

THE EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON COMPLIANCE
AFTER A FAILURE EXPERIENCE IN A
SOCIAL VERSUS NON-SOCIAL SITUATION

A Thesis presented to:
The Graduate Faculty
The Department of Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Arts

H. Dan McGrew

The University of Texas at El Paso

December, 1972

UMI Number: EP00887

UMI[®]

UMI Microform EP00887

Copyright 2003 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

THE EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON COMPLIANCE
AFTER A FAILURE EXPERIENCE IN A
SOCIAL VERSUS NON-SOCIAL SITUATION

Approved:

William F. Floyd
Director

Rudolf W. Woodworth
Reader

Philip Hamilton
Reader

Approved:

Samuel G. Sealy
Dean, The Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to sincerely thank his director, Dr. William Lucker for his direction and help with the preparation of this paper. Sincere thanks is also expressed to Dr. Randolph Whitworth and Dr. Philip Himelstein for serving on the author's committee and for their criticisms. Special thanks is extended to Mr. Bill Musser for helping the author conduct the experiment.

December, 1972

H. D. M.

PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.	1
Review of the Literature.	4
Method.	25
Results	30
Discussion.	34
Appendices.	38
References.	44

PREVIEW

THE EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM ON COMPLIANCE
AFTER A FAILURE EXPERIENCE IN A
SOCIAL VERSUS NON-SOCIAL SITUATION

H. Dan McGrew

University of Texas at El Paso

In dealing with the world about him man experiences an ever present sense of his own being. That is, he is an organism that possesses a sense of self-awareness. With any endeavor and course of action man pursues in dealing with reality, there is an accompanying sense that it is he that is perceiving and behaving. With this sense of self there is also an ongoing process of self-appraisal. Man's self-evaluations result and contribute to his sense of self-esteem. An individual's self-esteem, as a trans-situational personality variable, has been recognized as an important factor influencing human behavior in a variety of life situations. Self-esteem has been studied with respect to many different aspects of human behavior. For example, an individual's perceived sense of self-esteem has been found to be a factor affecting his susceptibility to social influence (Janis, 1954; Levanthal and Perloe, 1962; Nisbett and Gordon, 1967; Stimpson, 1970; and others). Self-esteem has been correlated with differential behavior associated with experiences of success and failure (Stotland, Thorley, Thomas, Cohen, & Zander, 1957; and Silverman, 1964a, 1964b). Self-esteem has also been shown to influence a person's assignment of personal responsibility (Fitch, 1970).

A major theoretical formulation on the nature of self-esteem and its consequences in human behavior has been presented by Branden (1969). From clinical experience Branden has theorized that men's thinking processes, values, goals, desires, and emotions are profoundly affected by his self-evaluation. In the degree of his self-esteem, i.e., the nature of his

self-evaluation, lies the most significant factor to understanding man psychologically and consequently, his behavior. By understanding the standards by which man judges himself, one understands man's psychological nature. Branden has defined self-esteem in terms of two interrelated aspects:

...it entails a sense of personal efficacy and a sense of personal worth. It is the integrated sum of self-confidence and self-respect. It is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living [p. 104].

and

Such confidence is not the conviction that one can never make an error. It is the conviction that one is competent to think, judge, to know (and to correct one's errors)---that one is competent in principle---that one is unreservedly committed to being in unbreached contact with reality to the fullest extent of one's volitional power. It is the confidence of knowing that one places no value or consideration higher than reality, no devotion or concern higher than one's respect for facts [p. 106].

Apparently, Branden has conceptualized self-esteem as a trans-situational personality variable. A person's basic sense of self-esteem is to be distinguished from the more specific and localized type of self-confidence that results from specific success or failures. While self-esteem pertains to man's sense of his fundamental efficacy and worth, Branden has stated that "pride" refers to that sense of pleasure that accompanies man's specific achievements and successful actions. Branden has expressed this relationship in saying, "Self-esteem is I can. Pride is I have [p. 118]."

Branden has also postulated that man cannot be indifferent to or totally noncognizant of the evaluations he places upon himself. In order to maintain self-esteem or a sense of positive self-regard, man may repress, evade, or distort his judgement to avoid the facts that might put his sense of self-esteem in jeopardy. And also, to the extent that man

feels a lack in his self-esteem, he may try to cover it up by pursuing irrational values such as, for example, the compulsive pursuit of constant social approval.

The issue of self-esteem and defensiveness has also concerned other psychological theorists. Arthur Cohen (1954, 1959) has presented evidence, and has theorized that different ego defenses are employed by individuals with high and low self-esteem. In brief, Cohen has theorized that individuals of high self-esteem tend to maintain their sense of self-esteem by employing avoidance type defenses, i.e., denial and rationalization, while the characteristic modes of defense for low self-esteem individuals are of a more expressive nature, i.e., projection and sublimation. High self-esteem individuals tend to deny threatening information while low self-esteem persons tend to incorporate it and then act to negate or nullify the effects of the threatening information. Cohen (1959) has described the defense preference distinction as follows:

In effect, people of high self-esteem...are also characterized by a preference for ego defenses which help them to repress, deny, or ignore challenging and conflictual impulses. Individuals with low self-esteem...show a preference for the more expressive defenses, those which allow them to play-out their impulses; being inclined to "act out" they may be more dependent upon situations and events [p. 116].

