

Background Research for
Towards Respect Together
Program

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Self respect

*Is self-respect sometimes susceptible
to decline as part of the ageing process?*

And if so what can assist in rebuilding it?

Transitions in identity as we age

*Exploring the impact of declining
capacities and roles.*

*What can help to maintain
a sense of dignity and self-respect?*

Across the globe there are growing concerns regarding ageing populations and, subsequently, the unique challenges that these populations are confronted with. Notably, of considerable concern, is the concept of self-respect and how it develops over the course of the ageing process. While results regarding normative changes in self-respect over time have conflicted in past studies, recent research has indicated a decline in self-respect in old age. As such, an important focus of understanding is the potential approaches that can be undertaken to intervene and assist in promoting self-respect in this critical developmental stage. Involved in this is understanding how reducing capacities and roles may function into a decline in self-respect throughout old age, and the differing effects of reliance on external approval and internal approval.

Defining Self-Respect

The concept and purpose of self-respect are topics that have been long debated over time, with there being a variety of opinions on what constitutes self-respect. A dictionary definition defines 'respect' as "esteem for or a sense of worth or excellence of a person, a personal quality or ability", and 'self-respect' as "proper esteem or regard for the dignity of one's character" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/respect>). Early definitions of the psychological construct, self-esteem, tended to involve qualities such as self-respect and personal conviction (Rosenberg, 1965). Furthermore, throughout more recent psychological literature, self-respect, as a component of self-esteem, represents a concept that rests on honour, worthiness of high regard, principles, and adherence to moral standards (Kumashiro, Finkel, & Rusbult, 2002). Therefore, while not a confined representation of self-respect, study of the self-esteem construct offers a broad, over encompassing insight into the development, outcomes, and associations involved with self-respect, available to be explored throughout psychological literature.

Self-Respect and Ageing

Self respect: Is self-respect sometimes susceptible to decline as part of the ageing process? And if so what can assist in rebuilding it?

Early debates surrounding the topic of systematic changes in self-esteem over a lifespan were, essentially, left unresolved due primarily to the paucity of studies conducted on samples beyond adolescence (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). However, recent research conducted by Orth, Trzesniewski, and Robins (2010) has been able to address this issue by conducting a cohort-sequential longitudinal study, consisting of 4 assessments across a 16-year period of a sample of 3,617 individuals from the USA, aged 25 years to 104 years. The study suggest that the development of self-esteem over a lifetime can be captured by a quadratic curve, whereby self-esteem increases over adulthood, after which, at approximately age 60, decline in self-esteem begins to occur (Orth et al., 2010). Thus, these results demonstrate that the elderly are particularly susceptible to decline in self-respect as they continue to age. So, what is the impact of these findings?

Positive self-esteem has been found to be associated with better physical health (Reitzes & Mutran, 2006), lower levels of depression (Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, Maes, & Schmitt, 2009), closer and more supportive relationships (Andrews & Brown, 1995), and better socio-economic status (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). As such, with the elderly population being most predisposed to decreases in self-esteem, it is for this reason that interventions designed to promote self-respect for the elderly are imperative to ensure a satisfying quality of life.

Studies have shown that self-esteem is most closely associated with the personality traits of emotional stability, extraversion, and conscientiousness (Robins, Hendin, et al., 2001; Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002). However, as personality traits are suggested to remain relatively stable over time (Goldberg, 1993), it would be an error to regard the adjustment of personality as a good intervention suggestion in order to improve self-esteem. More appropriate intervention procedures should include attempts at promoting greater physical health, the importance of strong social networks, and should educate and influence the elderly population at the role of socio-economic status on self-respect. In order to develop an adequate intervention, though, an understanding of the causes of these concerns needs to be explored.

Ageing and Transitions in Identity

Transitions in identity as we age: Exploring the impact of declining capacities and roles. What can help to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect?

The research conducted by Orth et al. (2010) found that the largest mean-level changes in self-esteem occurred during young adulthood (largest increase in self-esteem) and old age (largest decrease in self-esteem). These findings suggest a relationship with the theory that interindividual, or rank-order, stability in self-esteem is somewhat lower in these two developmental stages than in middle adulthood (Trzesniewski et al., 2003).

With the transition from midlife to old age come various changes in which a considerable amount of adjustment is required in order to cope and adapt. Involved in the transition into old age are high levels of instability, that are a result of the numerous changes in capacities and roles, relationships, and physical functioning, typically accompanied by a decrease in socio-economic status (Baltes & Mayer, 1999). Changes in roles can include circumstances such as obsolete work skills, retirement, or 'empty nest', whereas changes in relationships is typified by spousal death and decreased social support, and physical functioning is distinguished by declining health and memory loss (Baltes & Mayer). All of these changes in capacities and roles are likely to contribute to a decline in self-respect.

While there are a myriad of literature and interventions in place covering the maintenance and improvement of self-esteem and self-respect, there is a substantial lack of research covering the issue pertaining to old age. As such, investigation into this issue should be undertaken, and based on previous research, specifically looking into interventions regarding physical health and relationship maintenance.

Conclusions

Therefore, in conclusion, it can be seen that self-respect, a concept that is oft debated, is of considerable importance in the transition to and progression through old age. Of distinct interest is how self-respect develops over the course of the ageing process and what can be done to successfully maintain it. Positive self-respect has been found to be associated with better physical health, lower levels of depression, closer and more supportive relationships, and better socio-economic status. Additionally, these findings suggest that stability in self-esteem is lower, and reduced self-esteem more likely in old age than in other developmental stages. As such, future research and interventions should look to integrate these factors in when approaching ways of potentially maintaining and improving self-respect.

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