

Review of Current Research on the Impact of Self-Esteem and Emotional Regulation on Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract:

Interpersonal relationship quality is an indispensable indicator of the individual's social adaptation and mental health. Self-esteem and emotion regulation, being the core psychological mechanisms of interpersonal relationships, have profound impacts on their formation and maintenance. The existing research mostly discusses the role of the two separately, but lacks systematic integration, which limits the theoretical deepening and practical application regarding interpersonal relationships. Based on the systematic literature review adopted from the past two decades, this study comprehensively analyzes the mechanism, interaction, and practical application value of self-esteem and emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships, aiming to fill the current gap in the integration of the two. The research method further discusses self-esteem types and their formation processes, emotion regulation models and strategies, differences in attachment types, and the mediating and regulatory effects of the two in interpersonal interactions, as well as multiple neural, behavioral, and longitudinal research studies. The results show that high and stable self-esteem is conducive to positive interaction, and emotion regulation significantly improves intimacy and satisfaction through cognitive reappraisal and empathetic listening, where different attachment types and situations can determine the efficacy of strategies. The conclusion of this study suggests that education and family intervention should focus on improving adolescents' self-esteem and emotion regulation ability, and clinical treatment should be based on individual characteristics. Furthermore, constructive emotion regulation habits and positive self-evaluation systems should be developed in the workplace and daily life to promote cooperation and reduce conflict.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Emotion regulation, Interpersonal relationship.

1 Introduction

Relationships are an essential part of social life. With current advances in psychological research, scholars are gradually realizing that self-esteem and emotional regulation ability are particularly important among the many aspects that affect interpersonal relationships. First, self-esteem is not only an individual's subjective evaluation of their value, but also a psychological evaluation index of their social acceptance. Thus, self-esteem stability and type largely determine an individual's interaction habits and social adjustment ability [1,2]. Second, emotion regulation involves the individual's personalized management of production, experience, and expression regarding emotions, which is not only related to individual mental health but also profoundly affects the quality of their interpersonal communication [3].

The existing research has made great progress in revealing the importance of self-esteem and emotion regulation to interpersonal relationships. For example, Kong et al. found that adolescent families can indirectly improve their children's interpersonal relationship quality by promoting their self-esteem. Coan et al. demonstrated the buffering effect of emotion regulation in interpersonal interaction at the neurophysiological level. However, few studies have systematically integrated the mechanisms by which self-esteem and emotion regulation work simultaneously on interpersonal relationships. This research gap limits the possibility of considering both in theory construction and in real-life practice.

Based on this, this paper aims to comprehensively review the mechanism and practical application of self-esteem and emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships, and explore their performance differences and interaction effects in different situations. By combining the theoretical model and empirical research, this paper hopes to fill the current gap in the integration of the two and strives to provide operational improvement suggestions for education, clinical, and daily communication, so as to enhance overall interpersonal relationship quality.

2 Essential Definitions

Interpersonal relationship is a complex model based on perception and cognition, which covers many contents, including but not limited to the basic understanding of emotions, beliefs, intentions, characteristics, and the neural structure lying behind them. This dynamic and interlaced quality leads to a constantly updating understanding of oneself, others, and the combination of the two—interpersonal relationships [6].

2.1 Definition of Self-esteem

Self-esteem is an individual's subjective assessment of his or her overall worth, reflecting the degree to which he or she feels valued, liked, or accepted by others [7,1]; It also incorporates cognitive self-evaluation and emotional experience into an individual's identity core [1].

Although self-esteem mainly reflects the internal cognition of the self, it is also influenced by many external factors, such as the formation and function of interpersonal relationships. As Cameron & Granger explain, theoretical models such as Sociometer theory view self-esteem as a psychological measure of an individual's perceived social acceptance. In other words, self-esteem reflects how individuals interpret others' acceptance or rejection of themselves.

