

Contingencies of Self-worth and its Impact on Mental Health and Cognitive Vulnerability among undergraduate medical students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Introduction: In social psychology, it's well established that people strive to maintain and enhance their self-esteem. The contingencies of self-worth refer to the seven domains where individuals primarily invest their self-esteem: Academics, Appearance, Approval from others, Competition, Family Support, God's Love, and Virtue. People aim to achieve success and avoid failure in these areas, as they are deeply invested in maintaining a positive self-image.

Objective: To study the Contingencies of Self-worth among undergraduates

Materials and Method: A Cross-sectional (Descriptive), Survey-based Study was conducted from the 18th of July to the 7th of September 2022 on undergraduates of Riphah International University. A sample size of 378 was determined out of which 69 males and 309 females participated. The data was collected using questionnaires with Cronbach's alpha values of .862 and .798 respectively.

Result: Dependency of self-worth in undergraduates was seen to be highly dependent on these domains. It was seen that appearance had a positive correlation with body image dissatisfaction ($r = 0.155$, $p < 0.05$). While Approval from others had a negative correlation with Competition ($r = -0.352$, $p < 0.05$), Decision making ($r = -0.330$, $p < 0.05$), Challenging ($r = -0.492$, $p < 0.05$), Body image satisfaction ($r = -0.431$, $p < 0.05$), and Contention in life ($r = -0.288$, $p < 0.05$), as well as with Psychiatric disorders ($r = 0.111$, $p < 0.01$). Family Support had a positive correlation with Contention in life ($r = 0.153$, $p < 0.05$). God's love also had a positive correlation with contention in life ($r = 0.217$, $p < 0.05$) and a negative correlation with psychiatric disorders ($r = -0.139$, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Dependency of self-worth based on one's appearance and approval from others had delirious impacts on the personality of an individual and it led to body image dissatisfaction, pessimism, and psychiatric disorders mainly depression, anxiety, and social phobia. However, those with strong religious beliefs were least likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders.

Keywords: Self-worth, Mental Health, Cognitive Vulnerability, Psychiatric Disorders.

Introduction

It is quite axiomatic in social psychology that people seek to maintain, protect, and enhance their self-esteem.¹ They are highly selective about which domains they need to stake their self-worth upon, what to hold important to themselves and what to ignore, who to look up to, and who to never depend on. For some people their goals and aims make them consider that they are respectable, that they hold importance in this world, and that their existence has a meaning. And for some, it can be their appearance, their academics, their relationships, their careers, and so on. James concluded that "our self-feeling in this world depends directly on what we back ourselves to be and to do."² Contingencies of Self-worth are those 7 domains upon which a person mainly invests his self-esteem. These are the areas in which a person believes that success would make him worthwhile, and failure would denote his worthlessness.³ These 7 domains include Academics, Appearance, Approval from others, Competition, Family Support, God's Love, and Virtue. What we hold important, what matters to us the most is what affects us, there for success in achieving satisfaction related to those particular domains boosts our self-esteem while a failure or a setback in achieving satisfaction in those domains pulls our self-esteem down. Because of this people try to attain success and avoid failures in these domains.⁴ Their goal becomes the achievement of success and satisfaction in these domains and their success and failure in achieving these goals related to self-esteem influence others equally or more important goals that do not even relate to it.⁵ The person becomes paranoid to keep this domain high and he tries to avoid it by a defensive response⁶ and when that doesn't seem to work it leads to a drop in his self-esteem which causes negative events to occur not because those events were linked to it, but because the person believes that

they were. This further clarifies that this mind game of depending on a certain domain is linked to the person's thoughts and hence his behavior which led to that incident that produced misfortune in his life. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the past social experiences of being accepted or rejected due to some cause related to a domain lead to the complete dependency of self-worth on that particular domain.⁷ It has been proven that instability in self-worth in different circumstances leads to anxiety, social phobia, and vulnerability.⁸ Researchers have begun to support the fact that instability in self-worth is considered to be a risk factor for depression.⁹

Self-worth is closely tied to various factors, including academic achievement, physical appearance, social approval, superiority, family love, and religious beliefs.¹⁰ For students, especially undergraduates, good grades can boost their self-esteem and confidence. However, this dependence on academics can lead to emotional instability and social anxiety. Similarly, the emphasis on physical appearance, particularly for females, can lead to a strong influence on self-worth, driving individuals to seek cosmetic products and surgeries. The need for social approval can also lead to emotional instability and social phobia. Some individuals derive self-worth from being superior to others, while others find it in family approval and love.¹¹ Religious beliefs can also positively impact self-worth, leading to a sense of being valued and appreciated. Adhering to moral codes can lead to a sense of being a good person, boosting self-worth. Ultimately, the factors that influence self-worth vary from person to person, and what enhances self-worth for one individual may not be the same for another.¹²

This study aims to investigate the contingencies of self-worth among undergraduate students, examining which of the seven domains (Academic, Appearance, Approval from others, Competition, Family support, God's love, and

Virtue) their self-worth depends upon and to identify how this dependency relates to various outcomes, including confidence, body image, life satisfaction, and psychiatric disorders such as depression.

