The Changing Faces of Self-Esteem: 
A Critical History of the Concept and Its 
Implications for Personhood

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Abstract

This thesis critically analyzes the concept and phenomenon of self-esteem using the approach of historical ontology. The analysis focuses on how understanding and application of the concept has shifted as a consequence of three sociohistorical processes: the quantification, idealization, and normalization of self-esteem. While self-esteem originally was understood as unquantifiable and a by-product of success, it is now considered quantifiable and a cause of success. As well, whereas the modification of self-esteem previously was regarded as idiosyncratic, it is now believed that all people can and should raise their self-esteem using generic strategies that emphasize self-responsibility and self-management. It is argued that these changes gave rise to a new kind of person called "low self-esteemers." Revealed is that although low self-esteemers have low self-esteem because they are marginalized in society, they are held responsible for their negative self-feelings. The source of their low self-esteem is social and political—a consequence of neoliberalism—but they and others are made to believe the cause of their low self-esteem resides internally as an individual psychological problem.

Keywords: self-esteem; historical ontology; critical history; governmentality; neoliberalism; psychology; education