In addition, the quality of self-esteem matters. Kernis divides self-esteem into optimal and fragile self-esteem. The optimal self-esteem is stable, authentic, and unthreatening, the so-called secure self-esteem; the fragile self-esteem is defensive, dependent on external approval, and prone to volatility. The concept of optimal self-esteem and fragile self-esteem is subjective, and for different people, optimal self-esteem and fragile self-esteem can either be the result of objective high self-esteem or low self-esteem. For example, Zhang San's fragile self-esteem is high. His high self-esteem brings social pressure to those around him, making it difficult for him to fit in with others, and he often receives strange glances. Therefore, Tom developed fragile self-esteem under the influence of his high self-esteem. In contrast, for Alex, his high self-esteem makes him socially less vulnerable to the verbal and non-verbal scrutiny of those around him. This allows him to be socially confident and further develop stable, authentic, and rewarding optimal self-esteem. This distinction makes sense in interpersonal behavior: when individual values are challenged, such as being ridiculed or criticized, people with fragile self-esteem are more likely to respond defensively, such as crying or cursing loudly, which may damage the interpersonal relationships around them.

Differentiated self-esteem also plays a mediating role in different intimacy and interpersonal situations. Kong et al. find that adolescents with acne have higher self-esteem if they are in a good family situation. Their self-esteem, which changes with family status, is also positively correlated with their relationship status. In other words, the level of intimacy a person has can affect their relationships through their self-esteem.

2.2 Definition of Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation is a process in which individuals influence their own emotion generation, experience, and

expression. James Gross defines emotion regulation as the regulation of emotional experience and expression through conscious or unconscious strategies. These adjustments can affect many processes of emotion generation, from situational and cognitive changes to physiological or behavioral responses. The Process Model of emotion regulation used by Gross includes three core stages: recognition, selection, and execution. The model is based on the Modal Model of emotions, which suggests that emotions unfold in a specific sequence: firstly, awareness of the current situation; second, forming of self-evaluation; lastly, generating of emotional responses. During the entire process, emotional regulation has a sustained impact [3].

The common regulatory strategies include cognitive reappraisal and suppression of emotions. Cognitive reappraisal focuses on changing one's understanding of the situation and is often accompanied by positive outcomes, such as improved mental health; emotion inhibition points to reduced emotional explicitness and often leads to negative effects, such as reduced relationship satisfaction.

In addition to an individual's internal processes, interpersonal emotion regulation also involves others' participation in the regulation process, including internal regulation and external regulation. The former aims to regulate one's emotions through others, while the latter aims to help others regulate their emotions [8]. This form of adjustment is particularly pronounced in intimate relationships, where partners often co-regulate emotions through behaviors such as providing empathy, trust, attention shifting, or comfort [9]. Attachment theory also provides key clues for understanding differences in emotion regulation. Secure attachment individuals are typically able to effectively utilize problem-solving skills or support-seeking abilities to propose constructive strategies; avoidant attachment individuals tend to suppress or ignore emotional distress; and anxious attachment types may amplify pain [10]. Emotion regulation is not a universal process, as it is shaped by sensitivity, past experience, interpersonal interaction, and individual attachment.

3 Self-esteem

3.1 Formation of Self-Esteem

The formation of self-esteem stems from the individual's social experience, especially in the critical growth stages such as childhood and adolescence. Sociometer Theory points to the nature of self-esteem as a measure of the degree to which individuals believe themselves to be socially accepted [2]. Specifically, the theory posits that when individuals feel recognized or valued, self-evalua-

tion levels generally rise and develop optimal self-esteem; conversely, when individuals receive signals of rejection, alienation, or aversion, their self-recognition will correspondingly decrease and lead to fragile self-esteem.

The development of self-esteem can be divided into three stages. The first stage is the generation of self-esteem, which begins with the child's early contact with a guardian, peer, or kindergarten teacher. In this process, the response and value information conveyed by the above people to children will shape children's self-perception in the early stage. Kernis supports this view and emphasizes that the optimal self-esteem results from continued acceptance and unconditional support during childhood. If support during childhood is limited by specific factors, or children generally lack recognition, fragile self-esteem might be caused instead.

