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The Role of Collective and Personal Self-Esteem in a Military Context

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ABSTRACT

Collective self-esteem refers to individuals' evaluations of their social identities, their group affiliations. Private collective self-esteem includes assessments of how individuals privately evaluate their social group or groups while public collective self-esteem assesses how individuals believe others evaluate their social group or groups. This study examines the relationships between military cadets' personal self-esteem, private and public collective self-esteem, and well-being. We find that cadets with higher private and public collective self-esteem also report higher personal self-esteem and lower levels of depression. While both private and public collective self-esteem have direct effects on depression, most of the effects of public collective self-esteem operate through personal self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Social identity theory as developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986) argues that there are two distinct aspects of the self-concept: personal identity and social identity (also known as collective identity) (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1992). Hence, self-esteem can exist on the personal and the social level. Personal self-esteem refers to the positive or negative evaluation of our senses of self as an object (Rosenberg, 1989). In addition to personal self-esteem, Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) propose that there is a second type of self-esteem, collective self-esteem. Collective self-esteem refers to our evaluations of social identities. What-is-more, they argue that we strive to maintain both our personal and collective self-esteem and the two concepts may interact with one another such that collective self-esteem may influence personal self-esteem and well-being.

The goal of this study is to examine the relationship between perceptions of group evaluations and individual self-esteem and well-being among military cadets. The military context is

particularly relevant in the study of group and individual identities because of the salience of cohesion and other group processes in the military. It is widely believed that military units with a strong sense of cohesion will perform better than those with less cohesion (Costa & Kahn, 2010; Griffith, 2007). However, no research has been conducted to assess whether collective identity in the military influences personal-level self-esteem.

Personal and Collective Self-Esteem

Social identity theory posits that individuals strive to maintain or enhance not only a positive personal identity but also a positive collective identity. Collective identity may be positive or negative according to the evaluations of one's social groups, rather than one's personal attributes or achievements within groups. Social identity is a function of both how one evaluates one's groups and how others evaluate those groups. Individuals must be subjectively identified with their in-groups (i.e., the in-groups must have some emotional significance to the individuals) for the groups to contribute to the individuals' self-concepts (Porter & Washington, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; see also Andreopoulou & Houson, 2002). Ultimately, group-level self-esteem protects personal-level self-esteem. Positive stereotypes of the in-group and less positive ones for out-group members serve the purpose of protection or enhancement of our positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Several researchers have developed measures of collective self-esteem. The scale suggested by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) includes private collective self-esteem (an assessment of how individuals privately evaluate their social group or groups), public collective self-esteem (assesses how individuals believe others evaluate their social group or groups), and the importance to identity (assesses the role of group membership in the self-concept).

Another model often used in the scholarly literature, rooted in the looking-glass self and the identity-control theory, focuses on the relationship between reflected appraisals and self-esteem (Burke, 1991; Cooley, 1902). Here, the focus is on the role of our perceptions of the value other people place on our identities. One study, for instance, found a negative correlation between the importance other people are thought to place on respondents' race, sex, age, among other characteristics, and respondents' self-esteem (Jaret, Reitzes, & Shapkina, 2005). In this sense, public collective self-esteem is the equivalent of reflected appraisals on the group level.

Linking Self-Esteem to Well-Being

The role of group identity and self-esteem is traditionally studied in context of discrimination among racial and ethnic minorities. Jackson and Lassiter (2001) suggest that discrimination reduces both group and individual-level self-esteem. The underlying premise of this approach is that minorities are likely to internalize an imposed negative self-image based on the principles of reflected appraisals and social comparisons. Discrimination produces lower group evaluations which, in turn, lower individuals' personal self-esteem. Thereafter, lower personal self-esteem reduces well-being.

In their study of minority identity and self-esteem, for instance, Porter and Washington (1993) argue that previous research indicates a reciprocal relationship between personal and racial self-evaluation: positive group image protects individual self-esteem, while high individual self-esteem increases minorities' ability to successfully cope with discrimination, to manage the stress associated with discrimination. Furthermore, Mossakowski (2003) demonstrated that the stronger respondents' ethnic identification, the less likely they were to report depressive symptoms. It also showed ethnic identity to be an effective coping resource for racial and ethnic minorities since it buffers stress of perceived discrimination and is strongly associated with fewer symptoms of depression.

