

## Self-esteem in Indian women: The role of employment status and emotional intelligence

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### Abstract

*Self-esteem is a core construct within the framework of women empowerment. The present study was designed to investigate the role of employment status and emotional intelligence (EI) in self-esteem of Indian women. It was expected that the delineation of the predictive role of these two variables for self-esteem would be helpful for future intervention programs. The study adopted a 2 (employed versus unemployed) x 2 (low EI versus high EI) factorial design where employed and unemployed women were separately divided into low EI and high EI subgroups on the basis of median split of EI scores. Apart from the test of EI, all the participants were individually administered a standardised test of self-esteem. The analysis of variance supported both the hypotheses. Employed women exhibited higher self-esteem than unemployed women. Women with high EI showed greater self-esteem than women with low EI. The findings were explained in terms of the contemporary theories of self-esteem and interventions were suggested for women empowerment.*

**Keywords:** *Self-esteem, emotional intelligence, sociometer theory, contingencies model of self-esteem, social inclusion and exclusion, social-cognition theory, role multiplicity, role accumulation*

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### Introduction

Self-esteem denotes an attitude towards the self and is related to the personal beliefs about skills, abilities, social relationship and future outcomes. It refers to an individual's overall positive evaluation of the self (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem has enormous influence on mental health of individuals. Self-esteem comprises of self-worth and self-image which affects adjustment in various spheres of life. It is generally believed that there are many benefits of having a positive view of the self. Those who have high self-esteem are presumed to be psychologically happy and healthy whereas those with low self-esteem are believed to be psychologically distressed and unhealthy. Persons who possess high self-esteem apparently feel good about themselves, cope effectively with challenges and criticism, and feel wanted and respected socially, thus lead a happy and productive life. By contrast, people with low self-esteem see the world through a more negative perspective.

Employment serves as a resource for boosting women's confidence and self-esteem leading to a sense of psychological well-being as well as economic security; autonomy and expansion of social network. Unemployment is

associated with increased depression and poorer self-esteem. Occupying multiple roles is thought to increase the women's chances to learn, develop self-esteem, build social network and open access to informational, instrumental and emotional support, and to buffer life's stresses and strains. Playing multiple roles also provides cognitive cushioning and alternative sources of self-esteem and gratification when things go poorly in one's life domain. One of the primary reasons for higher self-esteem among professionally employed women is that employment can enrich a woman's life providing stimulation, self-esteem, adult contact and escape from the repetitive routines of the household. The independent financial base supplied by employment provides women with an increased sense of competence, gives more power within the family.

Taylor and Spencer (1988) found that working mothers acknowledge the combined joy of employment and family responsibilities. Employed women have more autonomy, experience higher worthiness, face less discrimination at workplace, feel lesser role conflicts, displays more positive attitude towards family, and job (Chaudhry, 1995). They demonstrated high self-esteem (Mary & Good, 2005), high well-being (Rao, 2003), display

strong ability, committed interests, sound psychological health, and have a high level of education (Donelson & Gullahorn, 1997). Coleman and Antonucci (1983) reported that women employed outside the home have higher self-esteem than those who are not employed. The self-esteem of working wives was significantly higher than housewives. The women who occupied more roles in their life have higher self-esteem than women with fewer roles. Employment leads to internal locus of control, higher self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence leading to the potential for gaining psychological empowerment.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, control and evaluate emotions. Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to recognize, understand, manage and harness emotions both in self and others and to use emotion to facilitate cognitive processing (Salovey & Mayer 1999). It is a skill, which involves three processes: perception, (the ability to consciously recognize our emotions), understanding (integrating what we feel in our thoughts), and regulation (lead and manage effectively both positive and negative emotions). Literature reveals that higher emotional intelligence is typically associated with positive moods and higher self-esteem because emotionally intelligent persons are able to maintain positive mental states due to their capability to efficiently manage their emotions (Tamra, 2006). More specifically, emotional intelligence enhances self-esteem of a person. Emotional self-awareness and self-regulation help an individual to appreciate one's own worth and enhance the ability to confidently deal with others without any bias. Self-esteem is positively related to emotional functioning and several predictors of life satisfaction and subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007). It is even negatively related to psychological maladjustment indicators such as depression (Tennen & Herzberg, 1987) or anxiety in response to acute stressors. Low self-esteem leads to emotional disturbances (Keith & Schafer, 1982).

Emotional instability creates false self-image that leads toward emotional maladjustment. It also creates the feeling of inadequacy, guilt, shyness, social inhibition, helplessness, reduced

ability, accepting unfavourable assessment as accurate, vulnerability and interpersonal problem. Schutte and colleagues (2002) found that higher emotional intelligence was associated with an increase in positive mood state and higher self-esteem.

