The interpersonal nature of self-esteem: Do different measures of self-esteem possess similar interpersonal content?

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the interpersonal content of various self-esteem instruments in order to determine the interpersonal similarity of these measures. This was accomplished by measuring self-esteem and interpersonal style across seven samples (N = 1422). Each of the self-esteem instruments possessed significant interpersonal content and demonstrated interpersonal cohesion to the extent that all of the measures were located in either the Assured-Dominant or Gregarious-Extraverted regions of the interpersonal circumplex. These findings suggest that the self-esteem instruments included in the present study possess similar interpersonal content but that differences between these measures may exert subtle influences on how self-esteem is conceptualized in interpersonal contexts. Implications for the measurement and conceptualization of self-esteem will be discussed.

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1. Introduction

At the risk of stating the obvious, self-esteem is an extremely popular topic within psychology. A recent PsycINFO search found more than 30,000 articles concerning self-esteem with nearly 6000 of these appearing within the last five years. Given the popularity of self-esteem, it may not be terribly surprising that there are more than 200 instruments purported to measure this construct (Schefl & Fearon, 2004). An unfortunate consequence of the proliferation of self-esteem instruments is that these measures may be contributing to the divergent views of self-esteem that have emerged in the literature (Brown & Marshall, 2006; Marsh, Craven, & Martin, 2006; Mruk, 2006). During the past 20 years, for example, self-esteem has gone from being considered a sort of panacea the would remedy many of the problems confronting society (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1989) to recent claims that it is largely inconsequential (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Schefl & Fearon, 2004) and it has even been suggested that programs intended to boost self-esteem may unintentionally lead to harmful consequences (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). In contrast to this negative view of self-esteem, other scholars have argued that self-esteem remains a useful construct but that its utility may often be underestimated due to factors such as its diverse array of conceptualizations (e.g., global self-esteem vs. domain-specific self-esteem; see Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007 and Trzesniewski et al., 2006, for extended discussions of this issue).

If the various instruments used to measure self-esteem are capturing different underlying constructs or even different facets of the same construct, then the availability of so many instruments may make comparisons between studies somewhat difficult. For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assesses whether respondents believe they are generally as good as most other people, whereas scales such as the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989) measure whether respondents believe they are better than other individuals on specific dimensions (e.g., physical attractiveness). This is an important distinction because an individual who claims to be as good as other people would appear to be making a substantially different claim than someone who believes he or she is better than most other people (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004). The differences between these instruments used to measure self-esteem may suggest that these instruments are not perfectly interchangeable (Bosson & Swann, 1999; Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004). As an example, Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004) found that instruments used to measure self-esteem varied considerably in the degree to which they captured both social dominance and narcissism. One of the suggestions offered by these authors was that examining how various measures of self-esteem compare in their associations with other constructs may be helpful for clarifying what is meant by the term self-esteem whenever it is used in the literature and may provide researchers with information to help guide their selection of self-esteem instruments for various types of studies. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to compare the interpersonal content of some of the most commonly employed self-esteem instruments.

Comparing the interpersonal content of these measures is important because the use of different self-esteem instruments...
may lead to slightly different conclusions concerning the construct of self-esteem. For example, a classic study by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, and Reis (1988) examined the link between self-esteem and a variety of interpersonal behaviors. They found strong positive correlations between self-esteem and a range of self-reported interpersonal skills such as the provision of emotional support. Interestingly, the ratings of the participants provided by their roommates revealed a much different picture because the self-esteem level of the participants was at best weakly associated with the roommates’ impressions of their interpersonal skills. The measure of self-esteem used by Buhrmester and his colleagues was the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich, Stapp, & Ervin, 1974) which was originally developed as a measure of social competence and has been found to contain a strong social dominance component (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004). Would these researchers have found similar results if they had used a measure of self-esteem such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) that was not created as a measure of social competence and that has a much weaker association with social dominance? If the various instruments that are used to measure self-esteem differ in terms of their interpersonal content, then the choice of which instruments researchers use may have an important influence on how self-esteem is conceptualized. Are individuals with high levels of self-esteem plagued by positive illusions concerning their interpersonal skills? Are individuals with high levels of self-esteem plagued by positive illusions concerning their interpersonal skills as suggested by the results of Buhrmester et al. (1988) or is this view of high self-esteem due to the interpersonal content of the measure they employed?