Military Contexts

There is not a lot of research on self-esteem among military personnel. The few studies there are have either excluded those in military service (Bachman & O'Malley, 1977), had small samples (Platt et al., 1970), or are dated (Julian, Bishop, & Fiedler, 1966). However, low self-esteem for some soldiers is a product of mental health stigma (Greene-Shorridge, Britt, & Castro, 2007). Notably, traditional research in the military context emphasizes the role of group cohesion on individuals' and groups' performance. Cohesion is often thought of as a group's "esprit des corps" or sense of oneness (Shils & Janowitz, 1948). Units with greater sense of cohesion are thought to perform better than those with lower cohesion and have greater well-being (Costa & Kahn, 2010; Griffith, 2007). Social scientists, as well as military leaders tend to cite unit cohesion as the key element in combat motivation and fighting resilience (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, & Ben-An, 2005). However, research on the effects of cohesion on individual morale and readiness appears to be mixed. Costa and Kahn (2010) in their study of the Union Army veterans of the Civil War argue that men from more cohesive companies were significantly less likely to experience the impact of wartime stress. However, another study on cohesion in the military showed that the fighting power of military units may not be diminished by the lack of their social cohesion and reliance on temporary frameworks and short-term components (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, & Ben-An 2005).

Patriotism has also been cited as a possible motivation for fighting (Wong et al., 2003). While not designed to be a measure of collective self-esteem, it reflects perceptions towards one's country. Patriotism is also studied under the rubric of national identity (Evans & Kelly, 2002; Smith & Kim, 2006). The logic of the argument is that men and women will be more willing to sacrifice their personal lives for their love of the country, their sense of national (group) pride. Research on this hypothesis has also been mixed. Traditional research coming out of World War II found that the desire to end the conflict and group relationships (e.g., protecting one's platoon) are two primary reasons for fighting in combat (Marshall, 1947; Shils & Janowitz, 1948; Stouffer et al., 1949). However, Leonard Wong and his associates (2003) found that many soldiers fighting in Iraq also attributed some of their motivation toward their sense of honor and duty towards the U.S.

While research in the military context has not emphasized self-esteem per se, it is clear that military researchers believe that group conditions influence individuals. Given what we know about the relationship between collective and individual self-esteem, we predict that collective self-esteem, attitudes toward the military as a whole, will be positively related to personal self-esteem among individuals associated with the military. Further, both group and individual-level self-esteem will be positively related to well-being; higher levels of self-esteem will be associated with greater well-being.

METHODS

Data for this project come from a survey of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets and cadets from American military academies conducted between 2002 and 2009. A total of 3,054 cadets are included in these analyses. The academy cadets are from the academies at the United States Military Academy (West Point), and the United States Air Force Academy (n=2,112). In addition, 942 ROTC cadets were also surveyed from colleges around the U.S. including states ranging from California and Colorado to New York and New Hampshire (see Ender, Rohall, & Matthews, 2013 for further description of the sample).

Measures

In this study, we focus on three major sets of items: individual self-esteem of military personnel, collective self-esteem in the military, and psychological well-being measured by levels of depression. Individual self-esteem is measured utilizing six items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1986). Respondents were asked the degree to which they agree with six items such as “I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane as others”, “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”, and “All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure” (see Table 1 for six items). Responses ranged from 1 ‘Strongly Agree’ to 4 ‘Strongly Disagree’. Items were recoded such that higher scores reflected higher levels of self-esteem. The combined set of items yielded a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .82 with a mean of 3.59 and a standard deviation of .50.

We divide collective self-esteem in terms of private and public collective self-esteem wherein private collective self-esteem includes respondents’ personal assessment of their group identity while public collective esteem refers to their perceptions of what they believe other people think about their group (see Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

We utilize two items to assess private collective self-esteem:

- I am proud of the men and women that serve in the military;
- I have confidence in the ability of the military;

One item is utilized to reflect public collective self-esteem:

- The American people understand the sacrifices made by the people who serve in the U.S. military.

Responses to both groupings range from 1 ‘Agree Strongly’ to 4 ‘Disagree Strongly’ but were coded to reflect higher levels of collective self-esteem. In the case of the private collective self-esteem, a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .72 was obtained with a mean of 3.78 and a standard deviation of .50. The measure of public collective self-esteem yielded a mean score of 2.43 with a standard deviation of .93. Additional analysis was conducted to determine whether these items overlapped. Factor analysis of all three items indicated that the first two items loaded differently from the third. Our single item measuring public collective self-esteem did not load with the items we utilized to measure private collective self-esteem. Further, the two items used to measure private collective self-esteem are highly related to each other ($r=.43, p<.001$), public collective self-esteem is less related to our measure of private collective self-esteem ($r=.047, p<.05$).

Factor analysis is utilized to help ensure that three distinct forms of self-esteem are operating in this study. The factorability of nine items (six personal, two private collective, and one public collective self-esteem) was examined. Overall, it is clear that three components appear distinct from one another (see Table 1). The Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggests that the sample was factorable ($KMO=.801$).