## Method

### Research objective and formulation of hypothesis

In view of the importance of women's self-concept in the context of their empowerment an empirical study was planned to examine the role of two possible predictors of self-concept: employment and emotional intelligence. Therefore, we have proposed following hypothesis:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Self-esteem is higher among employed women as compared to unemployed women.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Self-esteem is higher among women with high emotional intelligence as compared to women with low emotional intelligence.

### Sample and procedures

240 women within the age group of 45 to 55 years participated in our survey. Due care was taken to sample groups equated with respect to education and age range. They were all married and had children. Out of total number of participants, 120 women were from the employed category and 120 women were from the unemployed category. Each of the groups of the employed and unemployed women was divided into two sub groups - women with high emotional intelligence and women with low emotional intelligence on the basis of median split of their scores on emotional intelligence. The participants of all four groups (employed women with high emotional intelligence, employed women with low emotional intelligence, unemployed women with high emotional intelligence and unemployed women with low emotional intelligence) were individually administered self-esteem inventory.

The investigator explained to them that the participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous, and can be withdrawn at any time and it would not affect the person adversely. Rapport was established between the investigator and respondents/participants. All the participants were individually administered measures of

emotional intelligence, and self-esteem. The instructions for each part of the questionnaire were adequately explained and care was taken to ensure that they understood the questionnaire. Investigator requested participants to respond to each item in the questionnaire freely and frankly without any hesitation. Investigator had ensured strict confidentiality and the study was conducted in compliance with ethical standards. The participants were debriefed after the study was completed.

### Research Design

The study involved a 2 (employed women versus unemployed women) x 2 (women with high emotional intelligence versus women with low emotional intelligence) factorial design. Employment status and emotional intelligence are the independent variables and self-esteem is the dependent variable.

### Instruments used for the study

**1. Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS):** The emotional intelligence scale was developed by Hyde and Pathe and Dhar in the year 1971. This questionnaire consists of 34 items and the highest score is 170 and lowest score is 34. The inventory measured 10 factors dimensions, such as self-awareness, empathy, self-motivation, emotional stability, managing relation, integrity, self-development, value orientation, commitment and altruistic behaviour. The split-half reliability of the scale was 0.88 and the content validity of the

scale was 0.93. Respondents are requested to indicate their agreements / disagreements on a five- point scale where '1' indicates strong disagreement and '5' indicates strong agreement.

**2. Self-esteem Inventory:** The Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) was constructed by Prasad and Thakur in the year 1977. The scale consists of two identical sets of statements having different instructions. The first part of the inventory measures personally perceived self and the second part covers items for measuring socially perceived self. In this present study, only personally perceived self-esteem was administered. Out of the thirty items, seventeen are socially desirable and thirteen are socially undesirable. The item which is socially desirable would get 7 scores if answered completely true and 1 if answered completely false. Other intermediate answers would get scores accordingly. The socially undesirable items would be scored in the opposite manner, (i.e., the completely false point would get 7 scores and completely true would get 1 score). Split-half reliability co-efficient is .82 for personally perceived self-esteem and test-retest reliability is .69.

### Data findings

The summary of the analysis of variance on the self-esteem scores of the participants is presented in *Table 1*. The mean and standard deviations on the self-esteem scores of participants are presented in *Table 2*.

**Table 1: Analysis of Variance Performed on Self-esteem Scores of Participants**

Source	df	Mean Square	F
Employment Status	1	882.74	70.58
Emotional Intelligence	1	288.68	23.08
Employment x Emotional Intelligence	1	38.20	3.05
Error	236	12.50	

\*p < .01

**Table 2: Mean Self-esteem Scores of Participants**

Groups	Employed Women		Unemployed Women		Combined Mean
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Women with high emotional intelligence	196.60	2.96	191.95	2.77	194.29
Women with low emotional intelligence	193.60	2.36	190.55	5.39	192.06
All Women	195.22		191.30		

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on self-esteem scores of the participants shows significant effect for employment status,  $F(1,236) = 70.58, p < 0.01$  (see Table 1). As shown by Table-2 employed women show greater self-esteem than do unemployed women. ( $M = 195.22$  and  $191.30$  respectively). The result also shows significant effect for EI groups,  $F(1,236) = 23.08, p < .01$ . The examination of mean scores shows women with high EI exhibit greater self-esteem than do low EI women ( $M = 194.29$  and  $192.06$ , respectively). However, the employment status  $\times$  emotional intelligence level effect is nonsignificant,  $F(1,236) = 3.05, n.s.$  In sum, both the hypotheses ( $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ) are supported. The findings have evinced the fact that, employed women exhibit greater self-esteem than do unemployed women. Furthermore, women with high EI level report greater self-esteem than do low EI women.