The second stage of self-esteem development is the shaping of self-esteem. This stage revolves around the individual's teenage years and is influenced by family and gender. Kong et al. provide empirical support for this stage. They studied 230 adolescents (43.91% male and 56.09% female) with hemorrhoids aged 12 to 20 in Jining, China, on the correlation between family functioning, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem levels. It was found that adolescents from families with strong cohesion, smooth communication, and adequate emotional support showed the optimal self-esteem. Empirical evidence for a negative correlation between adolescents' scores on the Family Intimacy and Adaptation Scale (high scores represent better functioning) and Interpersonal Comprehensive Diagnostic Scale (high scores represent worse interpersonal distress) means that the worse the family functioning, the worse the interpersonal relationship ($R = -0.395$, $p < 0.01$). The study also found that self-esteem had a stronger effect on relationships among girls ($\beta = -0.470$, $p < 0.001$) than among boys ($\beta = -0.189$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, it can be concluded that family and self-esteem in adolescence have a significant shaping effect on self-esteem.

The final stage of self-esteem development is the final consolidation of self-esteem. An individual's self-esteem is generally stable in adulthood, such as high or low, fragile or optimal, and other basic aspects. However, this is far from the end of the development of self-esteem, where the formative stage will accompany the individual throughout his or her entire life. As adults, the components of self-esteem can be altered by major transitions or disruptive experiences, such as winning \$5 million in the lottery, leading to a surge in self-esteem when the economy supports it. Still, fundamentally, the degree of change is limited. In short, the formation of self-esteem is essentially a reflection of the interaction between interpersonal

and environmental factors, resulting in the accumulation of social evaluation.

3.2 The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem

Importantly, self-esteem is not only an individual's self-assessment, but also plays a mediating role between environmental inputs and social outcomes. Cameron and Granger, in their meta-analysis examining the role of self-esteem beyond the subjective level, found that self-esteem predicts objective interpersonal situations. For example, individuals with optimal self-esteem not only have higher self-satisfaction but also have a higher probability of receiving positive evaluations from others. The implication of this view is that self-esteem does influence the signals received by others in interpersonal interactions and the subsequent effects through the predictive outcomes it represents. Kong et al. also examined the mediating role of self-esteem between family functioning and interpersonal relationships. The study found that self-esteem can explain 40.47% of the total effect between family functioning and interpersonal quality, and means that a good family environment (environmental input) can improve individual self-esteem to a large extent, thus developing their appropriate interpersonal skills (social outcomes).

De Moor et al. found that although social relationship satisfaction was a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-esteem was of social acceptance (reverse path), the two-way effects are both significant and positive. The dual role of self-esteem as both a result and a predictor of social relationships suggests that self-esteem is, in fact, a mediating psychological mechanism between interpersonal relationships and social acceptance.

3.3 Practical Applications

At the practical level, the above findings have important implications for the development and education of young people. As suggested by Kong et al., improving the family situation is a crucial guide to enhancing adolescents' self-esteem and social skills. Given that de Moor et al. empirically demonstrate that social satisfaction has a long-term effect on self-esteem, over the long course of education, teachers can also bring students a strong sense of social acceptance through showing respect, encouraging interaction, and reducing bullying, thus improving interpersonal relationships between students.

In clinical settings, the self-esteem classification proposed by Kernis can refine targeted treatment strategies. For example, in the case of low and fragile self-esteem, treatment should focus on improving the subject's internal self-evaluation through encouragement, so as to achieve optimal self-esteem. Given that self-esteem is also in-

fluenced by the external environment, specific treatment strategies may also consider trying to change the family atmosphere or social quality in which the visitor lives to enhance his or her self-esteem level. For example, if a person with low self-esteem is reluctant to leave someone who often ridicules them, targeted subconscious cues can be used to help the individual think more comprehensively about the interpersonal situation. This broader perspective can, in turn, encourage them to distance themselves from the person who is likely to cause harm. Ultimately, Treatment goals should include both internal cognitive changes and external environmental adjustments.