The interpersonal circumplex (Leary, 1957) was selected to serve as the basis of comparison for the interpersonal content of these self-esteem instruments. The interpersonal circumplex is defined by a two-coordinate system represented as vertical and horizontal axes. Agency (which ranges from dominant to submissive) is represented by the vertical axis and communion (which ranges from nurturant to hostile) is represented by the horizontal axis (see Fig. 1). The circumplex is divided into eight sectors referred to as octants. The degrees indicate the boundaries of each octant as well as its midpoint. The two letter labels for each octant (e.g., PA, BC) are derived from the original division of the interpersonal circumplex into 16 sectors labeled “A” through “P” (Thomas Friedman, Leary, Ossario, & Coffey, 1951). These 16 sectors are most commonly collapsed into the octants employed in the present study with a two letter label for each octant beginning with “PA” at the top of the circle and proceeding in a counterclockwise direction around the circumplex: Assured-Dominant (PA, 90°), Arrogant-Calculating (BC, 135°), Cold-hearted (DE, 180°), Aloof-Introverted (FG, 225°), Unassured-Submissive (HI, 270°), Unassuming-Innocuous (JK, 315°), Warm-Agreeable (LM, 0°), and Gregarious-Extraverted (NO, 45°). The interpersonal circumplex is used to capture a number of interpersonal domains including problems (Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno, & Villasenor, 1988), goals (Locke, 2000), and styles (Wiggins, 1995). The present study will focus exclusively on interpersonal styles.

The agency and communion axes of the circumplex serve as a sort of Cartesian coordinate system that allows for the identification of points in interpersonal circumplex space. Using this system, locations on the circumplex may be characterized in terms of their distance from the origin (i.e., the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes) and angular displacement relative to the horizontal axis (Wiggins, Phillips, & Trapnell, 1989). Gurtman (1992) proposed that the interpersonal circumplex is capable of serving as the sort of nomological net that Cronbach and Meehl (1955) argued was at the very core of construct validation. More specifically, the interpersonal circumplex has been shown to have considerable utility as a means for clarifying the interpersonal meaning and content.
The purpose of the present study was to compare some of the more commonly used measures of self-esteem within the interpersonal circumplex in order to determine which of these instruments possess significant interpersonal content and to assess the similarity of their interpersonal content. It was predicted that the measures of self-esteem would possess significant interpersonal content and would generally be located in areas of the circumplex characterized by a combination of agency and communion (e.g., the Gregarious-Extraverted [NO] octant). This prediction was based on Sullivan’s (1953) view of self-esteem as resulting from the fulfillment of desires for love and status (see Benjamin, 1993 and Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996, for later extensions of this idea). This prediction was also consistent with previous results showing that high levels of self-esteem are often associated with both social dominance (e.g., Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004) and affiliative qualities such as kindness (e.g., Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, 2007). However, differences in the degree to which these instruments capture agency and communion may lead to variability in their locations within circumplex space. For example, it is expected that an instrument such as the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich et al., 1974) – which was created as a measure of social competence – will have a stronger association with agency than the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale which does not have a strong social competence component.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 1441 undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. Of the 1441 participants who began the study, the data from 19 participants were discarded due to their failure to provide complete information. The analyses were conducted using the 1422 remaining participants (340 men and 1082 women). The mean age of these participants was 20.34 years (SD = 3.93). The racial/ethnic composition of the participants was 57% White, 36% Black, 2% Asian, 1% Native American, 1% Hispanic, and 3% Other. Due to concerns about participant fatigue and frustration that may have resulted from completing so many instruments with such considerable overlap in content, data were collected using seven separate samples (see Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004, for a similar strategy). Information concerning the instruments completed by each sample is included in Table 1.

