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## The Self-Esteem Society

A report commissioned by The Cosmetic Toiletry and Perfumery Association (CTPA)  
and researched and written by Helen McCarthy, on behalf of Demos

## **About Demos**

Demos is a greenhouse for new ideas which can improve the quality of our lives. As an independent think tank, it aims to create an open resource of knowledge and learning that operates beyond traditional party politics. Demos connects researchers, thinkers and practitioners to an international network of people changing politics. Its ideas regularly influence government policy, but it also works with companies, NGOs, colleges and professional bodies.

For more information on Demos, go to:  
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## **About the CTPA**

The Cosmetic Toiletry and Perfumery Association represents a thriving, responsible and vibrant industry in the UK. Its members are manufacturers and distributors of cosmetic and toiletry products as well as ingredient suppliers. Covering a diverse range of products, the CTPA is the authoritative public voice on regulatory matters and best practices. The cosmetics industry is a substantial employer, contributing a positive balance of payments to the UK economy and providing exciting and innovative products to the consumer.

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## Foreword

By **Dr Chris Flower** *MSc PhD CBiol MIBiol*  
Director-General of the CTPA



**W**e've known for some time that 'looking good is feeling good'. Educationalists, personal development experts, employers and well-being specialists all recognise the importance of appearance to self-esteem. Confidence, pride and self-reliance are all underpinned by appearance, releasing or restricting the opportunity to fulfil one's potential. In short, beauty and appearance are more than skin deep.

But what does self-esteem mean to people; how do people value their own self-esteem and how can it contribute to active citizenship and a healthy nation? The Cosmetic, Toiletry and Perfumery Association (CTPA) commissioned Demos to explore the link between self-esteem and people's well-being to answer some of these questions.

The results offer fresh thinking to the debate and call for a reassessment of self-esteem, recognising it as an essential component to vibrant and healthy societies. This report demonstrates the positive side of self-esteem and challenges the traditional use of it in the negative context of explaining social problems. It explains that we live in a society where we lead increasingly open-ended lives, where people are more responsible for creating their own individuality than ever before. Yet it is also a society of high ideals. The result is that our self-confidence is often at risk as we struggle to live up to the high standards we create for ourselves.

The CTPA represents a British success story. Worth more than £6bn, the cosmetics industry provides training and jobs for tens of thousands of people. It's a thriving, responsible and innovative industry that provides products that meet the everyday needs of people. Yet the industry performs a more fundamental role than simply pampering – it underpins the nation's self esteem.

Self-esteem today is more important to have, yet harder to achieve. This has never been more important than now, when the nation's health is under siege. Whether in health issues such as obesity or in the nation's political apathy, there is a clear and present need for a positive appraisal of self-esteem - as a public good that contributes to active citizenship.

These are big issues. For us at the CTPA, it is reassuring that we can celebrate the value of self-esteem as a positive asset to society and one to which this industry strongly contributes. We hope this report adds insight to this evolving debate in which we all have a stake.



# The Self-Esteem Society: Executive Summary

Self-esteem is a concept that we all intuitively understand and use in everyday conversations. As a factor in our material and psychological well-being, its importance feels self-evident to us. Furthermore, there is broad consensus on the sources of self-esteem. Seventy-five per cent of adults polled for this research thought that having a supportive family was very important for building self-esteem, and almost half rated having a rewarding job and having confidence in one's appearance equally significant.

At the same time, **self-esteem is not evenly distributed across our society.** Our polling revealed a strong link between self-esteem and income, with the most affluent rating their self-esteem significantly higher than the poorest. Equally, men rate their self-esteem higher than women, and there are regional differences too, with the highest levels of self-esteem to be found in East Anglia and the lowest in the West Midlands.

So, whilst self-esteem remains an intimate affair for individuals, it is mediated through these wider social relationships. **Research over the past few decades has identified low self-esteem as a risk factor in a range of social problems, such as teenage pregnancy and unemployment among young men.** This has led to a series of promising social policy experiments, pioneered particularly strongly in the US, which attempt to raise the self-esteem of people at risk of social exclusion.

However, this focus in research and practice on the costs of *low* self-esteem means that creating a positive identity for the *high* self-esteem individual and his or her contribution to wider society has therefore been largely overlooked.

## **A positive identity for the high self-esteem individual**

This report, based on new polling data, a literature review and a number of expert interviews, **calls for a rethinking of how self-esteem is understood in Britain today.** To date, the *high* self-esteem individual has been conceptualised primarily in terms of an absence of the social problems associated with his or her opposite. This report argues that self-esteem should be understood as a personal tool that helps all of us to live our lives, and which has wider benefits regarding the quality of our public realm. It calls on policymakers to think of ways to improve the self-esteem of society as a whole, as well as targeting low self-esteem individuals.

## **The challenge of creating the Self-Esteem Society**

This is not an easy challenge but it is of critical importance to the health and well-being of modern societies. In advanced, post-industrial countries like Britain, **the challenge of surviving the complexities of modern life makes self-esteem both *more necessary* for individuals to have and *more difficult* to get and hold on to.** It is more *necessary* because we increasingly lead open-ended lives, where our identity and status are more a product of our own making than at times in the past. It requires deep emotional resilience and self-worth to navigate successfully through a world of extended possibilities.

It is more *difficult* because those inner resources are permanently at risk when we fail to live up to our (or others') ideals. Furthermore, factors outside our immediate control, such as family upbringing and early influences, have an enormous impact on our self-esteem; and structural inequalities regarding class, gender and ethnicity (amongst others) make it harder for some more than others to acquire and hold on to their self-esteem.

## **Building the Self-Esteem Society**

While governments may not yet have recognised the need to create this Self-Esteem Society, individuals certainly have. One only needs to look at the growth in the self-improvement industry, from personal development and 'working out' to alternative therapies, fashion and grooming. There is, inevitably, any number of possible explanations for these activities, but it seems clear that people in Britain today are genuinely trying to invest in their own self-esteem.

This report argues that public policy needs to recognise that although self-esteem is by definition a personal issue, its development should also be seen as a collective effort that can benefit everyone. This is because **the high self-esteem individual is able to make authentic choices and pursue activities for their own sake, which often involves holding institutions – public and private - accountable and challenging the status quo. This applies not only in politics and civic life, but in wider forms of social participation and cultural consumption.** These activities then create positive externalities from which we all collectively benefit, and give self-esteem the status of a public good.

For this vision of the Self-Esteem Society to have meaning, individuals and institutions together must bring it to life. There are various steps that a range of stakeholders, including government, employers, the voluntary sector, business and the media can take to maximise the opportunities available to individuals for gaining self-esteem. These fall under three broad principles:

### **Principle One**

#### **Challenge the system of social valuation that threatens self-esteem**

The opportunities for all of us to subvert conventional roles are plentiful, from fashion and gendered identities to sources of status and the value attached to material wealth. Government and employers can support our desire for self-expression and personal autonomy by promoting a quality of life agenda. Equally, business and the media should offer more varied and balanced images of success as a core part of corporate social responsibility.

