

Hooked on a Feeling

Nothing is of absolute value, but don't we feel great!

By Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel

THE CRUSADE AGAINST games with winners and losers, the sensitivity monitoring of classroom textbooks, the antipathy to competition, are all part of a national effort to enhance the self-confidence of American children. Yet it has never been shown that "high self-esteem" is an essential trait.

High-school dropouts, shoplifters, burglars, car thieves, and even murderers are just as likely to have high self-esteem as Rhodes Scholars. As a 2001 article in the *Scientific American* pointed out, "Saddam Hussein is not known as a modest, cautious, self-doubting individual." Hopeful Americans continue to buy thousands of books each year with titles like *The Self-Esteem Companion* and *Hypnosis for Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem*. Still no one seems to know how to define it, how to measure it, or whether it can be taught. Now several studies suggest that inflated self-esteem may even be dangerous.

In May 2003, four psychologists published the first comprehensive review of the supposed benefits of self-esteem. Roy F. Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University and his colleagues looked at all the existing studies on self-esteem and found no significant connection between feelings of high self-worth and academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, or healthy lifestyles.

On the contrary, high self-regard is very often found in people who are narcissistic and have an inflated sense of popularity and likeability. Such self-aggrandizing beliefs, said the authors, exist "mainly in their own minds." Furthermore, those with exaggerated estimates of self-worth

often become hostile when others criticize or reject them. "People who have elevated or inflated views of themselves tend to alienate others," the authors concluded.

If high self-esteem does not improve academic performance, if it does not make people less likely to engage in self-destructive behavior, then why encourage it at all? The review article did find one significant advantage that seems, at first glance, highly attractive. People with high self-esteem are happier.

Baumeister and colleagues were careful to say that further research is needed to establish the positive link. Nor do researchers know precisely how to determine that someone is happy or in which direction the causal story goes. But suppose we were somehow able to establish that high self-esteem promotes happiness. What parent or teacher would not want to confer such felicity on a child? This finding alone would appear to justify the self-esteem movement. Or would it?

For one thing, what makes us happy matters greatly. As we already noted, bullies and sociopaths often score very high on self-esteem tests and claim that they are very happy.

Happiness, without a foundation in ethics, can characterize a smug, unfeeling person, and such people are often exploitive and dangerous. As John Stuart Mill famously said:

No intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience

would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs ... better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Those who encourage children to "feel good about themselves" may be cheating them, unwittingly, out of becoming the kind of conscientious, humane, and enlightened persons Mill had in mind.

William James, a contemporary of Mill, noted that there is little or no connection between a man's self-esteem and his objective merits: "... a very meanly-conditioned man may abound in unfaltering conceit, and one whose success in life is secure and who is esteemed by all may remain diffident of his powers to the end."

What should schools be doing about self-esteem? They should not be addressing it directly at all. Self-esteem comes to some of us when we have an objective record of accomplishment in which we take pride. Even then, as the example of many other wonderful humble people teaches us, there is no guarantee it will come at all. If so, we must make do without it.

In his 1998 book, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, John Hewitt points to the ethical hazards of using the classroom for therapeutic purposes. In a typical classroom self-esteem exercise, students complete sentences beginning "I love myself because ..." or "Yes, I love myself even though I sometimes ..." Hewitt explains that children interpret these

assignments as demands for self-revelation. They feel pressed to “correctly” complete the sentences in ways the teacher finds satisfactory.

Teaching children to moderate their emotions is helpful to them. Forcing them to obsess over feelings and to share them with others, on the other hand, is meddling. In one exercise, during roll call, children identify their current emotional state rather than saying “here.” Suppose some of the children have serious problems at home—a depressed mother or alcoholic father. Should they feel compelled to disclose their true feelings? Or, alternatively, to present a false picture of themselves?

The roll-call exercise was developed by “Self Science,” a program started in 1978 by education researchers in Hillsborough, California. In 1998, a second edition of the center’s curriculum was published, entitled *Self-Science: The Emotional Intelligence Curriculum*. The text, as befits a “scientific” treatise, is full of charts and graphs with names like “confluence models,” “sequence spirals,” and “affective education index.” One typical activity is the “Hot Potato Feeling Experiment.” Students toss a beanbag back and forth, and when they catch this “hot potato” they shout out their current emotion. Later, they answer these questions: how does it feel to say what you are feeling? How do you feel when you can’t say anything? Is there anything you would like to have said but censored instead? What?”

The participants have to promise to keep everything said in the sessions a secret. Parents are not allowed to be present. The authors of the curriculum are unfazed by student resistance. Opposition only proves the program is working:

Somewhere during all this, there is a point where members need to rebel and test. (This testing is called ‘storming’ in the group development

process of ‘forming, norming, storming, performing.’) Be listening for expressions of hostility ... it’s your clue that the process is working.