## Discussion

The present study is directed to examine the role of employment and emotional intelligence in self-esteem of women. The findings clearly indicate that employed women have greater self-esteem compared to that of the unemployed women. This finding is explainable in terms of several theoretical anchors. Past research provided us with impression that role multiplicity is stress-inducing. Considering the notion that human energy is fixed and limited, any diversification was viewed as stressful. However, works of modern sociologists in recent terms have changed the notion. Sieber's (1974) concept of role accumulation suggests positive psychological consequences of multiple roles. The notion is based on the premise that roles provide individuals with psychological resources that can be beneficial to them in other life roles. Multiple roles facilitate enrichment because individuals can (a) amass role privileges across their various roles (b) achieve overall status, security by allowing roles to serve as buffers or compensate for each other, (c) receive additional resources for status enrichment and improved role performance, and finally (d) experience personal enrichment and ego gratification through the psychological experience of occupying multiple roles. *Second*, sociometer theory takes an evolutionary perspective arguing that the purpose of self-

esteem is to monitor social inclusion and exclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Self-esteem functions as an internal subjective monitor of social acceptance. It is very likely that employment status in Indian society augments good self-feelings. Consistent with the idea of self-esteem as a sociometer of where we stand in our relationships, social inclusion increases self-esteem. In contrast being unemployed denotes exclusion and lowers self-esteem. *Finally*, the conventional wisdom of unemployment research indicates marked decline in self-esteem, loss of self-worth and loss of self-respect. Hartley (1980) has provided a review of these negative consequences. Unemployment is likely to bring a change in social position.

According to the social-cognition theory, external changes in the objective world get subjectively and internally represented. Such changes in the unemployment context lead to unfavourable comparisons (Gergen, 1978). Furthermore, the condition of not having a job may be interpreted as a sign of personal inadequacy. Although the financial security in the form of a job is not very important, yet it carries relevance in Indian context. This explains as to why the linkage between unemployment and lowered self-esteem is not found in some studies conducted in western societies where the provisions of unemployment insurance and welfare assistance heals the wounds of unemployment (Swann, Chang-Schneider & McClarty, 2007). The other finding of this study shows that women with high emotional intelligence (EI) have greater self-esteem compared to women with low EI. This is consistent with the fundamental notion of self-esteem which is indicator of positive self-feeling. The very construct of EI implies positive mood and a generalised positive feeling about the self (Mayor & Salovey, 1995; Pervin & Laurence, 1989; Salovey & Mayer 1999). It is quite plausible that positive affect associated with EI would enhance self-esteem. The common goal of well-being and healthy life brings together these two predictors (James, 1983; Gray, 2001).

One of the unifying components linking EI and self-esteem is the potential for adjustment (Petrides & Furnham, 2000). All the ingredients of EI facilitate the adaptation process. The self-

awareness components of EI augments understanding; self-skills facilitate personal growth; interpersonal sensitivity (empathy) strengthens interpersonal relation (Podestsa, 2001). Numerous studies do indicate that self-esteem is indicative of psychological adjustment. From a different angle, EI not only promotes the positive, it also checks the negative. Both the constructs of EI and self-esteem check depression (Tennen & Herzberger, 1987) and anxiety (Brockner, 1984). The efficacious emotional management on the part of people with high EI and self-esteem provides a linkage. Through high emotional intelligence and high self-esteem, women could overcome “*glass ceiling*” and get themselves elevated to high ranking positions.

### Implications and Conclusion

The study offers both theoretical and applied inputs. Theoretically the nomological network is partly clarified. A core construct like self-esteem is linked with large number of concepts. The present study provides evidence regarding the positive association between EI and self-esteem. The role of employment as stable predictor is also delineated. On the basis of the findings, two broad guidelines may be imparted to the change agents. Self-esteem is a core construct in empowerment. With a view to empowering women appropriate interventions have to be undertaken. The efforts to expand employment opportunities for women and psychological training to enhance women’s EI are requisite steps.

While the scope of intervention is clear, the complexity of the main construct of self-esteem must not be ignored. Most researchers have relied on global measures of self-esteem that do not assess the specific and differing bases of people’s evaluation of self-worth. They only tell us about a person’s level of self-esteem. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) believe that thinking of self-worth only in terms of level is an oversimplified view that has led to misunderstandings concerning the role self-esteem plays. A contingency of self-worth is a category of outcomes on which a person has staked her or his self-esteem, so that a person’s view of her or his value or worth depends on perceived success or failures or adherence to self-standards to that domain (Crocker & Park, 2004). Crocker and her

colleagues developed a scale to measure seven sources (approval of others, appearance, competition, academic competence, family support virtue ,God’s love) of self-esteem. Each source describes a different contingent basis for feelings of self-worth. This contingency of self-worth model is supported by studies showing that contingent domains of self are powerful guide for people’s behaviour. It is important to recognise that future studies be addressed to deal with the problem of women’s self-esteem employing the contingencies model. Such an attempt in the future would be much more productive and valuable.

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