### **Principle Two**

#### **Promote positive forms of social capital that build self-esteem**

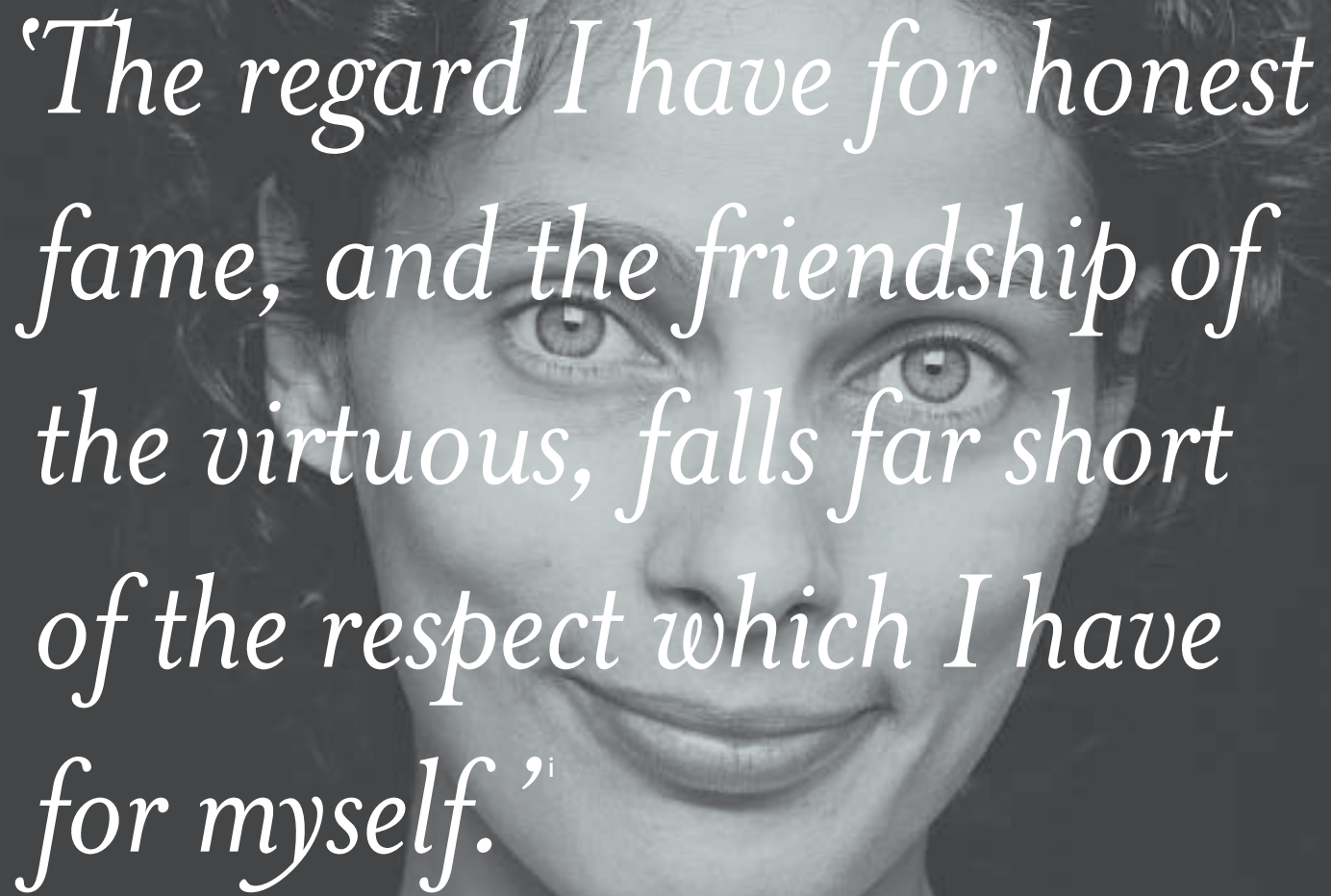
Not everyone has easy access to opportunities for building self-esteem through social participation. Everyday activities, such as personal grooming, sport and music can provide individuals at risk of exclusion with routes to better self-esteem if supported in the right way. Government and the voluntary sector therefore should collaborate to identify best practice and to develop a stronger evidence base about what works in this field, especially in the field of parenting and early years. Business should support these initiatives through corporate community investment and cause-related marketing strategies.

### **Principle Three**

#### **Recognise self-esteem as a pre-requisite for democracy**

Formal politics struggles to connect individuals' emotional lives and desires to the bigger story of institutional reform. Self-esteem provides exactly this conceptual link. Government should use it as a tool to transform a range of policy contexts: for understanding how to get people into work; for developing the 'life skills' agenda that looks beyond formal qualifications and training; and for the mighty task of modernising public services.





*'The regard I have for honest fame, and the friendship of the virtuous, falls far short of the respect which I have for myself.'*

Mary Wollstonecraft, 1790



1

## Introduction

*'The regard I have for honest fame, and the friendship of the virtuous, falls far short of the respect which I have for myself.'*<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of political theorist and early feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft in 1790 regarding that personal attribute she called 'enlightened self-love,' but which today we might just as easily recognise as self-esteem. At the heart of Wollstonecraft's thought was the belief that a healthy regard for the self and a commitment to cultivating one's 'inner resources' were integral to the good citizen and a pre-requisite for the good life.

However, Wollstonecraft was not the earliest advocate for the personal and social efficacy of self-esteem. The Greeks held 'oikeiosis' or self-love as the ultimate goal, and the idea that self-knowledge is a way of knowing God was central to the origins of many world religions, from Christianity to Hinduism. The first use of the term 'self-esteem' is dated by the Oxford English Dictionary from the 1600s, and it translates across many languages. For the French, it is 'amour-propre'; in Italy, Portugal and Brazil, 'amor proprio'; and in Germany 'Selbstwertgefuehl' (literally translated means 'self-worth-feeling').

Concepts of self-worth or self-regard have animated all societies and cultures from time immemorial. And yet, it is this very universalism that makes the deployment and application of self-esteem in contemporary contexts somewhat problematic. Quite literally, thousands of scholarly articles, studies and books exist on the subject. And for the layman or woman, thousands more self-help manuals, popular psychology books and parenting or relationship guides promise to lay bare the secret to better self-esteem. A simple search on amazon.co.uk turns up nearly 4,000 titles.

It is a concept that we all intuitively understand and regularly use in our everyday vocabulary. As a factor in our physical and psychological well-being, the value of self-esteem almost goes without saying. Nonetheless, this has created challenges for researchers seeking to study self-esteem empirically and systematically; and for policymakers and practitioners attempting to incorporate self-esteem into evidence-based policy and practice targeting a range of social problems.

Some claim that we have become almost *too* quotidian in our casual use of self-esteem, to the point that it risks losing its credibility entirely. With self-esteem it seems everyone's an expert. There has also been something of a backlash against self-esteem in recent years - or rather, against the self-improvement 'industry' which stands accused of commodifying self-esteem, packaging it and claiming it as its own.<sup>ii</sup>

But these readings fail to recognise the extent to which these more populist or 'buzz' expressions of self-esteem have democratised and brought to the masses what before was largely a social scientist's term. Indeed, activities often associated with self-improvement, such as beauty, health and fitness, education, or personal and professional development, can and do add value to the lives of a wide range of individuals every year. From the harassed CEO right down to the disaffected schoolchild, investing in self-esteem has its pay-offs.

But if self-esteem is to be a personal tool for living that is accessible to all, it is necessary to be clear about how and where it is valuable. This will involve re-assessing and broadening out the contexts in which self-esteem has been largely located to date. Factors such as family background, education and socio-economic status play an enormous role as indicators of self-esteem. And self-esteem has been linked to behaviours problematic for both the individuals directly affected and the wider society, such as teenage pregnancy, eating disorders and unemployment amongst certain groups.

Yet this focus on the costs of self-esteem in the research literature has supported narrow explanations of why it should be valued, centred around the ideal of an orderly society immune to ills such as crime, unemployment and other forms of welfare dependency. Instead, self-esteem should be re-located on the higher plane of human flourishing, social participation and the good life – exactly where Wollstonecraft placed it in the late 18th century.

