# The reification of self-esteem: *grammatical investigations* into scientific and popular texts

## Dorota Pomagalska

Faculty of Health Sciences,

Department of Psychology

August 2005

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the reification of the concept of 'self-esteem' has been achieved discursively. It investigates how the concept of self-esteem has been developed over time and how it operates as an explanatory construct across a rage of areas and disciplines. The analyses in this thesis examine texts coming from psychiatry, self-help publications and public policy. These disciplines have taken up, utilized and, consequently re-constructed the concept of self-esteem according to their own specific needs and their particular discursive organizations.

The thesis adopts the assumption that abstract psychological constructs are linguistically achieved and thus can be most effectively studied through focusing on the 'workings of language', rather than on 'discovering' some inner phenomena. Informed by Wittgenstein, critical psychology, and critical linguistics, the analyses undertake *grammatical investigations* into the concept of self-esteem.

These *investigations* , based on the analysis of patterns in the lexico-grammar, examine 'meanings' accumulated in the concept of self-esteem. These examinations extend to the level of social, cultural, and political contexts which have influenced our understandings of the concept of self-esteem. The investigations of 'meanings' embedded in the notion of self-esteem make possible an exploration of the values, assumptions and connotations carried by this concept.

The analyses demonstrate that self-esteem has been constructed over time as an increasingly more tangible, internalized and cognitive phenomenon. This intensified reification produced a 'self-esteem' that is not only a consistent and measurable 'feature' of the human psyche, but is an agentive force shaping human lives. Moreover, these constructions of self-esteem promote particular ethical principles and ultraconservative values. Paradoxically, while discourses of self-esteem have become a part of neo-liberal philosophies emphasizing personal liberty and freedom of choice, they serve to limit the choices of many social groups.

# STATEMENTS

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due references have been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

...................................　　　　　...................................

signature　　　　　　　　　　　date

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the following people who inspired my interest in critical social psychology and critical linguistics, and directly assisted me, over many years, in analysis and writing of this thesis.

## Professor Martha Augoustinos

Department of Psychology The University of Adelaide

For supervising the research, generosity in re-reading of drafts and for making suggestions to this thesis

## Dr. Bill Winser

Centre for learning and professional Development

For help in understanding of many aspects of functional grammar, reading drafts and making suggestions.

## Professor Ian John

Department of psychology The University of Adelaide

For finding relevant and most amazing articles and publications and reading drafts

## Brian Dare

For constant support, encouragement and a great sense of humour.

.

# PREFACE

My interest in the cultural importance of the concept of self-esteem was initially stimulated well before I started this thesis by my work with victims of domestic violence. In that context, 'self-esteem' of the clients was often a focal point of discussions. The common assumption made by us, shelter workers, as well as the victims themselves, was that improving women's self-esteem would, somehow, protect them from abuse in the future. The belief underlying this postulation was that the level of self-esteem was an important factor in 'attracting' abuse and that the shelter's clients did not think highly of themselves. The issue of whether the assumed 'low self-esteem' of abused women was a *cause* or a *result* of abuse was rarely considered important, but the assumption that they, indeed, do not 'esteem' themselves highly was a notion taken for granted. This is despite the fact that seeking help (and thus attempting to escape abuse as something unacceptable) may be taken as indicating the opposite.

Yet, it was not until my Honours research that I become consciously (and reflexively) aware of these assumptions about victims' alleged 'low self-esteem'. In my Honours thesis I examined explanations of domestic violence available to shelter workers. While analyzing my data, the focus on victims' self-esteem and psychological `damage' of victims in shelter workers' talk became more evident. I soon found that this tendency is representative of a more global shift towards *therapeutic* explanations and solutions to domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Inevitably, these therapeutic solutions focus on the *psyche* of a victim as a site of intervention. Concepts like self-esteem have been a significant part of this *therapeutic* way of constructing abuse. Reflecting on my own experience of working in the shelter, I realized that the focus of support given to the victims of abuse has indeed changed from more practical assistance and social concerns towards more abstract constructions such as `empowerment' or `self-esteem'.

Interestingly however, this shift has been notably less pronounced in a setting involving women from other than English speaking backgrounds. My experience of working with migrants using

languages other than English suggested a cultural and discursive base for therapeutic explanations involving self-esteem. The discourses around self-esteem were not (and still are not) easily available in other languages than English; self-esteem does not translate into such a 'neat' package. I concluded that, if the explanations offered within the culturally and linguistically diverse context differed so markedly, then the focus on 'self-esteem' must be a cultural phenomenon.

As my interest in the concept of self-esteem as a cultural phenomenon grew stronger, I begun to investigate it in more detail. My initial examination demonstrated that it was this language-specific convenient packaging that enabled 'self-esteem' to become such a powerful rhetorical concept. Moreover, because of its rhetorical strength, self-esteem has become a base for many explanations pertaining to individual and social issues, of which, domestic violence is only one example. Many problems, failures or disappointments and, as well as, accomplishments and good fortune are commonly associated, and explained through, discourses of self-esteem. There is no doubt that, at least in English speaking Western countries, these discourses have a profound effect on the way we understand ourselves and our place in the world. Yet, although some of these explanations may be seen as liberating, empowering and offering ways to increase control over our lives, many are potentially problematic. In particular, the view of 'low self-esteem' as a source of setbacks and misfortune carries the potential for 'blaming the victims' for their social or cultural inequalities. In my view, discourses that frame social disadvantage within discourses of personal failure and 'inner' shortcomings are not particularly 'empowering' to those in need of empowerment. In fact, as the research presented in this thesis demonstrates, the discourses of self-esteem contain so many implicit negative judgments, that they can only be perceived as detrimental for the socially disadvantaged.

As my research progressed, my views on the implications of discourses of 'self-esteem' were repeatedly, and sometimes vehemently, contested by friends and colleagues. Their unsympathetic reactions to my critical views made me realize that, indeed, the 'need for self-esteem' as a source of personal fulfillment has become a taken-for-granted fact. Consequently, we rarely question the belief that 'having high self-esteem' is a necessity if one is to be

successful and socially adequate. This assumption has become so naturalized that we see the expectation of happiness, optimism and self-love as part of our 'natural' drive.

Because of its *factual* status in everyday discourse, self-esteem has also become an important explanatory factor in more formal settings such as education, the law, media and government policy. More importantly, self-esteem has become a major variable in psychological research. A surprisingly high number of publications available in psychology study the correlations between self-esteem and other psychological, social or physical variables. Endless resources are directed at finding whether there are any significant disparities in self-esteem due to race, gender or social class. Parallel to this, is an increased interest among psychologists in contemplating whether or not 'high self-esteem' is necessarily good for you.

Once I became aware of this increased interest in the concept of self-esteem across different fields and disciplines, I felt even more strongly motivated to continue my exploration. As the time progressed, the focus of my research has become more specific; to investigate the use of self-esteem in different contexts. For the present thesis, I have chosen three major areas, psychiatry, self-help publications and public policy as sites of my exploration and analysis. Following Wittgenstein's method, I aimed to query, probe and describe the subtleties of explanations around self-esteem, rather than aim to penetrate and discover a hidden truth or to make broad generalizations. Looking carefully at what *lies on the surface*, I believe has enabled me to provide some insights into the elusive nature of the discursive construction of self-esteem.