What would it take to persuade the scientists that their process isn’t working? Hostility could be regarded as a sign that students find the program absurd, tedious, intrusive, or just a waste of time. They may be “rebellious” because they resent the requirement that they must bare their feelings or suspect that their classmates will not respect the secrecy pledge. Those in the business of promoting self-esteem education need to consider the possibility that their pedagogy is based on a false assumption. They take it for granted that open, emotional self-expression is necessarily a good thing for children. But what if it is not?

In a report called “Is Repression Adaptive?” a team of psychologists studied a group of high-school students, dividing them into three types: repressors (those who suppress unsettling thoughts), sensitizers (those keenly aware of their emotional states), and intermediates. The students were then asked to evaluate themselves and others using these distinctions; so were their teachers. The repressors were rated as more successful academically and socially. “In their day-to-day behavior it may be good not to be so emotional,” said the researchers. “The moods of repressed people may be more balanced.”

Yet curricula are being radically transformed by the requirement that school materials should help children feel good about themselves. The state of California, for example, requires that all instructional materials used in its classrooms “contribute to a positive educational experience for all students.” It therefore subjects prospective textbooks to a “social content review” to determine whether or not they “promote

individual development and self-esteem” and “instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage [and] develop a feeling of self-worth.” Because California is one of the largest markets in the country, textbook publishers marketing to other states tailor their books to its specifications.

What happens when social studies textbooks aim at boosting self-esteem and providing the student with a “positive experience?” Gilbert Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council, aptly sums up the effects: “Students and teachers alike are sedated by textbook happy talk.”

Publishers and educators now take great care to avoid giving the impression that the United States is in any way exceptional or superior to other societies; to single it out for praise could hurt the feelings of children born in other countries. According to the special logic of the sensitivity monitors, immigrant youth might feel diminished or marginalized by readings that extol American traditions. A fact-based history curriculum that highlights the founding doctrines, the great wars, and the traditional heroes of American history might valorize America at the expense of other nations and cultures.

There is in fact no evidence that immigrant children or their parents would feel insulted or diminished by reading texts praising the nation’s democratic tradition and its heroes. A study by Public Agenda finds that “parents of all demographic groups—white, black, or Hispanic, immigrant or U.S.-born—clearly and resoundingly want the schools to teach children the traditional ideals and stories of what it means to be an American.” Two-thirds of them feel strongly that schools should “teach kids to be patriotic and loyal toward the nation.”

In 1995, when the Department of Education released the results of its National History Assessment, Lewis Lapham,

editor of *Harper's*, spoke of the low scores as a "coroner's report." Students, he said, are in a "state of mortal danger." He noted, "More than 50 percent of all high school seniors were unaware of the Cold War. Nearly six in ten were bereft of even a primitive understanding of where America came from."

Students in the past may have been ignorant of the fine points of American history, but they carried around in their heads a crude outline of our national story. Their history textbooks showed them that they were part of a highly unusual culture of liberty, and they were acquainted with and took pride in the heroes of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. That prideful perspective is fast becoming obsolete.

Stanford's William Damon has written about the adverse effects on young Americans:

Students are not learning much of what they need to know ... there's another problem that may be even closer to the heart of the matter. This has to do with the capacity for positive feelings towards one's society, with a sense of attachment, a sense of affiliation, a sense of love for noble purposes larger than oneself, and a sense of inspiration fostered by one's role as citizen ... since the time of the ancient Greeks, [this sentiment] has been known as patriotism.

Now the very mention of the word patriotism, says Damon, provokes an argument: "If you think it's hard to talk about morality and values in the schools, try talking about patriotism."

One effect of the ignorance and confusion is that many students are reluctant or unable to condemn atrocities committed by other cultures no matter how heinous. In many world-history classes, it is now the fashion to present all cultures as morally equivalent. In

one typical high school text, *American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century*, the Anasazi Indians are praised for their "egalitarian culture in which people functioned as equals." Students do not learn about recent evidence that strongly suggests that Anasazi "egalitarians" were cannibals. Such information is routinely suppressed in textbooks and classrooms because revealing it would be disrespectful of the Anasazi and because a discussion of cannibalism might distress some students. It would inevitably raise questions about the moral status of another society, possibly implying that our own modern society might be superior.

In California, the Department of Education explicitly requires that "when ethnic or cultural groups are portrayed, portrayals must not depict differences in customs or lifestyles as undesirable and must not reflect adversely on such differences." Connecticut requires that all classroom materials "present the rights, goals, and needs of all groups as worthwhile and authentic."

A doggedly uncritical attitude to cultures other than our own demands a great deal of forgiveness on the part of the student. Inevitably, it requires that they approach exotic cruelties in a spirit of tolerance. In a 2000 commencement address, the president of Wake Forest University, Dr. Thomas K. Hearn Jr., reported visiting a Wake Forest class whose students were "reluctant to denounce Hitler as a monster." One student defended Hitler as "a man of his own time. We cannot judge him by our different standards."