This is about restoring the link between the agency and motivation of the individual and the fortunes of the collective. Functioning societies need self-confident citizens, and vibrant democracies require those citizens to challenge authority and hold institutions accountable. These are tasks that can only be achieved where individuals believe in their own agency and value the contribution they know themselves capable of making. To this end, self-esteem, whilst remaining an intimate affair for each individual, has a status similar to that of a public good, the benefits of which we all collectively consume.

As we will see, opportunities for making this vision of the efficacy of self-esteem a reality are not accessible to all. The politics of self-esteem are complex and fully implicated in much wider debates around how we organise our society and economy, and the pressures this exerts on the way we work and consume, and on our aspirations to lead full and fulfilling lives.

Nonetheless, there are paths that both individuals and institutions can follow to ease these pressures and create spaces in which positive and authentic choices can be made. Based on specially commissioned polling data, expert interviews and a review of the current literature, this report begins to describe those paths. It first examines the methodological challenges inherent in any study of self-esteem, moves on to assess its significance for contemporary societies, and then uncovers the tensions that emerge when self-esteem is used by political and commercial interests. It concludes by presenting three new principles for making sense of self-esteem, which will help a wide range of stakeholders to reassess how it informs their thinking, strategy and practice.

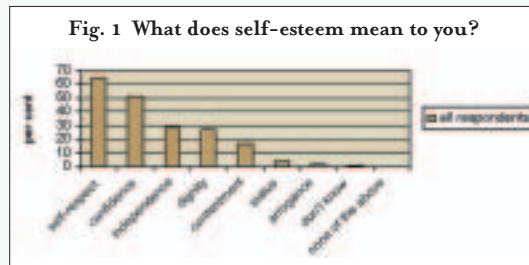


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## Meanings and Methods

Self-esteem is a concept with high recognition status. Unlike many other words and phrases used by academics and policymakers, self-esteem has an immediate resonance for a much wider, populist audience. Most of us regularly refer to our or others' self-esteem to account for a range of relatively humdrum behaviours or outcomes, whether it's asking for a pay-rise or talking to strangers at dinner parties.

Furthermore, most people are in fairly close agreement about the core meaning of self-esteem. Sixty-five per cent of adults polled for this research, when asked what self-esteem meant to them, chose 'self-respect' and 52% chose 'confidence'. Whilst there was more variation around the relevance of 'independence', 'dignity' and 'contentment' for understanding self-esteem, respondents were in agreement that 'status' and 'arrogance' have little to do with it. See fig. 1.



This general popular consensus is supplemented by the various conceptual models of self-esteem developed by scholars as a prerequisite to studying it empirically and measuring its impact. It's worth reviewing these here because they force us to think more precisely about what we mean when we talk about self-esteem. They also inform a great deal of research, policy and practice.

Harvard professor William James made one of the earliest attempts in 1890, when he defined self-esteem as the simple formula of success divided by pretensions. In James' view, self-esteem is determined by one's performance measured against one's original aspirations, rather than by any objective measure of 'success.' Yet that relativity in assessing our own worth encompasses how we imagine *others* judge us too, as sociologist Charles Horton Cooley argued a decade later. We routinely internalise an understanding of ourselves that is communicated to us by others, through the way they treat us, behave towards us, praise us or criticise us.

We do have the ability to discriminate between our potential critics, allowing us to take the opinions (or imagined opinions) of some more seriously while we ignore or block out the less complimentary messages. However, not everyone is able to do this as effectively as they might like. Children, for example, have little power in choosing in whose company they spend the majority of their formative childhood years. The substantial influence of family on self-esteem helps to explain why so much research and practice in this field focuses on children, young people and their parents.

Finally, our self-esteem is mediated by how we feel we measure up to others in terms of achievement and success. As Leon Festinger argued in his theory of social comparison, we seldom have absolute or objective standards against which we can judge ourselves. It then becomes crucial *who* we choose for comparison. Most commonly, it's our immediate peer groups, as writer Alain de Botton argues in his book *Status Anxiety*: 'There are people whose enormous blessings leave us wholly untroubled, others whose minor advantages act as sources of relentless torment. We envy only those whom we feel ourselves to be like; we envy only members of our reference group. There are few successes more unendurable than those of our close friends.'<sup>iii</sup> Or as Richard Reeves, Director of the ideas consultancy Intelligence Agency, puts it: 'our benchmarks are very, very local.'

Measurements of self-esteem usually rely upon people's self-reports of their feelings or opinions of themselves. Scholars have taken different approaches to the study of self-esteem over the years, coming up with a range of models and measures, which can make comparison of studies problematic, if not in some cases impossible.

However, the model with the widest currency in the literature is the 10 point scale developed by Morris Rosenberg, the father of self-esteem research, in 1965. The Rosenberg scale, regarded by many as the gold standard, measures self-esteem as an evaluative attitude towards the self, and has been used in many studies over the past forty years. It is reproduced opposite. To work out your score on a scale of one to ten, simply add up the number of times you agree with a positive statement and the number of times you disagree with a negative statement.

- 1 On the whole I am satisfied with myself
- 2 At times, I think I am no good at all
- 3 I think that I have a number of good qualities
- 4 I am able to do things as well as most other people
- 5 I feel I do not have much to be proud of
- 6 I certainly feel useless at times
- 7 I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others
- 8 I wish I could have more respect for myself
- 9 All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure
- 10 I take a positive attitude towards myself

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press)

Where self-esteem is conceptually useful is in encouraging us to think about the quality of our relationship *with ourselves* as a segue into considering our place in the wider world and our behaviours towards others. This relationship goes beyond happiness or what policymakers and economists prefer to call 'life satisfaction' or 'subjective well-being.'<sup>iv</sup> These two technocratic terms have little power to fire the popular imagination, and give little sense of the more 'agentic' nature of self-esteem – that is, the ability to act with autonomy and purpose. As **Richard Reeves** explains:

*To me self-esteem is about a belief in one's own agency. It's the thought that I can do things in the world: If I do A, B will happen. I can manipulate the world around me. Taking action requires that self-belief and confidence on the part of the individual.*

It is this active, enabling dimension of self-esteem that makes it such an important tool for leading full lives. But first, we must look more closely at the contemporary context for our discussion of self-esteem.





3

Open-Ended Lives

**D**espite its timeless nature, self-esteem has a distinctive significance for us that spins out of the peculiar conditions of modern living. In short, self-esteem is both *more* necessary for survival in advanced, post-industrial societies and *more* difficult to get and hold on to.

The conditions of 'modernity' have been discussed and debated at length by a long and distinguished line of philosophers and theorists whose ideas and influence cannot be done full justice in this report. But if we were looking for a short cut, the central dilemma for building self-esteem (and holding on to it) in modern societies could be summed up in one of our greatest contemporary myths: *Anyone can achieve anything and be whoever they want to be if they want it enough and are prepared to do whatever it takes to get there.*

We cling to this maxim because it is, we believe, what makes our society open, fair, and democratic, as opposed to the rigid hierarchies based on birth and rank of times past. And certainly, life chances in Britain have opened up considerably in the period since World War Two. The expansion of access to higher education over the past 30 years, for example, has weakened the link between class origins and social status. Discrimination on the basis of sex, race or disability is outlawed in employment. Social attitudes towards gender roles, family structure, sexuality or unconventional lifestyles have softened over the same period, freeing up the possibilities for self-determination and experimenting with personal identity.