4 Emotion Regulation

4.1 Theories of Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation theory refers to the practice of regulating emotions in order to achieve goals or adapt to situations. Gross proposed that the regulatory model includes five aspects: situation choice, situation correction, attention allocation, cognitive change, and response adjustment. The theory also emphasizes the control of the timing of emotion generation, and it believes that different regulatory strategies act on different stages of emotion generation. This theory lays the foundation for the study of emotion regulation and highlights the key role of emotion regulation in interpersonal interaction.

The research on attachment theory on emotion regulation is helpful to further understand the different ways people regulate their emotions. One prior study mentioned that argue that attachment orientation determines individuals' differential emotion expression in different situations: people with a secure personality tend to adopt adaptive regulation methods, such as expressing their needs directly when feeling stressed, and relieving emotions through confession and empathy; anxious individuals tend to adopt more paranoid regulation strategies, such as maintaining intimacy through excessive contact or control over others to alleviate anxiety; avoidant individuals tend to suppress their emotions to avoid any emotional interactions, such as showing over indifference or rationalization during conflicts or intimate moments, and using a "I do not care" attitude to conceal their feelings of sadness.

Additionally, social regulation theories, such as social foundational theories, also attempt to challenge the view of emotion regulation as an individualistic process. Coan et al. suggest that emotion regulation is an ability that arises from the need for mutual support between people as relationships evolve. This viewpoint takes emotion regulation as a social, mutually supportive process, and further

puts emotion regulation into a multifaceted framework, viewing it as a dynamic, relational concept that is influenced by developmental factors.

4.2 Emotion Regulation's Effects on Interpersonal Relationships

Emotion regulation has a significant impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships. When Wang et al. examined the ability of interpersonal emotion regulation in conflict situations to predict partner relationships, they found that partners who were able to effectively regulate each other and were willing to talk constructively had higher levels of intimacy, desire, and satisfaction; In contrast, poor regulation, such as perfunctory attitudes and problem avoidance, was associated with relationship decline. This suggests that emotion regulation plays multiple high-weight roles in interpersonal relationships. In addition to helping individuals alleviate tension and pain, it is also an important factor in cultivating harmonious and happy relationships.

Yan et al. have broadly categorized romantic interpersonal emotion regulation strategies into several types. These include, but are not limited to, empathetic listening, which contributes to the mitigation of negative emotions by encouraging the partner to express emotions, such as supporting the expression of negative emotions; cognitive reappraisal, such as helping the partner re-interpret the event in a positive light, and promote long-term emotional well-being; divert attention, which helps to quickly relieve negative emotions by directing partner's attention to other things, such as suggesting a short break to watch a movie when your partner is feeling stressed; humor, use humor or a fun way to change the atmosphere of a situation to effectively reduce stress, for example, making light-hearted jokes during stressful moments. It is worth noting that the regulation strategy is different between the situations and the individuals, and the effectiveness of the strategy depends on the matching degree of the regulation behavior with the partner's needs. Like humor, it may relieve tension in controlled and relaxed discussions, but it can be dismissed as perfunctory in serious arguments.

As elucidated in the introduction to attachment theory, the diverse attachment styles of individuals can, to a certain extent, predict their capacity to navigate interpersonal difficulties. Specifically, the communicative approaches of securely attached individuals are markedly more effective, whereas those characterized by anxiety and avoidance exhibit a deficiency in efficient communication. These dynamics imply that adaptive and responsive emotional regulation serves as a crucial mechanism for relational health.

4.3 Research Integrations

In the past 20 years, researchers have developed a multi-dimensional investigation into emotion regulation, including neurological, behavioral, and psychological aspects. Early on, Coan et al. demonstrated the feasibility of emotion regulation at the neurophysiological level. They found that if women hold their partner's hand when performing a stressful task, their brains are less activated by the threat. It can be seen that emotion regulation in close relationships may serve as a buffer against negative emotions. More evidence on the effects of emotion regulation on partner well-being can be found in Wang et al.'s study using a diary approach as well as a longitudinal design. The results of their study showed that both frequency and quality of emotion regulation behaviors predicted long-term intimacy and satisfaction in close relationships.