Within his theoretical framework, Cohen has stated that low self-esteem individuals may be more vulnerable to the effects resulting from failure experiences, and may be more affected by what other persons relate to them concerning their performance and responsibilities than high self-esteem persons.

Review of the Literature

Fitch (1970) examined the effect of self-esteem, perceived performance (success or failure), and perceived degree of choice on the source of causal attribution (internal or external). Subjects were 108 undergraduate business students at the University of Kansas, who were divided into groups of high and low self-esteem by a median split of the scores achieved on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS; Fitts, 1964). Each self-esteem group was then divided into two equal groups containing 27 subjects. Two of the high self-esteem groups were randomly assigned to a "high-choice" condition and two were assigned to a "low-choice" condition. One of the "high-choice" groups was randomly assigned to a condition of "success-feedback" and the other to a condition of "failure-feedback". The same procedure was used for the four low self-esteem groups. There was also a control group of 27 subjects randomly chosen from the original pool of 135 subjects.

The subjects were previously told that they would have a choice of participating on one of four experimental tasks. At the time of the experimental session, though, the "high-choice" subjects were told that the necessary data for three of the four tasks had been collected, and that they had a choice of participating in the remaining task or not participating at all. The "low-choice" subjects were told that the original procedure had been changed, and rather than choosing among four tasks, they had been randomly assigned to one particular task.

The subjects were then given a task of estimating the number of dots flashed on a screen. The feedback concerning their estimation performance was varied between predominant success or predominant failure. In the "failure" condition subjects were told that they scored at the 23rd percentile relative to other subjects who had taken the test. In the "success"

condition subjects were told that they had scored at the 83rd percentile.

A questionnaire designed to allow subjects to distribute causality for their dot estimation performance (ability, effort, luck, and physical or mental condition) was administered. Effort and ability were designated as internal sources, and luck and physical or mental condition were designated as external sources of causal attribution. Fitch found that low self-esteem subjects who were given failure feedback attributed more causality to internal factors than did high self-esteem subjects who were given failure feedback ($F=4.46$, $df=1/112$, $p<.05$). High and low self-esteem subjects who were given success feedback did not differ significantly in the amount of causality attributed to internal sources ($F=1.86$, $df=1/112$, $p>.05$). The "perceived-choice" variable did not significantly affect causal attribution ($F=1.86$, $df=1/112$, $p>.05$).

Shrauger and Rosenberg (1970) also investigated the affects of success and failure feedback on subsequent performance of persons manifesting different levels of self-esteem (high and low). From a group of 250 students enrolled at the State University of New York at Buffalo, 36 participants were selected on the basis of scoring in the upper and lower quartiles on a Self-description Inventory (SDI). The SDI, which was the self-esteem measure used, consisted of 16 items that covered interpersonal relations, intellectual competence, physical attributes, and reactions to stress. The subjects were asked to indicate the percentage of time a particular item applied to themselves. Such items as "When meeting new people for the first time, what percentage of the time are you able to impress them favorably and form good relations?" were used. The average score for all 16 items of the SDI was the subjects' self-esteem score; a higher score indicated higher self-esteem.

The subjects were also administered an adjective check list designed

to assess their own estimation of their social awareness. The rating scale consisted of 17 bipolar trait dimensions, and the subjects placed themselves on a 21-point scale along each dimension.

Subjects were divided into four groups: high self-esteem subjects who received success feedback or failure feedback, and low self-esteem subjects who received success feedback or failure feedback. As the subjects arrived for the "experiment", they were first given a digit-symbol test similar to the test on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (Wechsler, 1954). They were then administered a contrived "Feldman-Collier Personality Inference Inventory". This was a fictitious test which was supposedly designed to "...assess sensitivity in the judgement of other people by evaluating how accurately subjects could predict others' attitudes [p. 408]." An example of the items is:

1. undecided: Avoid depending upon other persons and things.
2. true: Truth existed before man.
3. _____: It's a wonderful feeling to sit surrounded by your possessions.

The subjects' task was to "...draw inferences about the person presumably represented in the item on the basis of the answered statements, then to predict how that same person would respond to the unanswered statement [p. 409]." In the failure condition only 5 of the 15 items were marked correct by the experimenter, while in the success condition, 12 of the 15 items were marked correct. Also the subjects were given fictitious percentile norms supposedly derived from the performance of other students on the inventory. For the success condition, the norms were at the 87th percentile, while for the failure condition, the norms were at the 35th percentile. Subsequently, the subjects were given an alternate form of the digit-symbol test and were readministered the adjective check list which they had initially taken approximately five weeks earlier. Changes