

**I matter. You matter:**  
***Defining self-respect vs. self-esteem and measuring this critical youth-development asset***

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**Introduction**

In much of the popular literature on children and adolescence, the terms *self-respect* and *self-esteem* are often conflated, and sometimes condemned as empty indicators of youth well-being. *Self-esteem* in particular has been the subject of magazine cover stories decrying the self-centeredness of youth: Gottlier's "How the cult of self-esteem is ruining our kids" (The Atlantic, July/August 2011) and Henig's "Why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?" (New York Times, August 2011) are examples of articles that suggest parents' and teachers' efforts to improve children's self-esteem is, rightly or wrongly, about making kids feel unrealistically good about themselves. *Self-respect*, on the other hand, is directly addressed far less often, but when it is, popular writers tend to use the term interchangeably with *self-esteem*. However both terms, at least in the popular press, are considered the property of pop-psychologists who want to help parents and teachers understand how to help children be successful adults.

In youth development work and in the Academy, however, definitions of *self-esteem* and *self-respect*, and the differences between them, are the subject of serious theorizing and increasingly in empirical development. The definition of *self-respect*, in particular, is located in the realm of philosophy as well as in the more expected work of psychology. Researchers concerned with children's and adolescents' development at school, in high-poverty areas, and in differing world contexts are turning their attention to the concept of *self-respect* as a potentially more useful construct than *self-esteem* in developing and remediating youth resilience, independence, and strength.

As part of those concerned with youth development across multiple contexts who wish to affect fundamental indicators of well-being, we at The Respect Institute feel it is imperative that the

definitions of *self-esteem* and *self-respect* be separated. Our work focuses on the latter, self-respect, as a distinctive and foundational measure of human emotional health. The purpose of this paper is to define *self-respect* and its importance as a concept independent from *self-esteem*, and make the case for a self-respect scale as an evaluation tool in measuring the effectiveness of our youth development work at *The Respect Institute*.

### Definitions of self-esteem

Coopersmith (1967) conducted one of the earlier American studies of *self-esteem*, specifically focusing on the antecedents of its positive development. He defined *self-esteem* as

[T]he evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself [sic]: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself [sic] to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a *personal* judgment [italics original] of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself [sic] (p. 5).

He elaborates on three aspects of this definition: one, that this definition centers on the “enduring estimate” of general *self-esteem* rather than on its transitory nature – that is, he focuses on an individual’s baseline *self-esteem* rather than its expected and temporary rises and falls; two, that the definition varies across “sex, age, and other role-defining conditions” (p. 6); and three, that self-evaluation is a subjective process and that stereotype threat is a danger in estimating one’s worthiness (though Coopersmith does not use the term *stereotype threat*).

Coopersmith’s definition is not only important because of its early date, but because it raises several foundational aspects of the definition: *self-esteem* is a self-evaluative judgment of one’s own worth that is likely affected by one’s social contexts and by the measurement-taking itself. Empirical evidence suggests that Coopersmith’s definition is accurate: for example, DuBois et al. (1996) confirms

the contextual nature of the definition and Kristjánsson (2007) confirms the self-evaluation bias that occurs when defining and measuring self-esteem.

This self-evaluative aspect of the term carries with it the necessity of constantly monitoring oneself. Langer (1991), for instance, states that “to esteem anything is to evaluate it positively and hold it in high regard, but evaluation gets us into trouble because while we sometimes win, we also sometimes lose” (p. 1). Helfaer (1998) underscores the evaluative nature of self-esteem in that he maintains *self-esteem* “is always tinged with anxiety and the need to manage one’s feelings about oneself,” (p. xiii), while White (1986), on the other hand, sees *self-esteem* as feeling secure that one’s framework for living is good and that one can execute this framework (p. 96). Terror management theorists, from yet another perspective, feel that self-esteem can be defined as a sense of personal value, which is obtained by believing in the validity of one’s worldview, and that one is living up to this view (Pyszczynski, et al., 2004).

Further complicating the definition of *self-esteem* is another major tenant of the definition: others’ opinions of oneself are important to its measure. That is, what we believe others think of us also affects our *self-esteem* (Chazan, 1998; DuBois et al., 1996; Roland & Foxx, 2003; Sachs, 1981); our *self-esteem* also affects how much we feel we can influence others’ perceptions of ourselves and our shared contexts. How self-esteem varies within different contexts in which we participate – we think of ourselves differently depending on where we are and with whom we are interacting – illustrates the malleable nature of self-esteem, and contributes to the accepted definition that it is something that is highly variable.

### **Measurement of *self-esteem***

By far, the most well-known measure of self-esteem is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1989). The 10-item scale was originally designed to measure self-esteem in high school students, but it has since been used to measure self-esteem in various groups of adults. The scale is a

Guttman scale, meaning that “the response pattern can be captured by a single index on that ordered scale” (Wikipedia). On a Guttman scale, items are arranged in an order so that an individual who agrees with a particular item will also agree with items of lower rank-order.