### **Social mobility, inequality and self-esteem**

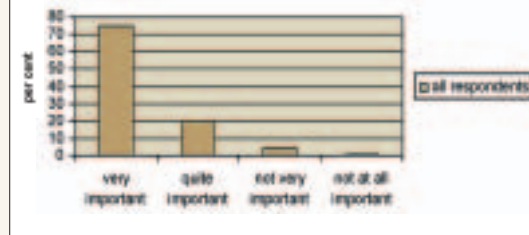
Clearly, this narrative of progress has implications for how we judge our own worth. In traditional societies, an individual's position in the hierarchy is fixed at birth. As long as you don't fall out and into a lower rank, your self-esteem, or psychological contentment at least, is guaranteed.

In contrast, modern secular societies open up the routes to self-worth by extending opportunities for social mobility and enlarging the space for self-expression and identity formation. This freedom, whilst to be celebrated, is a double-edged sword, for with it too comes insecurity and uncertainty. When self-esteem is shaped by what each one of us makes of our lives, it becomes a fragile entity, as any failing or misfortune can only be what we deserve.

But of course, Britain is a long way off from being a perfectly open society, despite its more progressive recent history. Inequalities based on class, gender, race, disability and many other factors still shape, in varying degrees, the likely outcomes of our lives. In one respect, the persistence of these barriers to equality of opportunity actually provides some psychological solace, in so far as we can understand our failings in terms of the absence of a level playing field, overt or unconscious discrimination, or simply bad luck, rather than as a genuine reflection of our talents. Yet, ultimately, they hold us back.

In addition, there are other factors outside of our control that have huge bearing on self-esteem. Experts and non-experts alike agree that the single most important factor in securing self-esteem is a supportive family, whose influence begins to make its mark from a child's earliest years. This was ranked as important or very important by an overwhelming 95% of polling respondents [see fig. 2]. What constitutes 'good' or 'bad' parenting remains controversial, yet it is fair to say that there are many children who do not enjoy the sort of early years experiences that we would hope for them.

**Fig. 2 Having a supportive family as a factor in building self-esteem**



*Parents and carers are incredibly important. That's where it starts really - where children develop a good sense of self through their parents praising them, talking to them, listening to them, engaging with them. It's not hopeless if it's not there from the age of 1 or 2, or certainly 3-5 – those are the crucial years. But it's best if the groundwork has already been laid.*

**Sarah Benioff**, Community Development Foundation

## Self-Esteem and 'Project: Me'

So what makes us different can also make us unequal. And yet, self-esteem remains fundamental, in so far as realisation of self is at the centre of every individual's life project, regardless of their social location. This, after all, is what freedom is ultimately about. But it is a project that requires work. The sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that these days, personal identity is to be found in an individual's 'capacity to keep a particular narrative going'; to 'integrate events which occur in the external world', and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, failure to do so has implications for our self-esteem. Just as we would find it difficult to pass judgement on a stranger, we struggle to value ourselves positively when we have no stable idea of who we are as people. The ambiguous nature of identity certainly extends the opportunities for self-expression and creativity. But it also creates the potential for feeling enormous anxiety as we wonder whether we will ever be the person we hope to become.

*In large part, self-esteem is about how far you've attained your goals and how far you measure up to your ideals. Are you advancing towards your goals, or are your goals advancing away from you? Ideals are particularly important for understanding self-esteem, because they suggest that you are imagining yourself moving towards some future, more perfect state.*

**Alain de Botton**

As we will see below, the race for self-realisation (or 'Project: Me') manifests itself in a variety of forms in Britain today, from make-overs and life coaching to youth mentoring projects and parenting classes, and presents us with a complex social barometer that can be read in various ways. One reading might see Britain as a 'could-do-better' nation, characterised by constant striving for self-improvement, personal development and social mobility. An alternative reading could pick out the many casualties of low self-esteem - individuals who, for a variety of reasons can't, or simply don't want to try harder.

The complex reality is inevitably somewhere between the two. Yet our tendency to polarise obscures the hard reality of living open-ended lives: we need strong emotional resilience and high self-worth to make the most of a world of infinite possibilities. Developing and keeping that inner strength is made all the more difficult where uncertainty is the only thing we can be sure of in our lives.

Until we understand in greater detail the obstacles to living harmoniously with ourselves, we have little chance of improving our prospects for living peacefully and constructively with others. It is to the apparently conflicting trends evident in Britain today that the next chapter turns.



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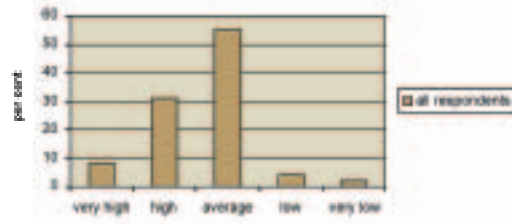
The Highs and the Lows:  
the paradox of self-esteem  
in Britain

So is Britain a high self-esteem society or a low self-esteem ghetto? The answer is, it's both. Health and fitness are all the rage, but obesity and alcohol abuse are also on the rise. Personal and professional development have never been more popular; yet we are more stressed and time-pressured at work than ever before. What this apparent paradox tells is a story of symbiosis - about how the opportunities and pressures of modern life are mutually reinforcing, and how this creates unique challenges for building and holding onto self-esteem.

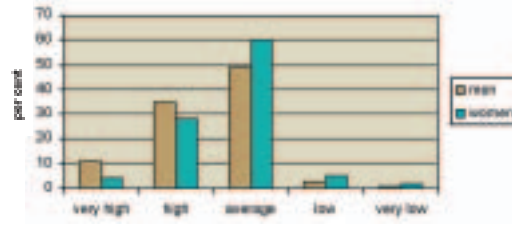
We can be heartened by the polling data, which paints a generally upbeat picture. When asked to rate their own levels of self-esteem, our respondents provided a suitably measured response: a slim majority (55%) rated themselves average, with the remainder of the balance falling towards high or very high (39%), with only 6% falling into the low or very low categories [see fig. 3].

Yet these findings vary between groups. For example, in figure 4 we can see that men rate themselves higher than women (a finding consistent with many other studies), as do social grades ABs, C1s and C2s, compared to Ds and Es. In fact, there appears to be an almost perfect correlation between high socio-economic status and high self-esteem [see fig. 5]. The relationship between self-esteem and age, however, appears less straightforward, as self-esteem peaks amongst the 35-44 year olds before declining amongst the older age groups [see fig. 6].

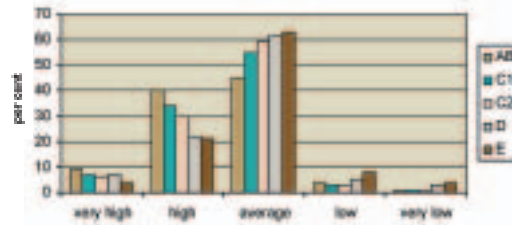
**Fig. 3 How would you rate your self-esteem?**



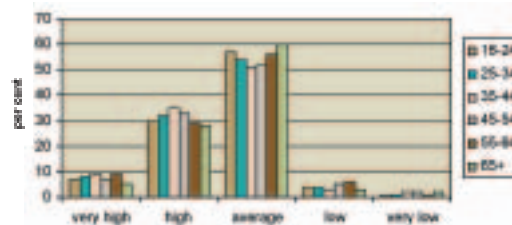
**Fig. 4 How would you rate your self-esteem?**



**Fig. 5 How would you rate your self-esteem?**



**Fig. 6 How would you rate your self-esteem?**



This data provides a useful snapshot of the reported distribution of self-esteem amongst Britons at one moment in time, but it is limited without placing it into a wider context. It makes sense, therefore, to look more closely at some of the broader social trends which provide the backdrop to this story.