Table 1. Component Matrix of Personal and Collective Self-Esteem Measures

	Component		
	1	2	3
I feel that I'm a person of worth, an equal plane with others	.805		
I feel that I have a number of good qualities	.816		
All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure	.693		
I am able to do things as well as most other people	.693		
I feel that I do not have much to be proud of	.622		
I take a positive attitude toward myself	.748		
I am proud of the men and women that serve in the military		.805	
I have confidence in the ability of the military		.791	
The American people understand sacrifices by the people in military			.951

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis; Factor loadings <.3 are suppressed.

a. 3 components extracted.

Well-being is measured utilizing items from the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (Radloff, 1977). Altogether, 10 of the 20 items were included in the questionnaire and included items such as, “I did not feel like eating”, “I felt that everything I did was an effort”, and “My sleep was restless.” The response scale included the following options: 1 ‘Not at all,’ 2

'Occasionally,' 3 'Frequently,' and 4 'Almost all of the time'. The combined scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .82 with a mean of 1.78 and a standard deviation of .44.

We also include a number of variables generally associated with well-being. Specifically, women typically report higher levels of depression than men, hence, differences in self-esteem may reflect the gender composition of the sample. In our case, 19 percent of our sample identified themselves as female. There are also class differences associated with well-being but since our sample is based on similar class and age levels, we control for parents' education levels as a proxy for class background (see Rosenberg, 1986). Fifty-six percent of our sample had at least one parent who graduated from college.

RESULTS

The goal of our analysis is to assess whether measures of individual self-esteem are related to collective self-esteem (public and private) and their relationship to well-being. Overall, it appears that most of the model variables are associated in the predicted direction. For instance, personal self-esteem is positively associated with private collective self-esteem ($r=.18$, $p<.001$). Cadets who have a positive attitude toward the military report higher levels of personal self-esteem (Table 2). Furthermore, both public and private collective self-esteem is negatively related to depression. Respondents with higher levels of private collective self-esteem report significantly lower levels of depression ($r=-.10$, $p<.001$). Similarly, higher levels of public collective self-esteem are associated with lower levels of depression ($r=-.12$, $p<.001$).

Table 2. Correlation of Personal Self-Esteem, Collective Self-Esteem, and Well-Being

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Personal Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1.000					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	2878					
2. Private Collective Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.175**	1.000				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	2845	2984				
3. Public Collective Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.029	.047*	1.000			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.126	.012				
	N	2837	2891	2908			
4. Depression	Pearson Correlation	-.445**	-.104**	-.118**	1.000		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	2802	2866	2795	2907		
5. Parents' Education (1=College Degree)	Pearson Correlation	-.018	-.027	.014	.014	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.346	.149	.463	.440		
	N	2864	2955	2879	2896	2996	
6. Sex (1=Female)	Pearson Correlation	-.093**	.000	-.048**	.101**	-.027	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.990	.010	.000	.144	
	N	2871	2962	2887	2901	2988	3026

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

We also find that gender is associated with both levels of depression and self-esteem. As our analysis indicates, women in the military setting tend to have lower personal self-esteem than men ($r=-.09$, $p<.001$) (Table 2), lower public collective self-esteem ($r=-.05$, $p<.01$), and have a generally higher level of depression ($r=.10$, $p<.001$).

Our next analysis is designed to determine whether the previous relationships continue after controlling for background characteristics associated with personal self-esteem and well-being. Here, depression is our dependent variable and both personal self-esteem and collective self-esteem are treated as independent variables. As with our previous findings, both forms of self-esteem are associated with greater well-being. First, personal self-esteem is negatively associated with depression levels ($b=-.40$, $p<.01$) (Model 1) (Table 3). Further, private collective self-esteem as well as public collective self-esteem are independently related to depression ($b=-.15$ and $b=-.06$, respectively, both $p<.001$) (Models 3 and 4).