Other, lesser-used scales, also measure self-esteem, but none are as well-known or as regarded as valid as the RSE. These scales include but are not limited to the Coopersmith Self-Esteem inventory (1967), the Implicit Association Test (IAT) , Harter’s Self-Perception Profile for Children (1985),The Harter Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA), and Marsh’s Self-Description Questionnaire (1984).

### **Definitions of self-respect**

The definition of *self-respect* is a contested definition, located concurrently in the domains of morality, psychology, and philosophy. While popular writing often conflates self-respect with *self-esteem*, major theorists of *self-respect* draw clear lines between the two concepts, even if the individual concepts themselves are less clear: *self-esteem*, theorists argue, is an evaluation and an assessment, by oneself and others, of a person’s worth. *Self-respect*, they more or less agree, is a foundational belief in oneself and one’s character that is not shaken by temporal life events.

A who’s-who of philosophers including Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Kant, Jung, Rousseau, and Nietzsche have all examined aspects of the definition of *self-respect* (Dillon, 1995). Kant made the concept of *self-respect* the center of moral philosophical arguments, and John Rawls, in his *Theory of Justice* (1973), gave great attention to the idea. While Rawls interchanged *self-esteem* and *self-respect*, most philosophers who use his work as the basis for theirs understand Rawls to mean *self-respect* as the dominant term (White, 1986, p. 96). Rawls’ underlying definition rests upon self-respect as “a conception of oneself as a moral person with certain moral rights” (White, p. 97), with Rawls, too, drawing his definition from the philosophers Kant and Aristotle.

### **Morality as a central component**

Indeed, most of the contemporary philosophical literature on self-respect hinges on morality, with Kantian and Aristotelian concepts at the center. Morality, it must be noted, is not used as a judgment in this model; rather, it is used normatively to refer to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons. By using the term “morality” normatively, we assume that, under plausible conditions, all rational persons would endorse that code (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2011).

Kristjánsson (2007) argues that social scientists should focus on Aristotelian concepts of morality for practical reasons: 1) it follows contemporary virtue ethics, 2) it acknowledges the psychological and moral salience of emotions and ironically, 3) that *self-respect* is created and sustained through the recognition of others (p. 235). Some social scientists would argue that including “recognition of others” as a salient component of *self-respect’s* definition actually blurs the line between *self-respect* and *self-esteem* too much; *self-respect*, they argue, does not waiver in the face of others’ opinions. The Respect Institute argues that while others’ opinions are not integral to our definition of *self-respect*, the acknowledgement of others and their inherent equality is a central piece of the Institute’s definition.

Still, Kristjánsson argues that *self-respect* can be defined as: 1) having impeccable command of all the moral virtues 2) having an acute sense of one’s dignity 3) having strength of character – the courage of one’s convictions and 4) having stability of character (pp. 237-238). Taken together, he states that these characteristics can be used to define and ultimately measure *self-respect*.

Other researchers also claim that the essence of self-respect relates to morality. Roland & Foxx (2003) claim that *self-esteem* hinges on the opinions of others and on self evaluation, but *self-respect* has a defined moral code. In fact, when trying to define it, these authors articulate four “conceptual families”:

- Self-respect as appreciation of being a person – the historical view, and the contemporary view
- Self-respect as grounded in character and conduct
- Self-respect as recognition and appraisal
- Unified account of self-respect (pp. 248-257).

### **No single definition**

Similar to other theorists, though, Roland & Foxx do not identify a single definition that emerges from these themes. They, too, describe the definition only circuitously, stating that it: exists on a variety of levels, that it is “based on one’s capacity for rationality that leads to behaviors that promote autonomy, such as independence, self-survey, self-control, and tenacity,” (p. 258). Leary, Brennan and Briggs (2005), on the other hand, are much more straightforward about the definition of *self-respect*, basing their definition on the work of Sennett (2003) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000): “[Self] respect ... embodies presumptions of integrity, ego, power, position, status, control, value, and worth ... and involves the intrinsic worth that each individual has.... [It] means to regard and value a person as a unique contributor to the whole” (p. 463). These researchers use the definition in the context of African American youth development and argue that its definition is context-specific.

This is a line of thought where The Respect Institute feels that much more work in developing *self-respect* in youth can be accomplished. Sennett (2003) and Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2000) work indicate that the prevailing definitions of the term may be too narrow to fit all cultural contexts. It is in this light that we move to The Respect Institute’s definition of self-respect.

### **The Respect Institute’s definition of self-respect**

As opaque and reverent as the debates about *self-respect* have been, it is Dillon’s influential book, *Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect* (1995) that we feel captures the contrary essence of the term’s many facets:

Despite its prominence in moral philosophy ... it is simply not clear what self-respect *is* [italics original], why alone it matters. Indeed, there is more controversy than consensus about its nature and value, no general agreement concerning necessary and sufficient conditions for *self-respect* or its relation to other goods and concepts....What makes *self-respect* a theoretically useful concept is also what makes it hard to pin down: it is embedded in a nexus of such profound and profoundly problematic concepts as personhood, rights, equality, justice, agency, autonomy, character, integrity, identity, and the good life (p. 3).