Today, such no-fault history is common in American classrooms. Robert Simon, a professor of philosophy at Hamilton College, finds increasing numbers of students telling him "they accept the reality of the Holocaust, but they believe themselves unable morally

to condemn it, or indeed to make any moral judgments whatsoever." Simon calls their moral paralysis and relativistic stance "absolutophobia."

Phobias that inhibit moral judgment have found their way into all subjects, including English classes. Professor Kay Haugaard, a creative writing teacher at Pasadena City College, wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about her class's reaction to Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery." This story describes a village that holds an annual lottery which all are obliged to enter. Each year the loser of the lottery is stoned to death.

Haugaard's students did not condemn the villagers. Instead they strained to understand them, to defend them and, in the end, to exculpate them. Haugaard sought in vain to find even one student who would react with moral indignation to the villagers' grisly custom, but she failed. "At this point I gave up. No one in the whole class of more than 20 ostensibly intelligent individuals would go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice."

Students equate adverse moral judgment with intolerance and insensitivity. And though some professors are dismayed by their students' no-fault ethic, few appear to be doing anything to discourage it. On the other hand, not a few endorse and foster just this kind of moral agnosticism.

In July 2002, Zogby International released the results of a poll on moral education on the American campus. In a survey of 400 randomly selected college seniors, Zogby found the overwhelming majority (97 percent) said that they expected to be ethical in their future undertakings. However, 73 percent said they had learned from their professors that "what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity."

Pluralism is an American tradition, but moral relativism is not. In the Decla-

ration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson asserts the universal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He does not add, "At least that is how many of us feel about it here."

To be sure, the idea of "moral truth"—to say nothing of self-evident moral truth—is controversial, indeed. The theoretical debate over the ultimate status of moral judgments goes back to the very beginnings of philosophy in ancient Greece, when Plato (a moral absolutist) first challenged the Sophists (the upstart relativists). However fascinating and contentious the philosophical debate may be, we do not have the luxury of waiting to see which side finally prevails before we teach our children about right and wrong and good and evil.

It is no great achievement for a teacher or textbook publisher to induce skepticism in American students about the truth or legitimacy of Jefferson's assertions. What they badly need to understand is how fortunate they are that the nation's founders had such unusual ideas about personal liberty and individual rights, and how blessed we are to live in a society that takes them as self-evident and incorporates them into its Constitution and strives to live by them.

Nobel Laureate author V.S. Naipaul is struck by the originality, power, and sheer beauty of America's founding ideals:

The pursuit of happiness is ... an elastic idea; it fits all men. ... So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist; and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away.

Such confidence assumes a lot. In particular, it assumes that children today

Pentagon protégé Ahmad Chalabi, who lied about WMD and leaked U.S. intelligence to Iran, is back on top

and has been congratulated by Condoleezza Rice over his appointment as Iraq's deputy prime minister and acting oil minister. Chalabi has brought his friends along with him. Arras Habib Karim, his chief of intelligence, who had fled to Tehran after an Iraqi judge issued an arrest warrant for him, has returned to Baghdad. The Iraqi Justice Ministry's file on Arras has mysteriously disappeared, and there is no longer any danger of him being arrested. Arras orchestrated the alleged Iraqi defectors to European and American intelligence services prior to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The "defectors" routinely fabricated information about weapons of mass destruction programs. The U.S. intelligence community also believes that Arras is an Iranian intelligence agent working for the Iranian Ministry of Information and Security. He was the conduit for a number of classified U.S. government reports passed to Iranian intelligence, many of which were originally given to Chalabi by Pentagon officials without authorization.



The Chalabi connection is also a major element in the FBI investigation of AIPAC, which led to the recent indictment of Department of Defense analyst Larry Franklin.

The bureau has determined that the recently disbanded Office of Special Plans, headed by Doug Feith, was the source for the leaks both to Israel and Iran. Several of Feith's dozen handpicked employees have reportedly been polygraphed in an attempt to trace the document trail. An FBI source also notes that a number of the staff working most closely with Feith do so without security clearances that have been issued in the normal fashion, i.e., after a background investigation and a vetting process. They have reportedly received godfathered clearances in which senior Defense Department officials intervene in the process to overrule FBI objections. Feith himself should never have received a clearance after having been fired from the National Security Council in 1982 over allegations that he passed classified material to Israel, but he was reportedly godfathered by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz.



Recent Department of Defense assessments suggest that North Korea has mastered the technology of miniaturization and now has the theoretical capability to mount nuclear devices on its two- and three-stage missile systems.

A three-stage missile with a nuclear device could hypothetically cover most of the continental U.S., while a two-stage missile would threaten the West Coast. The capability was revealed when DIA head Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby answered a question from Hillary Clinton at a meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Senator Clinton's question was planted by a U.S. government source that opposes the Bush administration's policy towards North Korea and wanted to call attention to the fact that the policy has been a failure. The independent nonpartisan International Crisis Group confirms that North Korea may have 10 nuclear weapons and is making technological advances both in the area of nuclear miniaturization and in advanced missile technology.

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