Materials and Methods

A Descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted. Keeping the confidence interval of 95%, margin of error of 5%, and taking prevalence from the previous study, the sample size estimated was 378, which included 69 males, and 309 females aged between 18 to 28. The data collection was done by self-administered Questionnaire/ Survey forms filled in by the students. The inclusion criteria were simply undergraduate students while the exclusion criteria included undergraduates with any pre-diagnosed mental disorder or any physical disability. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, the first based on demographics, the second on Contingencies of self-worth, and the third on questions based on their impact. The Contingencies of Self-worth were accessed using the CSW scale for which Cronbach's alpha value was .862, this included the 7 domains noted as Academics, Appearance, Approval from others, Competition, Family support, God's love, and Virtue. The impact was identified by using a self-made

questionnaire developed after through Literature search from Google Scholar, PubMed, DOAJ, JSTOR, and articles from books based on Psychology and self-worth. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the calculated value was reported as .798. The questionnaire consisted of 3 domains namely Confidence, Decision-making, Challenging, Body Image, and Contentment with Life. It also included the state of Physical and Mental health. Google Questionnaires were created and sent to the target sample to be filled. Data analysis was done using SPSS. At the beginning of the research questionnaire, informed Consent was taken from all the participants, this was done by adding the description of our research and inserting the option of agreeing to participate in the very beginning of the Google form. There is no external funding source for this research except the principal investigator. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Committee (IRC) / Ethical Review Board. Ref No. Riphah/IIMC/IRC/22/2054.

Results

Data was collected from 378 participants. It was seen that the mean scores of various domains of self-worth were higher in females as compared to males, details are shown in Table 1.

Table-I Mean values of various domains of the CSW scale

Domain	Mean	Males	Females
Academics	5.973	5.705	6.033
Appearance	5.053	4.075	5.131
Approval from Others	3.241	3.036	3.286
Competition	5.526	5.384	5.558
Family Support	5.987	5.859	6.016
God's Love	6.463	6.054	6.555
Virtue	5.177	5.162	5.246

Table-II Correlations among Subscales of Contingencies of Self-worth using the CSW scale

	Academics	Appearance	Approval from Others	Competition	Family Support	God's Love	Virtue
Academics	1	.399**	.079	.598**	.521**	.409**	.386**
Appearance	.399**	1	.335**	.469**	.301**	.150**	.299**
Approval from Others	.079	.335**	1	.143**	.136**	-.069	.216**
Competition	.598**	.469**	.143**	1	.408**	.225**	.368**
Family Support	.521**	.301**	.136**	.408**	1	.462**	.377**
God's Love	.409**	.150**	-.069	.225**	.462**	1	.132*
Virtue	.386**	.299**	.216**	.368**	.377**	.132*	1

Table-III Correlation of the Domains of Self-Worth with various outcomes

	Confidence	Decision Making	Challenging	Body image Satisfaction	Contended with Life	Psychiatric Disorder
Academics	.094	-.034	.084	.036	.114*	.041
Appearance	-.007	.061	-.093	-.155**	-.069	.094
Approval from Others	-.352**	-.330**	-.492**	-.431**	-.288**	.111*
Competition	.083	.068	.017	.104*	.091	.000
Family Support	.088	.040	.029	-.022	.153**	-.100
God's Love	.099	-.060	.022	.101	.217**	-.139**
Virtue	-.069	.011	.035	-.102*	-.095	.097

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Correlation analysis showed that Academics, Appearance, Competition, Family Support, God's love, and Virtue had a positive correlation. People who had their self-worth influenced by Academics also were affected by the other four domains mentioned above and vice versa.

While correlating the dependency on domains with its impact it was shown that academics had a positive correlation with satisfaction/contention in life ($r = 0.114$, $p < 0.01$) indicating that for those

individuals who have their self-worth based on academics and who get the desired score seemed to be satisfied and contended in their life and for those who failed to achieve satisfaction in academics had a fall in their perspective of life.

Appearance had a negative correlation with Body image satisfaction ($r = -0.155$, $p < -0.05$) proving that those individuals who hold their appearance as the determinant of self-worth had very low satisfaction with body image, this was more

evident in females.

Approval from others had a tremendous impact. It had a negative correlation with Competition ($r = -0.352$, $p < 0.05$), Decision making ($r = -0.330$, $p < 0.05$), Challenging ($r = -0.492$, $p < 0.05$), Body image satisfaction ($r = -0.431$, $p < 0.05$), and Contention in life ($r = -0.288$, $p < 0.05$). This showed that those who consider themselves worthwhile depending upon the approval from others, the perception that others hold of them, are the ones who are emotionally weak. They struggle in competing, decision-making, and fighting challenges. They are unsatisfied with their body image and do not contend in life either. It was also proven that such people have psychiatric disorders such as Depression, Anxiety, Social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc. There is a positive correlation between Approval from others and Psychiatric disorder ($r = 0.111$, $p < 0.01$)

Family Support had a positive correlation with Contention in Life ($r = 0.153$, $p < 0.05$) indicating that those who find love and appreciation from their families and who have their self-esteem depending on it are satisfied and contended with life.