#### 2.2. Measures of self-esteem

Of the instruments that are currently used to measure self-esteem, seven instruments were included in the present study in order to determine their interpersonal content and examine their interpersonal cohesion. Measures were selected for inclusion based on their representation of various conceptualizations of self-esteem.

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### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for measures of self-esteem, and interpersonal style.</th>
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<td>3. Feelings of Inadequacy Scale</td>
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</table>

**Note:** $N_{\text{Sample A}} = 165$; $N_{\text{Sample B}} = 175$; $N_{\text{Sample C}} = 486$; $N_{\text{Sample D}} = 141$; $N_{\text{Sample E}} = 128$; $N_{\text{Sample F}} = 234$; $N_{\text{Sample G}} = 93$. Missing values are indicated for measures that were never included in the same sample. The internal consistencies for agency and communion were estimated from internal consistency coefficients for the constituent octant scores (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

* $p < .01$.

* * $p < .001$. 


teem as well as their frequency of use and demonstrated utility in the existing literature. For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is the most commonly used measure of self-esteem and captures a form of global trait self-esteem. Other commonly used measures of global trait self-esteem included in the present study were the Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Eagly, 1967; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Janis & Field, 1959), Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich et al., 1974), and Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). The Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001) was included because it captures two distinct aspects of trait self-esteem (i.e., self-liking and self-competence) that have been shown to be important for understanding how individuals feel about themselves. The State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) was selected because it is intended to capture moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth referred to as state self-esteem. The Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989) was included because it is a measure of domain-specific self-esteem.

2.2.1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of global self-esteem. Participants were instructed to complete the instrument according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This instrument has been shown to be a well-validated and reliable measure of global self-regard (e.g., Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991).

2.2.2. Feelings of Inadequacy Scale

The Janis-Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Eagly, 1967; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Janis & Field, 1959) is a 36-item measure of global self-esteem. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (never/not at all) to 7 (always/very much). Previous research has shown this instrument to be a valid and reliable measure of self-esteem (e.g., Fleming & Courtney, 1984).

2.2.3. Texas Social Behavior Inventory

The Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich et al., 1974) is a 16-item measure of self-esteem which focuses on perceived competence and confidence in social situations. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Previous research has shown the Texas Social Behavior Inventory to be a valid and reliable measure of self-esteem (e.g., Brown & Marshall, 2001; Helmreich et al., 1974).

2.2.4. Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale

The Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (Robins et al., 2001) measures global self-esteem using only a single item (i.e., “I see myself as someone who has high self-esteem”). Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This instrument has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of global self-regard (Bagley, 2005; Clark, 2006; Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, 2002; Robins et al., 2001).

2.2.5. Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale-Revised

Self-liking and self-competence were measured using the Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale-Revised (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). This measure consists of two 8-item subscales designed to measure self-liking (e.g., “I like myself”) and self-competence (e.g., “I am a capable person”). Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability and validity of these subscales have been supported in previous studies (e.g., Tafarodi, Marshall, & Milne, 2003; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001).

2.2.6. State Self-Esteem Scale

The State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) is a 20-item measure that assesses self-esteem across three domains: performance (e.g., “I feel confident about my abilities”), social (e.g., “I feel concerned about the impression I am making”; reverse-scored), and appearance (e.g., “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”). Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Previous research has shown the State Self-Esteem Scale to be a valid and reliable measure of self-esteem (e.g., Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Vohs & Heatherton, 2004).

2.2.7. Self-Attributes Questionnaire

The Self-Attributes Questionnaire (Pelham & Swann, 1989) is an 8-item instrument which assesses respondents’ beliefs about themselves relative to other individuals their same age and sex. These judgments are made for the following dimensions: intelligence, social skills, artistic ability, musical ability, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership ability, and common sense. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (way below average) to 9 (way above average). Previous research has shown the Self-Attributes Questionnaire to be a valid and reliable measure of self-esteem (e.g., Pelham, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989).