Table 3. Effects of Personal and Collective Self-Esteem on Well-Being (Depression)

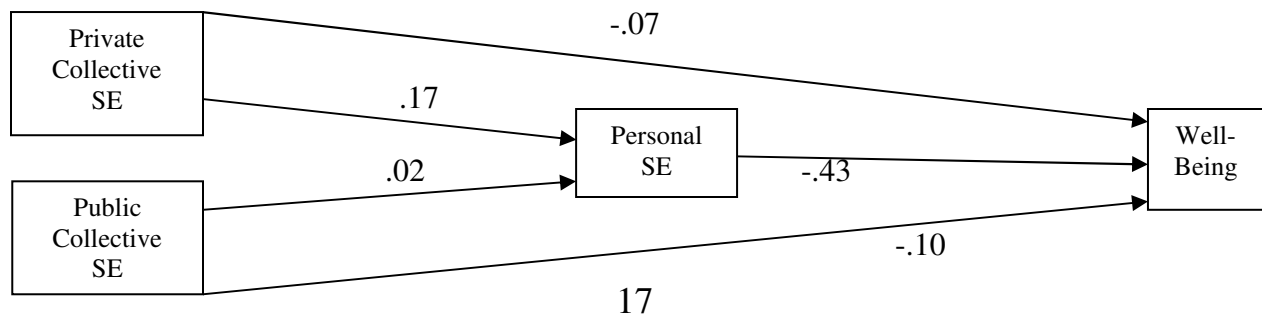
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Personal Self-Esteem	-.399** (.015)			-.388** (.016)
Private Collective Self-Esteem		-.153** (.028)		-.103** (.029)
Public Collective Self-Esteem			-.057** (.009)	-.048** (.008)
Parents' Education (1=College Degree)				.010 (.486)
Sex (1=Female)				.048* (.011)

*p<.05, ** p<.001

Our final model in Table 3 examines the effects of all levels of self-esteem on well-being, controlling for background characteristics. Here we see that personal self-esteem continues to affect well-being, controlling for collective self-esteem and background characteristics ($b=.39$, $p<.05$) (Model 4). Both private and public self-esteem also impacts well-being, controlling for all other model variables ($p=-.10$ and $-.05$, $p<.05$ for both variables). Overall, it appears, private and public self-esteem are associated with personal well-being. Although women are a relative minority of cadets (less than 16% at West Point), our findings are similar to other studies with female military personnel reporting higher levels of depression than men ($b=.05$, $p<.05$) (Table 3).

Path analysis is utilized to better assess the relationships among our self-esteem variables and well-being. The first stage of the model utilizes regression analysis with private and public self-esteem as the predictor variables and personal self-esteem as the criterion variable. The second stage utilizes depression as the criterion variable with all three forms of self-esteem as the predictor variables. As with our previous analysis, we see that private collective self-esteem has a direct impact on well-being (Figure 1). Also, private collective self-esteem appears to impact well-being through personal self-esteem.

Figure 1. Full Path Model Linking Self-Esteem and Well-Being



Public collective self-esteem does not appear to have significant impact on personal self-esteem but it does appear to impact well-being directly. It is also important to note that the relationship is positive: higher public self-esteem is positively related to personal self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study is to apply research and theory regarding the relationships between personal and collective self-esteem and well-being. Our findings support much of the research linking personal and collective self-esteem and well-being (Pearlin et al., 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Porter & Washington, 1993; Brandcombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Pearlin 1999; Jackson & Lassiter, 2001; Mossakowski, 2003; Jaret, Reitzes, & Shapkina, 2005). Respondents in our study with a positive sense of group identity also reported higher levels of personal self-worth. In addition, having a greater sense of self-worth is associated with greater well-being. Specifically, personal self-esteem is positively related to personal well-being. Furthermore, cadets with more positive attitudes toward the armed services also report greater personal self-esteem and lower levels of depression.

Although it provides a preliminary analysis of the effects of collective self-esteem on personal self-esteem in the military context, this study has several methodological limitations both related to the sample of respondents and measures used to assess self-esteem levels. Our measure of public collective self-esteem, for instance, did not appear to be related to personal self-worth but is associated with well-being. We believe that these findings may reflect the measure we utilized for public collective self-esteem, a single item. If a more robust measure was utilized, we believe that the finding would have been significant.

Additional analysis (not shown) reveals that a small but significant relationship among public collective self-esteem and personal self-esteem among academy cadets but not ROTC cadets – though both are in the same direction. These differences may reflect institutional differences in these groups that we did not assess in our data. However, we believe that the relationship would become significant for both groups with a more robust measure.

A major challenge for future research in this area may be to design alternative measures of collective self-esteem, thereby disaggregating personal self-esteem from collective self-esteem. Perhaps observing interactions among group members or assessing group self-esteem by portraying symbols of group pride would help to separate collective self-esteem from personal self-esteem.

Another limitation to this study lies in the sample used for this study – Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets and cadets from American military academies. Members of our sample may not reflect active-duty members of the military. Unlike regular armed forces personnel who are full members of the military organization, cadets have made an initial, but serious decision, toward active-duty military membership and thus may not possess a group identity as strong as members

of the active-duty military. Our findings suggest that the relationship between personal and group identities may be even more robust should such a sample become available.

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