### In pursuit of self-actualisation...

If you value yourself, you will look after yourself, and seek to invest in your well-being and on-going development. It's a simple enough logic. As Rosenberg and Owens argue, high self-esteem individuals seek growth, development and improvement by pushing themselves to the limit in order to discover and exercise their capabilities.<sup>vi</sup> Psychologist Abraham Maslow describes this desire to become everything that one can become as self-actualisation: 'what a person can be, he or she must be.'<sup>vii</sup>

This motivation might be detected in a number of trends at work in Britain today, from the increasing popularity of executive coaching and adult education to rising interest in personal growth and alternative paths to spiritual fulfilment.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, the popularity of TV shows such as *Life Laundry* and the rise of an industry of de-clutter experts, consultants and coaches demonstrates the link that we are increasingly making between our emotional and spiritual well-being and the environment we create for ourselves in which to live, work and play. Whilst these less conventional designs for living are not entirely new, it is only in the last decade or so that they have become mainstream, popular pastimes – perhaps best epitomised by the appointment in November 2003 of a 'Spirituality Editor' at *Cosmopolitan* magazine, one of Britain's best-selling women's monthlies.

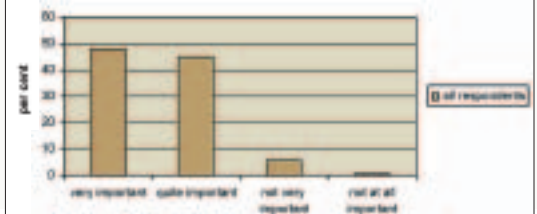
*It is unhealthy to hold on to the old, stale energy, emotions and physical reminders of things that happened in the past. They prevent you from living in the present, promote low self-esteem and can cause health problems on the physical level.*

From *The Life Laundry: How To De-Junk Your Life*  
by Dawn Walter and Mark Franks (BBC)

The same reasoning applies too to our growing interest in health and fitness. According to MORI, 22% of us have used a gym, a figure that rises to 44% amongst 18-24 year olds. Another survey found that spending on health and fitness clubs rose 179% between 1993 and 2003.<sup>ix</sup> Our changing eating habits reflect a move towards healthier diets, perhaps yet another sign of our increasing concern for looking after our bodies as well as our souls.<sup>x</sup> In addition, dieting for sustained weight loss has been boosted by the appearance of popular new regimes such as Atkins, estimated to have been tried by around 3 million Britons.<sup>xi</sup>

Of course fitness and diet are both linked to a concern for our physical appearance, which has become an integral part of the self-improvement project. An overwhelming 93% of those polled thought feeling confident in their appearance was an important or very important factor in building self-esteem. [see fig. 7]

**Fig. 7 Importance of feeling confident in your appearance as a factor for building self-esteem**



### ...Or filling a gap?

Looked at this way, these trends support an upbeat picture of Britain's reserves of self-esteem. However, nudge the spotlight slightly, and might they just as easily sustain an alternative reading? As Owens and Rosenberg are at pains to point out, people with *low* self-esteem often strive to improve themselves *too*, but are motivated by their sense of deficiency, rather than a desire to build on the capabilities they already possess.<sup>xii</sup>

Nowhere has this been more powerfully articulated than in feminist critiques of the diet and beauty industries. These argue that the power interests at work both encourage and exploit women's dissatisfaction with their body-image, and are responsible for any number of eating disorders and negative feelings towards the self.<sup>xiii</sup>

Whilst there is little direct evidence to support the conspiracy thesis, studies demonstrate that perceived societal pressures to be thin do indeed appear to predict dieting and eating pathology.<sup>xiv</sup> As Susie Orbach and others have argued, the beauty industry often promotes a message of entitlement encouraging women to aspire to high standards of physical beauty as a treat or reward, without appreciating the wider social impact this has on women's self-esteem and body image.

And yet at the same time, there are examples of where the negativity characterising much debate around body image has been turned on its head. Industry initiatives or advertising campaigns that depict alternative images of beauty serve to challenge an interpretation of our culture's concern with physical appearance as either wholly frivolous or wholly exploitative. These are the sorts of steps that can begin to break down cultural and social pressures to conform to one physical standard.

This perspective on the tensions inherent in societal ideals - such as beauty - helps to shed light on the paradoxical nature of self-esteem. These trends towards self-actualisation co-exist alongside other behaviours that appear unconstructive, risky, irrational or self-destructive, such as eating unhealthily, heavy drinking, taking drugs, having unprotected sex, playing truant at school or absenteeism from work.

Yet the relationship between the two sets of trends is not simply one of co-existence: it is more like a symbiosis. As De Botton argues: 'With any ideal of the good life you'll get the opposite going on.' In open, free societies, individuals must make their own choices and take responsibility for their own lives. Self-esteem is an inner tool which helps us in this task, but it is not an asset or commodity on which we can faithfully rely throughout our lives. It is crucial that we recognise the inherent instability and unequal distribution of self-esteem in open societies. Furthermore, we must learn how to better identify the risk and resilience factors mediating our self-esteem. This will enable individuals to make choices that maximise rather than compromise their feelings of self-worth, and it will provide institutions with the know-how to support those choices.





5

Cause and Consequence

The complexities set out in the previous chapter have not, generally, been reflected in the approach taken by researchers to the study of self-esteem in social context. In large part, these studies have focused on the costs of low self-esteem, exploring links with teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, unemployment, depression and countless other social ills.

The benefits of higher self-esteem are largely described in terms of an absence of the problems associated with its opposite, rather than through any positive affirmation of the high self-esteem citizen. Yet it is exactly this positive identity that we need to uncover and articulate if self-esteem is to regain its purpose as a tool to help us live our lives.

Researchers and policy experts have sought to make sense of the role of low self-esteem in perpetuating negative social behaviours by developing a number of theoretical models, four of which are set out here:

#### **Model 1**

The 'Esteem Enhancement' theory: individuals with low self-esteem hope that by engaging in activity X they will be able to enhance their self-esteem. There are many examples of where this might take place, such as smoking to look 'cool' amongst peers, or drug abuse as a way of escaping one's low self-esteem on a temporary basis.

#### **Model 2**

The 'Self-Abuse' theory: individuals with little regard for themselves are likely to treat themselves badly, engaging in behaviours that risk damaging their health and well-being. The classic examples here relate to drug abuse, unprotected sex, smoking and drinking to excess as well as self-harm and eating disorders.

#### **Model 3**

The 'Social Standing' theory: individuals with low self-esteem believe that others' opinions of them are already so low that engaging in socially deviant behaviours will make little difference to how they are judged. This case has been made with regard to criminal activity, alcoholism and drug addiction.

#### **Model 4**

The 'Peer Influence' theory: low self-esteem individuals are particularly susceptible to external influence and pressures from others to engage in risky behaviours, such as criminal activity, drugs or unprotected sex. This theory is most commonly applied to young people and informs many health campaigns designed around a 'just say no'-style message.

From Emler, N (2001) *Self-Esteem: the costs and causes of low self-worth* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York)

These models inform much of the research into self-esteem and a great deal of social and youth work and may seem to make intuitive sense. Yet they are supported by an imperfect evidence base. Some of the most robust data relates to teenage pregnancy, where a link between very low self-esteem and risk of pregnancy at a young age has been established by several studies, as well as being borne out by practitioners who work with young mothers.

*For girls, this is a way of increasing your self-worth or self-importance of standing within the family. It may be the first time they feel loved by another person.*

**Sarah Benioff**, Community Development Foundation

*Younger single mothers told us in recent research that becoming a parent forces them to grow up and become responsible, and maybe their self-esteem is lifted as a result.*

**Kate Green**, One Parent Families

A link between poor self-esteem and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa is also supported by the available evidence, and appears to follow the 'esteem enhancement' theory too.