2.3. Measure of interpersonal style

Interpersonal style was assessed by the Interpersonal Adjective Scales – Revised (IAS-R; Wiggins, 1995). The IAS-R consists of 64 adjectives to which participants provide ratings of accuracy on scales ranging from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 8 (extremely accurate). Ratings of the adjectives provide individual scores on each octant which identifies particular interpersonal tendencies representing a unique blend of agency and communion. The scores for agency and communion are weighted linear composites derived from the octant scores as follows:

\[
\text{Agency} = (0.25) \times \sum [r_{i} \times \sin(\Theta_{i})]
\]

\[
\text{Communion} = (0.25) \times \sum [r_{i} \times \cos(\Theta_{i})]
\]

Previous research has demonstrated the reliability and validity of this measure as well as establishing its association with other measures (e.g., Ansell & Pincus, 2004; Tracey, Ryan, & Jaschik-Herman, 2001; Wiggins, 1995).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for the measures of self-esteem and interpersonal style are displayed in Table 1. The average correlation among the measures of self-esteem was .58. The correlations between the self-esteem measures and agency ranged from .29 (Self-Competence Scale) to .66 (Texas Social Behavior Inventory), whereas the correlations between self-esteem and communion ranged from -.03 (Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale) to .24 (Self-Competence Scale).

3.2. Confirmation of the circular structure of the IAS-R

The IAS-R is derived from the interpersonal circumplex which implies that it should conform to the predicted circular structure. In order for the circular structure of the IAS-R to be confirmed the correlations between octants that are closer together on the circumplex must be greater than the correlations for those octants that are more distant. On a practical level, this leads to 288 predictions concerning order such that the correlations between octants separated by 45° should be greater than those separated by 90° (64
predictions), 135° (64 predictions), and 180° (32 predictions). The correlations for the octants separated by 90° should, in turn, be greater than those separated by 135° (64 predictions) or 180° (32 predictions). Finally, the correlations for octants separated by 135° should be greater than the correlations for octants separated by 180° (32 predictions).

To determine if the IAS-R conformed to its predicted circular structure in the present study, a correspondence index (CI) was computed as recommended by Hubert and Arabie (1987). The CI serves as an indicator of the fit between the obtained correlations with the 288 order predictions mentioned earlier. The CI is computed using the following formula:

\[
CI = \frac{\text{number of correct predictions} - \text{number of incorrect predictions}}{\text{total number of predictions}}
\]

The CI can be interpreted as a Somers’s statistic (Somers, 1962) that can range from +1 (all of the order predictions were met) to −1 (none of the order predictions were met). To evaluate the significance of the CI, a randomization test of hypothesized order relations was employed (Hubert & Arabie, 1987; Rounds, Tracey, & Hubert, 1992). The CI and the subsequent randomization test were computed using the statistical package RANDALL (Tracey, 1997). The results of these tests found that 286 of the 288 order predictions were met (CI = .99, \( p < .001 \)). The significance of the randomization tests suggests that the circular structure of the IAS-R was maintained in the present study.

3.3. Projection onto the interpersonal circumplex

As outlined by Wiggins and Broughton (1991), the location of each instrument within the space defined by the interpersonal circumplex was determined by finding its association with the two principal dimensions of the circumplex (i.e., agency and communion). These coordinates identified the location of each self-esteem instrument and are described using their angular displacement and amplitude. Angular displacement refers to the location of a point on the circumplex relative to the positive horizontal axis (i.e., communion) and is calculated as:

Angular Displacement = \( \arctan (\text{Agency}/\text{Communion}) \).

Amplitude (i.e., vector length) is the distance of a location from the origin and is calculated as:

Amplitude = \( (\text{Agency}^2 + \text{Communion}^2) \).