In the medium term of the past 20 years of studies, Gross broadens the concept of emotion regulation to include factors such as individual differences and interpersonal affect, and calls on researchers to further explore the goals and roles of emotion regulation. The initial results of this advocacy can already be seen. There has been a significant increase in the number of studies that combine the internal and interpersonal aspects of emotion regulation, including studies that explore the relationship between attachment style, relationship situations, and neural mechanisms with emotion regulation, where most of them support and extend the view that emotion regulation is the result of many interpersonal factors.

Recently, many studies have focused on the individual perspective and emphasized that emotion regulation strategies are not static in diverse situations. In response to different people and situations, individuals usually adopt differentiated regulation methods, so as to better match the regulation strategy with the situation, and exert the best effect of this process of regulation [9]. Such as when having arguments with friends who have similar age, knowledge, and ability, individuals are likely to maintain a high level of excitement and be in a state of irritability; However, when arguing with elders or someone who is clearly superior in certain way, individuals are more likely to lean towards being listeners, maintaining a humble attitude and peaceful emotions.

4.4 Practical Applications

Emotion regulation is widely used in therapy, education, and everyday relationships. In clinical settings, emotion-focused therapy (EFT) can improve emotion regulation and interpersonal relationships based on attachment theory. The core idea is that emotion is the central driver of human behavior, and many psychological problems

stem from the confusion or avoidance of emotional experiences. By recognizing, accepting, and reconstructing emotions, individuals can build healthier coping patterns and interpersonal relationships. Studies by Wang et al. and Coan et al. further confirm that such interventions not only lead to psychological improvement but also have a neurophysiological benefit: reducing the brain's activation to pain.

In the wider workplace and school environment, emotion regulation training reduces conflict and improves social functioning. Yan et al. point out that interpersonal emotion regulation strategies such as empathetic listening, cognitive reappraisal, shifting attention, and humor can enhance relationship quality through daily practice. Gross further emphasizes that developing the ability to regulate the emotions of self and others is fundamental for professional success. Finally, emotion regulation can help refine details of everyday relationships. Simple emotional support actions, such as holding the hands of lovers, can convey comfort and emotional support. Emotion regulation is no longer confined to the realm of personal responsibility; it has become a practical and influential skill in shaping interpersonal relationships.

5 Conclusion

This article reviews and analyzes the role of self-esteem and emotion regulation in interpersonal relationships. First of all, in terms of the research topic, the paper discusses in detail the formation and classification of self-esteem, its mediating role, as well as theoretical models of emotion regulation, interpersonal emotion regulation strategies, and differences in attachment styles, thereby providing a comprehensive account of how both factors significantly influence the quality of interpersonal relationships. Secondly, regarding the research findings, self-esteem is both an outcome of interpersonal interactions and an important antecedent for predicting relationship quality. High and stable self-esteem facilitates the establishment and maintenance of positive relationships. Emotion regulation, meanwhile, serves as a key moderating mechanism in interpersonal interactions, with adaptive strategies effectively enhancing intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

In terms of practical implications, the study points out that education and family intervention can improve adolescents' social adaptation by enhancing their self-esteem and emotion regulation ability; according to the self-esteem type and emotion regulation preference, scholars can figure out more personalized treatment plans clinically. In the workplace and daily communication, people should cultivate constructive emotion regulation habits and a pos-

itive self-evaluation system to reduce conflict and promote cooperation. Finally, the significance of this study lies in integrating self-esteem and emotion regulation as two core psychological mechanisms, thereby offering a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. It also provides multi-level interventions for improving social functioning in the interpersonal domain. This integrative perspective can help future research to uncover the deeper mechanisms of interpersonal relationships through multidimensional and cross-context analyses.

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