*'Weight loss is experienced as a positive achievement and, therefore, may be strongly reinforcing to someone with low confidence and poor self-esteem.'*

NICE (2004) *Eating Disorders: NICE Guideline* (NICE, London)

Other research, mainly carried out with young people, supports a link between self-esteem and suicidal thoughts or attempting suicide; depression or feelings of unhappiness; unemployment and low incomes in early adulthood (for men) and having difficulty in forming and sustaining successful close relationships. However, areas in which the research does *not* support a link with self-esteem (although nor does it conclusively rule one out) include criminal behaviours, drug abuse, smoking, excessive use of alcohol, academic failure, or treating others badly.

Other studies cloud the picture even further; by suggesting that very *high* self-esteem may be linked to negative behaviours too, such as holding prejudiced attitudes towards ethnic minority groups and engaging in physically risky pursuits.<sup>29</sup> The possible explanation for the former is far from clear; although the latter might be explained by turning the self-abuse theory on its head, arguing that individuals with high self-esteem can feel confident that the risks entailed in taking drugs or having unprotected sex (for example) do not apply to them.

The inadequacy of the evidence base in these areas is problematic for those working with young people or adults at risk of these or other related behaviours. Much could and should be done through partnership between public and voluntary practitioners and the research community to address this gap in our knowledge and move towards identifying effective interventions for raising self-esteem.

It is important, though, that research does not only explore the relevance of self-esteem for explaining social *problems*. This helps to perpetuate a language that presents self-esteem as an issue only for those who don't have it, or who seek it in ways that endanger their well-being or that of other people. Instead, we need to create a new identity for self-esteem that centres around citizenship, personal agency and full human flourishing.

However, the fact that research to date has taken the path it has provides an important insight into how problems are socially constructed and identified with certain groups. This often leads to stigmatisation, and can be the case even where the behaviour in question - such as alcoholism, drug abuse or lone parenthood - is not exclusively limited to that group.

This happens because those problems are constructed and given meaning within a public realm, where an individual's self-esteem is no longer a personal but intensely political affair. It is to the politics of self-esteem that the next chapter turns.



6

The Politics of Self-Esteem

As a concept with such popular usage, self-esteem has a legitimate place in the broader public debate around rights and responsibilities and the relationship between individuals and the state. Social policy is often an area that divides opinion, particularly regarding prescriptions for reducing so-called 'welfare dependency' and tackling wider social inequalities. While self-esteem does not provide the solution to every societal conflict or tension, it does represent a social policy tool with significant potential.

Arguably the best-known occasion on which self-esteem became an explicit object of policy was the Californian Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, convened in 1989 to tackle the apparently endemic levels of social dysfunction in the state. John Vasconcellos, the politician and mastermind behind the Task Force made his case by describing self-esteem as a 'social vaccine' against future outbreaks of teenage pregnancy; educational underachievement; juvenile delinquency; domestic violence; drug dealing; alcohol addiction and child abuse amongst other social ills.

The significance of such a high-profile intervention was to confirm the status of self-esteem as a concept worthy of political attention and government action. Investing in policies designed to alleviate these sorts of problems is, after all, a central part of the project of modern governments. The legitimacy of the state rests on its ability to act in the public interest and provide for the well-being of its citizens, including the neediest.

Yet the *nature* of government intervention in these cases is nearly always controversial and has divided political opinion for centuries. How policy treats individuals in poverty or unemployment, engaged in or on the margins of crime, involved in substance abuse and so forth not only shapes life chances. It also suggests a diagnosis of how those individuals got into those unfortunate circumstances in the first place, and, consequentially, whether they, or society as a whole, should be held responsible.

Self-esteem does not sit outside these dilemmas. As we have seen, social relationships of various kinds shape the opportunities available to individuals for acquiring and holding on to their self-esteem, and these have important implications for policymakers seeking to use self-esteem as a social policy tool.

Gloria Steinem makes these sorts of connections in her book *Revolution from Within*. In her analysis of the self-help literature, Steinem found that its discussion of self-esteem failed to link the challenge of building a sense of inner worth to the external barriers that threaten to undermine that task, such as inequality, discrimination and prejudice. Instead, Steinem argues, the popular literature glosses over the ways in which the construction, destruction or renewal of one's self-esteem take place in a social context, in which some have better life chances than others. Or, as the sociologist Richard Sennett points out: 'someone at the bottom of the social order can achieve self-respect but its possession is fragile.'<sup>xvi</sup>

Much current social policy and practice in the UK recognises this wider context, even if the link with self-esteem has not been made as explicitly as it was in California. For example, the Sure Start programme provides services for pre-school children in areas of deprivation and actively involves parents, who are likely themselves to have had poor experiences in their early years leading to low self-worth. In this way, Sure Start can be understood as an attempt on the part of government to level the opportunities for building self-esteem amongst children in their early years.

*External forces should be taken more seriously. If you look at the forces on the parents - and they often are lacking in self-esteem too - you'll see poverty, unemployment, poor health or inadequate housing, and you understand that the solution has to be a combination of working on the individual **and** addressing those wider social forces.*

**Sarah Benioff**, Community Development Foundation

*We believe that there must be infrastructure changes to enable lone parents to participate fully – and that means childcare and flexible working. Our philosophy is that parents have a right to expect a supportive state, and the state should not abdicate responsibility.*

**Kate Green**, One Parent Families

Many teaching professionals, particularly those working with children from deprived or chaotic family backgrounds, intuitively understand supporting the development of a student's self-esteem to be part of their role.<sup>xvii</sup> Another highly visible example of an intervention designed to redistribute self-esteem is positive or affirmative action in higher education. This involves making judgements about individuals who belong to an under-represented group on the basis of

their *assumed potential ability* - that is, ability that does not yet exist.<sup>xviii</sup> This can be crucial for extending opportunities to flourish and develop to those at risk of low self-esteem. As Sennett argues, 'the bald judgement "you have little potential" is devastating in a way "you have made a mistake" is not.'<sup>xix</sup>

These attempts to nurture self-esteem amongst at-risk groups can invite controversy in so far as they highlight the underlying structures of social inequality that still exist in our society. Thus the political nature of self-esteem, or rather, of how one accesses the most powerful sources of self-esteem, touches on the most fundamental question of how we structure and organise society. The dilemma for policymakers relates to the limits of the state in extending that access to all its citizens. Should each and every one of us take on sole responsibility for his or her own self-esteem? Or should we be entitled to self-esteem as a social right, available universally from cradle to grave, regardless of income?

Clearly, this is not a question for government alone, but reaches much further towards the wider social and economic forces at play in our lives. A very visible measure of an individual's place in an unequal society is their ability to participate in consumer culture. Ostentatious consumption as a route to status and prestige is nothing new, dating back at least to the consumer revolution of the late 18th century. Yet *aspirational* consumption is more central to our popular culture than ever before, embodied in much vaunted celebrity lifestyles, designer labels, advertising, and music videos. What we buy, the products we use, the clothes we wear, and the food we eat is a key part of our identity and have become vehicles for our pursuit of self-improvement, as we saw in chapter 4.

## Rethinking Self-Esteem

So if self-esteem is a political minefield, how do we navigate a safe course through it and deploy it as an effective social policy tool?

The first step in breaking out of this dichotomy is to shake off our anxiety around self-esteem, both as individuals and collectively. We each benefit personally from having self-esteem, in terms of identity formation and life-chances. Yet self-esteem is also a form of human capital that generates positive externalities from which we all benefit more widely, rather in the same way as we do from universal education or a public healthcare system.

This points towards making some sort of social investment in the nation's self-esteem. Yet it is human infrastructure in question here, rather than schools or hospitals, and the outcomes cannot be neatly measured in terms of GDP, crime statistics or GCSE results.