The amplitude characterizes the strength of the interpersonal nature of the construct such that a construct with strong interpersonal characteristics will have a relatively large amplitude placing it nearer the circumference of the circumplex. The common heuristic used to determine whether a construct possesses significant interpersonal content is an amplitude exceeding .30 (Gurtman, 1991).

The results for the projection of the measures of self-esteem into interpersonal circumplex space are shown in Fig. 2. Each of the measures included in the present study possessed significant interpersonal content (i.e., amplitude exceeded .30). The interpersonal similarity among the measures of self-esteem was estimated by using the proximity of their angular displacements. Cosine-difference correlations – which are equal to the cosine of the angle of separation between the measures (Gurtman, 1992, 1999) – served as the measure of interpersonal similarity. For example, if two
measures of self-esteem had the same angular displacement, their cosine-difference correlation would be equal to 1 (i.e., $\cos[0] = 1$). Two measures separated by 90° would have a cosine-difference correlation of 0, measures separated by 180° would have a cosine-difference correlation of $-1$, and so on. The cosine-difference correlations for the measures of self-esteem are presented in Table 2. These analyses found a high degree of interpersonal cohesion among these self-esteem instruments such that the average cosine-difference correlation was .94. This interpersonal cohesion can be seen in the clustering of these measures within the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) and Assured-Dominant (PA) octants (i.e., their angular displacements were between 50.19° and 94.07°). The placement of these instruments in adjacent octants suggests that these instruments possess similar interpersonal content.

3.4. Item-centric analyses

These analyses examine the location of the items constituting each self-esteem instrument on the interpersonal circumplex (Gurtman, 1997, 2009; Pincus & Gurtman, 1995). This approach allows for an understanding of three primary features of these self-esteem instruments: thematic quality, breadth of coverage, and factorial saturation (see Gurtman, 2009, for a review). The results of these item-centric analyses are presented in Table 2. **Thematic quality** refers to the interpersonal style that best characterizes the constituent items for each self-esteem instrument and is represented by the circular mean. The circular mean for each instrument is nearly identical to its angular displacement which was displayed in Fig. 2. The circular means ranged from 48.51° (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale) to 93.73° (Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale) which is consistent with the earlier projection of the instruments showing that each was located in either the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) or Assured-Dominant (PA) octants.

**Breadth of coverage** refers to the dispersion of an instrument’s items around its circular mean (i.e., circular variance). Gurtman and Pincus (2003) referred to instruments that sample from a relatively narrow range of the circumplex as having “fidelity” of measurement, whereas those that sample more broadly are referred to as having greater “bandwidth” (see Cronbach, 1990, for a similar idea). The self-esteem instruments were characterized by a relatively narrow breadth of coverage which ranged from +17.46° for the Self-Liking Scale to +25.47° for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. This narrow coverage suggests that these measures of self-esteem have relatively high levels of interpersonal fidelity. Consistent with the finding that the self-esteem instruments were cohesive in terms of their interpersonal content, 101 of the 107 items were located in either the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) or Assured-Dominant (PA) octants. The remaining items were located in adjacent octants with three items in the Warm-Agreeable (LM) octant and three items in the Arrogant-Calculating (BC) octant.

The amount of variance that an instrument shares with the interpersonal circumplex is referred to as **factorial saturation**. Basically, this refers to how much “interpersonal content” a given measure actually has in terms of the interpersonal circumplex (Gurtman, 1991). Factorial saturation is calculated as the average amplitude of the measure's items. The mean item amplitude is similar but not identical to the instrument amplitudes displayed in Fig. 2. The self-esteem instruments were relatively consistent in terms of their interpersonal content with mean item amplitudes ranging from .26 (State Self-Esteem Scale) to .43 (Texas Social Behavior Inventory). These values are consistent with those that have been found for other interpersonal constructs such as dependency (Pincus & Gurtman, 1995).