While there might be no one clear definition according to Dillon, Kristjansson (2007) argues that it may be time for those concerned with youth work to turn from the psychological emphasis on *self-esteem* to the philosophical emphasis on *self-respect*. He maintains that there is likely a relationship between children's *self-respect* and their achievement, stating plainly: *self-respect* may provide a true measure of moral worth (p. 227).

For the purposes of *The Respect Institute*, then, we wish to contribute to the conversation about *self-respect* by first being clear about our organization's own definition. First we define "**respect**" as *knowing and acting on the foundational belief that: I matter. You matter.* We elaborate on this definition further regarding self-respect:

self-respecting individuals are motivated by a fundamental belief that despite their circumstances, they—and others—are equally a "unique contributor to the greater whole. (Lawrence-Lightfoot)" Self-respect is evident in each person's actions and language. It is not hierarchical, nor is it earned. It is self-caring, reflective, resilient, and rooted in personal power to choose how we utilize our gifts and interact with our surroundings and others. It is always present, though sometimes diminished; yet it can always be recovered. Self-respect is not a product of isolation nor dependence. It is fostered and grown from quite the opposite: interaction and support. It is nurtured through a personal commitment to practicing daily self-respecting acts whether learned or innate.

### **Measuring self-respect**

The Respect Institute feels that measuring the development of youth *self-respect* though its work throughout the United States can fill some of the needed gaps in the field to date and, more

importantly, further address the needs of child and adolescent development by “giving youth and their influencers the tools to [help youth] thrive” (The Respect Institute Mission Statement).

That no singular *self-respect* scale exists is cause for both concern and hope: while we feel that the construct of *self-respect* is missing in work with youth, its nonexistence allow our organization to define and redefine the measure of respect, something that Kristjánsson (2007) and others argue is sorely needed (p. 236).

There have been some attempts at measuring *self-respect* over the last quarter century, though often not under that term. Tolman & Porche (2000), for example, developed the Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (AFIS), which they state “measures the extent to which adolescent girls have internalized or resisted two negative conventions of femininity in two psychological domains: self in relationship with others and with one’s body” (p. 365). While not claiming to measure *self-respect*, many of the components of *self-respect* (or lack thereof) are imbedded in their scale, which is also designed to work with women and girls from different cultural backgrounds.

In the decade prior, Jerusalem & Schwarzer (1993), working with the Institute for Girls’ Development, created a self-efficacy scale, containing 10 statements that participants are asked to rank on a 4-point scale from 1 = “Not at all true” to 4 = “Exactly true.” The scale is adapted for 23 different nations, underscoring as do Tolman & Porche the notion that local context must be accounted for, though this scale, too, does not directly measure *self-respect*.

Leary, Brennan, and Briggs (2005), on the other hand, have developed one of the few reliable *self-respect* scales available, theirs specifically measuring African American adolescent male *self-respect*. The researchers state that “[R]espect is an essential part of street rules that are strictly enforced and regulated” (p. 463) and that the level of respect that African American youth feel contributes to their sense of psychological wellness and social identity (p. 464). Their scale, the African American Respect



Scale for Male Adolescents (AARS) uses a set of 20 items derived from the first author's youth work; this scale, like Rosenberg's and Jerusalem & Schwarzer's, also exists on a 4-point rating scale where 0 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree.

Kristjánsson (2007), interestingly and perhaps distressingly, does not acknowledge these scales when he calls for the development of good self-respect measures; whether he does not know of Leary et al.'s work or does not find it reliable or valid is unclear. He calls for empirical psychologists to develop "findings of people's *self-respect*" (p. 240) that do not involve self-reporting, citing Kohlberg's "bleary stage theory of moral development" as evidence of what happens when people self-report and use scenarios that have no relationship to the realities of their lives. Kristjánsson's call for an objective self-respect measure locates itself in objectivity, which he feels can and must be properly measured in order to assess the construct (p. 240).

#### **The next step: Indicators of self-respect**

Roland and Foxx (2003) state it plainly: "Research is needed on *self-respect*" (p. 281). They claim that *self-respect* measurements get at "higher order needs" and therefore will help people, when its components are identified and measured, to have dignity, self control, self reliance and ultimately behaviors that demonstrate a "life plan based on moral law ... that treats self and others as an end rather than a means," (p. 281). While we agree that research and development is needed, The Respect Institute is less concerned with morality and more with empowering youth and their influencers to re-define respect and gain to tools to build self-respect so they can break cycles of disrespect and thrive. With this in mind, our next step is conduct research in order to create a list of self-respect indicators and a scale to measure them. *elf-respect*, the measure of which is elusive now, can ultimately help all youth change their worlds—inside and out.

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