Economist Amartya Sen argues that the end of all development efforts should be to expand 'the real freedoms that people enjoy.'<sup>28</sup> But this involves more than governments or other agencies delivering services designed to secure individuals' physical or material well-being. Rather, it requires them to harness the agency of those individuals themselves in bringing about change and taking control of their destinies.

Self-esteem is central to this task of expanding freedoms. Without it, it is difficult to see how individuals can lead full lives. This suggests two things:

**1** *Having self-esteem does not require total self-sufficiency. This is the central problem with the 'social vaccine' theory, which promotes an ideal citizen who costs the state and society nothing. In reality, we are all dependent to some extent on others, including those beyond our immediate family, and others rely on us too. Government and other institutions need to find ways of recognising and supporting these forms of interdependency as part of any strategy aimed at raising self-esteem.*

**2** *Leading on from this, the high self-esteem citizen is not socially invisible. Rather, he or she is visibly active, participating in a range of social arenas from politics and community activities to popular and consumer culture. Self-esteem is a tool that helps the individual to navigate his or her way through the contradictions of living an open-ended life, and to challenge and hold accountable the institutions that shape our society.*

But this form of citizenship will not emerge unless we decide to make it happen. No single institution or actor can bestow self-esteem upon an individual (or take it away) at will. Yet they can and do shape the context in which all of us develop our sense of self-worth. What, then, can government, business, voluntary organisations and other stakeholders do to support Britain as a Self-Esteem Society?







7

## Building the Self-Esteem Society

Despite its many complexities, this report has argued throughout that self-esteem remains a valuable tool, and one suited to our time. Some critics have argued that it needs to be used with greater precision, and that the multiple meanings and contexts strip self-esteem of its explanatory power. Yet what this reading fails to appreciate is that whilst the democratic nature of self-esteem may be its greatest weakness, it is also its greatest asset. Few concepts in the social sciences have such widespread recognition and power to compel and this status should not be squandered.

Instead, this potential should be channelled by a range of stakeholders - from government and the voluntary sector to business and the media - in more thoughtful and purposeful ways. Through following the three broad principles set out below, these efforts can enhance and enrich our relationship with ourselves, and consequently with others too.

### Principle One

#### **Challenge the system of social valuation that threatens self-esteem**

We've discussed at length the various ways in which the conditions of modern societies make the pursuit of self-esteem particularly difficult. Nonetheless, there have always been extraordinary individuals prepared to buck the trend and social movements seeking to transform the script by which we live our lives. What gets valued in a society can and does change. But it requires constant challenge, and a willingness on all our parts to question the world around us.

Many of us already challenge or subvert the categories of status and sources of identity on offer. A good example is fashion. Haute couture may dominate the catwalks, but cheap chic and anti-fashion sweeps the high streets of London, Leeds or Manchester, celebrated by alternative magazines such as *Cheap Date*, edgy advertising campaigns like FCUK or icons of cool such as Kate Moss.

*Fashion and cosmetics can be an enjoyable aspect of life, but is it worth trying to buy into the unrealistic ideals? Experiment with what suits you and your body, rather than being told what should do so.*

**Susie Orbach**, from *On Eating* (2002)

We also seem capable of changing our priorities regarding material wealth. 'Status' was accorded a low ranking by our polling respondents when asked what self-esteem meant to them (see fig. 1 on page 14), and 'being financially successful' was rated as 'very important' as a factor in building self-esteem by less than a quarter of those polled.

Furthermore, there are stirrings of a backlash against the gospel of economic growth – which, as some critics demonstrate, now delivers us diminishing returns in terms of happiness and quality of life. Richard Reeves argues that post-industrial countries such as Britain, where rampant poverty has been all but eliminated, are experiencing a transition into an entirely new era of what he calls 'post-economics'.

*I think it's as significant as the Enlightenment in terms of the change of mindset required. The intellectual hold of economics has been enshrined almost in the same way as belief in a providential God and the divine right of monarchs was in the past. We are feeling increasing discomfort with the money = success formula in private, but haven't found ways of articulating this publicly yet. Who are the philosophers for the post-economics era?*

**Richard Reeves**

## Principle One

### Recommendations

As a general rule, we need to create a culture that appreciates the complexity of identity, supports self-expression and offers multiple and varied routes to self-esteem. Our culture should not be like a smooth, polished marble block, but a craggy rock-face with enough footholds so as to enable each individual to make their own path up and through it, and to value themselves and be valued for the route they have chosen.

To this end, **government and employers** should, as far as possible, promote culture change at work towards more balanced and varied benchmarks for success. Redistributing self-esteem between the worlds of employment and caring should become central to the work-life balance agenda, alongside more familiar 'business case' arguments around productivity and competitiveness.

At the same time, the **Citizenship Curriculum** in schools should equip students with the conceptual tools they need to deconstruct the visual culture in which they live. These critical faculties will empower young people as they seek to forge their own pathways in life.

This popular conceptual literacy will create incentives for **business, the advertising industry and other parts of the media** to promote varied images of success and identity to their audience. This should be understood as a core part of corporate responsibility and central to efforts to build trust and win the loyalty of their customers.

There are already examples of good practice in the cosmetics industry, where alternative images of female beauty have been promoted to market products with great success. This principle should now be extended more widely, including editors and broadcasters who control the commissioning of new content for their respective media channels.

## Principle Two

### Promote positive forms of social capital that build self-esteem

Of course, it is not only the images and ideals offered to us from on high that play a role in nurturing or inhibiting our self-esteem. We derive a large part of our self-esteem through very local relationships and contexts. Social interaction with family, friends, colleagues and peers is in itself a form of participation and the key to full inclusion in the mainstream life of a society.

Yet, as we have seen, not all have access to these positive participatory experiences. We need to become better at promoting these as a tool for building self-esteem, especially amongst those at risk of exclusion or isolation.

Even the most ordinary activities can become forces for positive self-development and growth. For example, using make-up gives pleasure to many women, as well as being part of their everyday personal grooming routines and the face they present to the world. For some women, however, it can be a lifeline to normality, or a gateway to a positive, functioning life. Some examples of best practice initiatives involving beauty and fashion are included below:

### Case Studies

**Look Good...Feel Better** is a not-for-profit programme helping women combat the visible side-effects of cancer treatment through cosmetics and beauty advice. First established in the US in 1989, LGFB now operates in 15 countries, including the United Kingdom, where the programme is supported by the cosmetics industry and delivered by the Cosmetic, Toiletry, and Perfumery Foundation, a registered charity set up in 1993. The idea behind the programme is simple - offering women with cancer the opportunity to benefit from expert advice on skin, hair and beauty regimes. The sessions take place in hospitals throughout the UK and are run by professional beauticians who volunteer for the scheme. By focusing on cosmetics, LGFB provides women with a time-out from the stresses of cancer treatment, enabling them to participate in a fun, communal activity that has nothing to do with their condition. Many are suffering distressing side-effects, such as hair loss or skin irritation. Pampering their skin and applying make-up is a way of maintaining a semblance of normality, reasserting their femininity and re-building confidence in their appearance. The programme also runs workshops for teenagers and is looking at ways to help male sufferers too.

Similar schemes and projects exist for other groups. For example, **Hype and Humble** is a charity based in Los Angeles which organises 'pampering days' as part of its offering to homeless women in the city and surrounding area. During the first pampering day event in 2001, 15 women were driven by limousine to one of LA's top hotels to be treated by massage therapists, stylists to the stars, renowned make-up artists and wardrobe consultants, as well as counsellors, career experts and motivational speakers. Hype and Humble design the beauty make-overs as part of a holistic process designed to build body, mind and spirit and set homeless women back on the path to success and independence.