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to compare the interpersonal content of various measures of self-esteem. The results of the present study provide insight into the interpersonal nature of self-esteem. Each of the self-esteem instruments included in the present study was found to possess significant interpersonal content. Further, these instruments demonstrated interpersonal cohesion such that each instrument was located within a 44° arc spanning the Assured-Dominant [PA] and Gregarious-Extraverted [NO] octants. These results suggest that the self-esteem instruments included in the present study possess a fair degree of overlap with regard to interpersonal style. This interpersonal consistency also emerged when the constituent items of the self-esteem instruments were projected onto the interpersonal circumplex.

The measures of self-esteem were associated with two primary interpersonal styles: Assured-Dominant (PA) and Gregarious-Extraverted (NO). Five of the instruments (i.e., Self-Attributes Questionnaire, Feelings of Inadequacy Scale, Texas Social Behavior Inventory, Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale, and Self-Liking Scale) were located in the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant. Individuals with this interpersonal style tend to exercise power over others in social contexts and describe themselves as forceful, assertive, and self-confident (Wiggins, 1995). This octant reflects the grant-
ing of both love and status to the self and the granting of love but not status to other individuals (Foa & Foa, 1974; Wiggins, 1995). In terms of their relationships with others, this suggests that individuals with high scores on these measures of self-esteem are likely to provide emotional support to others but not esteem support. In essence, these individuals are likely to exhibit an interpersonal style characterized by social dominance which may be used to maintain and enhance their high levels of self-esteem. This pattern is consistent with previous suggestions that self-esteem may be associated with relative positions in dominance hierarchies (e.g., Barkow, 1989; Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001, 2006).

The remaining measures of self-esteem (i.e., Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, State Self-Esteem Scale, and Self-Competence Scale) were located in the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant which is adjacent to the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant. Individuals with this interpersonal style tend to seek out interactions with others that are positive and harmonious (Wiggins, 1995). These individuals often describe themselves as friendly, sociable, and outgoing. In terms of social exchange, this interpersonal style reflects a tendency to grant love and status to both the self and others (Foa & Foa, 1974). It is important to note that the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant differs from the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant which does not grant status to others. That is, individuals who report high scores on the self-esteem instruments located in the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant are likely to provide both emotional and esteem support to others in their social environment. This may suggest that individuals who report high scores on a measure of self-esteem such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Gregarious-Extraverted [NO] octant) may use different interpersonal strategies to maintain their feelings of self-worth than someone who reports a high score on the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Assured-Dominant [PA] octant). It is possible that the differences in interpersonal style between the various self-esteem instruments may be important in some contexts despite the relatively narrow distribution of these measures across the circumplex.

The results of the present study – along with those of Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004) – suggest the intriguing possibility that self-esteem measures may differ with regard to how other individuals are evaluated. For example, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – which was located in the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant – assesses the degree to which individuals believe they are as good as most other people, whereas the Self-Attributes Questionnaire – which was located in the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant – measures the extent to which individuals believe they are better than other individuals. To put it another way, the use of different self-esteem instruments may lead to somewhat different conclusions concerning how individuals with high self-esteem view others. The social exchange model of interpersonal behavior developed by Foa and Foa (1974) raises the question of whether granting status to others diminishes or cheapens one’s own standing in some way. Some researchers appear to believe this to be the case. For example, Krueger, Vohs, and Baumeister (2008) argued that the granting or withholding of status to others should be viewed from the perspective of the Prisoner’s Dilemma such that Individual X would like it most if Individual Y approved of him, while Individual X withheld his approval from Individual Y. According to this perspective, mutual approval would be less desirable than this inequitable outcome. It would appear that this view of high self-esteem would be more likely to find support if a measure of self-esteem such as the Self-Attributes Questionnaire was employed than if a measure such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used. However, this is certainly an open empirical question that should be examined in future research.