Virtue was one of those factors on which people were dependent to a small extent, hence it did not prove to have any noticeable impact.

In analyzing our last domain God's love, it was seen that God's love has a positive correlation with contention in life ($r = 0.217$, $p < 0.05$) and a negative correlation with psychiatric disorders ($r = -0.139$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that stronger the faith a person holds, the more important his religion holds to influence his self-worth, lesser are the chances of having psychiatric disorders. Table 2.

Discussion

It is important to know what factors determine our self-worth, particularly that of our youth. Our research identified these factors, and their impact has been measured. In this research, we found that Academics served to be the driving force, however, failure in this domain led to severe consequences. Similarly, in females, Appearance held the most importance leading to body image dissatisfaction. Approval from others was proven to be the cause behind psychiatric disorders, mainly depression. However, those whose self-worth was dependent on God's love were least

likely to have psychiatric disorders. Furthermore, we found out how the level of dependency of our self-worth on these domains affected our Confidence, Decision-making, Challenging nature, Body image satisfaction, and content in life. Previous research done on this topic either targeted only one feature such as the one conducted on achievements¹³, and another conducted on academics. Another research on Contingencies of self-worth and its effect was conducted in 2006 however it lacked in a way that the outcome of research was influenced by other correlated factors that were not measured.¹⁴ In this research, we have individually discussed the 7 domains concerning the correlation among subscales, and correlation with the Impacts. There is a need for further research to be done on how to prevent or limit the dependency of self-worth on external factors before it gets to a dangerous level, affecting the social life of the individuals.

The dependency of self-worth on academics showed that those people spent most of their time studying.¹⁵ These people are mainly students, particularly undergraduates who have yet to get on a career path. For these people getting good scores seemed to boost their self-esteem, it made them feel more confident and feel worthwhile. These students seemed to "Stake their salvation" on it.¹⁶ All people generally but particularly females are evaluated based on their physical appearance to an extent.¹⁷ It has been identified that in adolescents out of all the factors, the strongest influence on their self-worth was determined by their appearance.¹⁸ For this reason, now people tend to spend on cosmetic products and ornaments. Facial surgeries have become very common in the past few years.¹⁹

To some extent, self-worth is dependent upon acceptance and approval received from others.²⁰ It mainly depends upon what a person believes others think of him rather than what opinion other people hold of them.²¹ This leads to emotional instability and influences the person's behavior towards others. It makes him socially awkward and anxious when around people, what we call social phobia.²² Some people believe that by being superior to others, by proving to be better than the rest, they would be able to gain respect. For them, the competitions they must face determine their self-worth. Men are identified to

root out their self-worth from being better than the rest.²³ The feeling of self-worth in some individuals depends upon the perception of approval and love from their family members. According to the Attachment Theory, to secure attachment it is important to have a mental model of being lovable and worthy of care.²⁴

"Intrinsic Religiosity" is the extent to which an individual internalizes and stays committed to his religious beliefs, which has a moderate and positive influence on his well-being and his self-esteem. Religion may have a positive impact on the individual's self-worth and hence his actions as he believes that he is valued in front of God. Adhering to the moral code leads to the judgment that an individual is a good person.²⁵ A person feels satisfied and calm in the sense that he knows that he has nothing to fear and whatever he has done is considered appreciable hence his self-worth gets a boost. But those who don't bother following the moral codes don't particularly feel down or low. This shows that the contingencies of self-worth differ from person to person.

Previously the attempts at James's (1890) hypothesis about differences in the domains were hampered by hurdles in measurements. In some research, the contingency on which a person depends was tried to be identified by correlations of outcome and self-esteem itself, for example, Osborne(1995) tested academics on black students by correlating self-esteem with grades without taking into view that there could be other factors influencing self-worth or the grades.²⁶ Similarly, most researchers only viewed a single domain without relating to its effects generally. In this research, we individually looked at all 7 domains and correlated the domains to their impact which included the influence on confidence, decision-making, challenging nature, body image, and level of being contended with life.

Conclusion

Dependency of self-worth based on one's appearance and approval from others had delirious impacts on the personality of an individual and it led to body image dissatisfaction, pessimism, and psychiatric disorders mainly depression, anxiety, and social phobia. According to social psychology, self-worth holds immense power in the lives of

people. It could alter their thoughts, raise their optimism, or it can ruin them to the depths of pessimism. The link between self-worth and behavior is set to be found but we believe that they are tied by the individual's thoughts and perception of a situation that made a particular feature become important enough to depend on.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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