Finally Dutch drug support charity **Mainline** courted controversy in 2001 when it published a glossy beauty and fashion magazine - aimed at women drug users. Funded by the Dutch government, *Mainline Lady* set out to promote positive health messages regarding safe sex and drug use, and to reflect an image of female drug users which looked beyond their habit and saw them as ordinary women with ordinary concerns and interests in health and beauty issues. Whilst the magazine drew many critics, it remained true to Mainline's core philosophy of harm reduction and non-judgmental treatment, which has produced significant results since it first opened its doors to drug users in 1990.

There are many other areas of social participation that can similarly be designed to reach out to those at risk of low self-esteem. There are many excellent community sports initiatives, such as *Step into Sport* run by the British Sports Trust, the Youth Sport Trust and Sport England. Another example are the practical and creative workshops on offer at Skylight, a centre established and run by the homeless charity Crisis in East London.

## Recommendations

The key challenge is to understand better how these sorts of initiatives impact on self-esteem, and to harness the tacit knowledge of practitioners and users of these services themselves in this task. To this end, the **Social Exclusion Unit** should set up a self-esteem database of best-practice initiatives and projects drawn from the **voluntary sector**, alongside a toolkit designed to capture valuable lessons and evidence about what works in building self-esteem. Practice relating to parenting and early years should be of especial concern, given the influential role that these play in shaping a young person's self-esteem.

Business should invest in supporting more self-esteem building initiatives, a strategy that should be integrated with Corporate Community Investment programmes and linked to cause-related marketing opportunities, especially where there is a strong brand fit (for example, the cosmetic and personal care industry and *Look Good...Feel Better*).<sup>xxi</sup>

## Principle Three

### Re-imagine self-esteem as a pre-requisite for democracy

Formal politics have traditionally struggled to find ways of connecting individuals' emotional lives and desires to the bigger story of whole societies and their institutions. And yet our interior lives and collective destinies are profoundly interlinked: the two shape, challenge and reinforce each other simultaneously. Feminism embodies this relationship: a movement built on the personal and private frustrations of women's unequal lives but which led to political action and social change of the grandest scale.

Self-esteem is an excellent candidate for providing this missing conceptual link between the personal and the political. It touches on the very nature of individual freedom and our ability to challenge or provide legitimacy to institutions. This extends beyond the general obligation on states to provide for the welfare of their citizens. It is about democracy itself. Under communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe, for example, the suppression of any notion of self and private life provided a legacy of weak citizenship that lives on in the struggles of those nations in building democratic institutions and open civil societies since 1989.

This helps to illustrate the point that political systems of whatever ilk create the citizens they deserve, and equally, those citizens create the political systems *they* deserve. If we value self-esteem as an inner resource providing individuals with agency and the purpose to act, then we must connect that capacity to the larger challenge of reshaping the public realm.

## Recommendations

This connection can be made in all sorts of ways through current policy priorities. A good place to start might be the work-place, where **government** should work with **employers** to understand better the role of self-esteem in occupational mobility, particularly in the low-skill employment and training sector. This would enable government to design policies that maximise opportunities for progression and career development by harnessing the agency of individuals and boosting their motivation.

The **education sector** should also promote a form of 'self-esteem literacy' at all levels as a way of building awareness amongst both children and adults of how to look after themselves emotionally, and to develop capacities for emotional resilience. The programmes run by Antidote are a good example of what can be achieved with students, but need to be mainstreamed in all primary as well as secondary schools.

There is much scope for developing this sort of literacy within the emerging '**life skills**' agenda. This agenda attempts to look beyond formal qualifications and conventional training to consider the wider set of qualities and capacities required to live life to the full, as workers, parents, friends and good neighbours. Self-esteem should be explicitly considered by policymakers and practitioners working in this area.

Finally, the on-going **modernisation agenda** for public service institutions offers huge potential for policy makers to integrate an understanding of self-esteem into the relationship between government and citizens. Public services have rarely been a positive source of self-esteem for users. Too often individuals find themselves dependent on services, mistreated or failed by services, or even excluded altogether from using those services.

There is now growing interest in the notion of 'co-production', which represents a way of reconfiguring public services so that users are understood not as people with problems, but as citizens with something to offer (and who deserve respect).<sup>xxii</sup> It is difficult to see how education, transport, health and social care can provide responsive, personalised services to all without reaffirming and actively supporting the role of individual agency. In this light, self-esteem has much to offer those in government charged with this almighty task.

### **Final Word**

Self-esteem then, is a concept that comes with a long history, an imperfect evidence base and a great deal of political baggage. Yet it remains part of our everyday vocabulary. It is a personal tool that helps us to make sense of our experiences and relationships with others. This report argues for a rethinking of the concept which takes it beyond the affairs of individuals and recognises the value of self-esteem as a public good. It offers ways forward for both individuals and institutions to maximise the opportunities for gaining self-esteem. Only through creating a positive identity for the high self-esteem individual, and his or her contribution to wider society, can this vision of a Self-Esteem Society be brought to life.

# Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Wollstonecraft, M (1790) *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in Tomaselli, S, ed. (1995) *Wollstonecraft: A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), p34
- <sup>ii</sup> See Lauren Slater, *The Trouble with Self-Esteem* in New York Times Magazine, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2002
- <sup>iii</sup> Alain de Botton (2004) *Status Anxiety* (Hamish Hamilton, London) p47
- <sup>iv</sup> See Nick Donovan and David Halpern with Richard Sargeant *Life Satisfaction: the state of knowledge and implications for government*, December 2002, Strategy Unit
- <sup>v</sup> Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Polity Press) p54
- <sup>vi</sup> Morris Rosenberg and Timothy J Owens *Low Self-Esteem People: a collective portrait* in Timothy J Owens, Sheldon Stryker, Norman Goodman, eds. (2001) *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research: social and psychological currents* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge), pp400-436
- <sup>vii</sup> In Gordon Marshall (1998) *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, p590
- <sup>viii</sup> For example, the Soul of Britain survey carried out by the BBC in 2000 found that whilst only 27% of people described themselves as 'religious', 31% believed themselves to be 'spiritual.'
- <sup>ix</sup> See <http://www.mori.com/fitness/facts.shtml> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3582821.stm>
- <sup>x</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1229950.stm> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2851355.stm>
- <sup>xi</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/3330753.stm>
- <sup>xii</sup> Owens and Roseberg, *ibid*
- <sup>xiii</sup> See, for example, Naomi Wolf (1990) *The Beauty Myth: how images of beauty are used against women* (Random House of Canada)
- <sup>xiv</sup> NICE (2004) *Eating Disorders: NICE Guideline* (NICE, London)
- <sup>xv</sup> Emler, N (2001) *Self-Esteem; the costs and causes of low self-worth* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Richard Sennett (2003) *Respect: the formation of character in an age of inequality* (Penguin, London) pxiv
- <sup>xvii</sup> See, for example, the Society for Affective Learning (SEAL) [www.seal.org.uk](http://www.seal.org.uk)
- <sup>xviii</sup> In the US, many universities operate quota systems for black and minority ethnic students; in the UK, there has been much discussion of imposing quotas of students from non-traditional backgrounds.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sennett, p77
- <sup>xx</sup> Amartya Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom* (Anchor Books, New York)
- <sup>xxi</sup> [www.lookgoodfeelbetter.co.uk](http://www.lookgoodfeelbetter.co.uk)
- <sup>xxii</sup> Gavin Kelly and Stephen Muers (September 2002) *Creating Public Value: an analytical framework for public service reform* (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit); and Leadbeater, C (2004) *Personalisation through Participation* (Demos, London)

## Acknowledgements

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