused or when group identity (as opposed to individual identity) becomes the primary source of self-evaluation, suggesting a need for integration with broader Social Identity Theory frameworks.

Further Reading

[Self-Evaluation Maintenance Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Tesser, A. \(1988\). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 21, 181-227.](#)

[Simply Psychology: Self-Evaluation Maintenance Theory Explained](#)