self-esteem Self-esteem is defined as the evaluative component of the self-concept, the extent to which people view themselves as likeable and worthy, good or bad (see SELF). It reflects an emotional response as people contemplate and evaluate different characteristics about themselves. As a self-reflexive attitude, self-esteem comprises cognitive and affective components. It influences personal beliefs about skills, abilities, and future outcomes, as well as the strategies that people use to gain self-knowledge. Feelings of low self-esteem are associated with poor mental health and have been implicated in a number of disorders ranging from depression to eating disorders.

Self-esteem is generally measured through self-report questionnaires that assess either an overall evaluation of the self (i.e. global self-esteem) or self-esteem within specific domains (i.e. social, performance, or appearance self-esteem). Researchers also differentiate between enduring levels of self-esteem that are consistent across time and situation (i.e. trait self-esteem) and momentary fluctuations that are influenced by situational events (i.e. state self-esteem). There appears to be a gender difference in the development of self-esteem, with girls more influenced by relationships and boys more influenced by objective success. In other words, males gain self-esteem from getting ahead whereas females gain self-esteem from getting along.

In North America there is a widespread belief that low self-esteem is an important cause of a number of societal problems, ranging from drug abuse to teenage pregnancy to poor school performance. However, the objective evidence does not support this view. A review of several hundred studies indicates that although people with high self-esteem report being much happier with their lives, self-esteem is only weakly related to objective life outcomes (see LIFE SATISFACTION). That is, many people with high self-esteem are successful in their careers, but so are many people who have low self-esteem. Indeed, to the extent that there is a small relationship between self-esteem and life outcomes, it is possible that success causes high self-esteem. Moreover, some recent research has found that people with high self-esteem can be defensive when they feel threatened, thereby causing them interpersonal difficulties. Ultimately, the essential feature of self-esteem is that it shapes how individuals interpret and respond to their social worlds.

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self-reflexive emotions In the literature, emotions have been distinguished on a continuum ranging from basic to self-reflexive or self-conscious emotions (see BASIC EMOTIONS; EMOTION CLASSIFICATION). All emotions are triggered by a match or, more frequently, a mismatch between the concerns of the organism and the event the organism is confronted with. The two poles of the continuum are differentiated by the type of concerns that are involved. At the basic pole emotions are characterized by a (mis)match in survival concerns. For basic emotions a quick onset of the emotion process is essential. The emotion process often takes place in an automatic and unconscious way. At the self-conscious pole the person's self is at stake (see SELF). Self-reflexive emotions are cognitively more complex than basic emotions; they require the cognitive capabilities of self-awareness and self-representation, and complex self-evaluative processes.

Ontogenetically, basic emotions develop earlier than self-conscious emotions (e.g. Lewis 2000b) (see CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT). Developmental research shows that basic emotions emerge during the first year of life. Whereas some self-reflexive emotions, such as embarrassment, start to develop in the second year of life, most self-reflexive emotions, including guilt, only emerge the third year. The ontogenetic difference in development is mirrored by a different phylogenetic development. Basic emotions have a long phylogenetic history and are shared by many organisms. As self-conscious emotions require self-awareness and self-representation, they emerge much later in phylogeny. Furthermore, their phylogenetic development has been linked to the submissiveness–dominance dimension, which plays an important role in organisms living in socially and hierarchically organized groups (e.g. Keltner and Buswell 1996). The function of submissive behaviour is to promote acceptance and avoid exclusion by the social group. The function of dominant behaviour is to indicate high social status and to signal that one merits increased group attention. This phylogenetic interpretation is supported by the study of expressive behaviour of self-conscious emotions. Although these emotions cannot be identified by particular facial expressions, as is the case for basic emotions, there is a growing body of evidence that these emotions can be identified on the basis of gestural expressive behaviour that is comparable across cultural groups. For instance, an expanded posture and head tilted slightly back have been found to be characteristic of pride, whereas lowered eyelids, head tilted slightly forward, and a crouched upper body are characteristic of embarrassment and shame (see GESTURAL EXPRESSION OF EMOTION). The former expressions have been related to dominant behaviour, while the latter have been interpreted as submissive appeasement behaviour. The ashamed person signals compliance with others or with the social norms in general, thereby reducing the probability of open conflict with or exclusion by the social group.

The link with the submissiveness–dominance dimension points to the intricate relationships of the