There is no simple means for determining which self-esteem instrument would be most appropriate for any particular context but it is important for researchers to be aware that the various measures used to capture self-esteem are not perfectly interchangeable. Rather, the subtle differences between these measures with regard to their interpersonal content could be important for certain types of studies such as those examining the link between self-esteem and behavior in romantic relationships. Based on their location in the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the State Self-Esteem Scale would appear to be appropriate choices for researchers interested in capturing a form of self-esteem characterized by interpersonal behaviors that are rewarding for both the individual and others in the social environment. The form of high self-esteem captured by these measures would appear to be highly consistent with interpersonal (e.g., Sullivan, 1953), humanistic (e.g., Rogers, 1959, 1961), and modern conceptualizations of self-esteem (e.g., sociometer model; Leary et al., 1995). In contrast, the use of a self-esteem instrument such as the Texas Social Behavior Inventory may result in an image of individuals with high levels of self-esteem as being socially dominant but not very warm or nurturing because of its location in the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant.

It is important to acknowledge some of the potential limitations of the present study. First, the present study relied exclusively on self-report measures. Due to shared method variance, the associations between the measures of self-esteem and interpersonal style may have been somewhat inflated (see Baumeister et al., 2003 for similar arguments concerning other domains). This is especially problematic given that individuals with high self-esteem tend to be those who are most likely to endorse favorable statements about themselves. Therefore, it may not be terribly surprising that these individuals would also report their interpersonal behavior as being characterized by a mixture of desirable styles (i.e., agency and communion). In the future, researchers may wish to either observe the actual interpersonal behavior of individuals or ask those close to the individuals (e.g., roommates) to provide ratings of their interpersonal styles. These alternative approaches would allow researchers to avoid concerns about shared method variance.

A second potential limitation is that the present study did not include all of the available self-esteem instruments. Although seven of the most widely used self-esteem instruments were included, there were some relatively popular measures of self-esteem that were not included (e.g., Self-Esteem Inventory; Coopersmith, 1967). The reason for limiting the number of measures included in the present study was primarily due to concerns about participant fatigue and frustration resulting from being asked to respond to so many similarly worded items. However, future researchers may decide to include additional self-esteem instruments in future research.

A final limitation is that the data from the present study was obtained exclusively from undergraduate students which may limit the generalizability of the present findings. For example, would similar patterns emerge for individuals in other stages of life? Previous research has shown that there are general shifts in self-esteem level over time (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003) but it is unclear whether the association between self-esteem and interpersonal style would change as individuals age. It is possible that the interpersonal style associated with self-esteem may be better characterized by agency at some ages (i.e., middle adulthood) and communion at other ages (e.g., late adulthood). In order to gain an understanding of any developmental changes in the association between self-esteem and interpersonal style, it will be necessary for future researchers to extend the present findings beyond undergraduate samples.

One direction for future research would be to examine the link between self-esteem and other interpersonal circumplex domains such as interpersonal problems or interpersonal goals. These sorts of studies may provide additional insights concerning the interper-
sonal content of various self-esteem measures. Another possible direction for future research is to consider the development of a self-esteem measure that has greater bandwidth in terms of interpersonal content. Each of the self-esteem instruments included in the present study sampled interpersonal content from a relatively limited region of the circumplex. Could a self-esteem measure be constructed that consisted of facets located across a broader range of interpersonal styles? If so, such an instrument may improve our understanding of alternative means for maintaining and enhancing feelings of self-worth (e.g., disconnecting from others).

5. Conclusions

The present results found similarities in the interpersonal content of some of the most commonly used self-esteem instruments such that all of the measures included in the present study were located in either the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) or Assured-Dominant (PA) octants of the interpersonal circumplex. Despite this interpersonal cohesion, it is possible that the relatively small differences between self-esteem instruments may exert subtle influences on how individuals with high self-esteem are perceived. For example, high scores on self-esteem instruments located in the Assured-Dominant (PA) octant may be associated with interpersonal styles that deny status to others, whereas high scores on measures located in the Gregarious-Extraverted (NO) octant are likely to be associated with the granting of status to others. Researchers are urged to consider the interpersonal content of these self-esteem instruments before deciding to employ them in their studies.

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