

The Adult Sources of Self-Esteem Scale (ASSEI): Development, Rationale and History

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Brief History

The Adult Sources of Self-Esteem Scale (ASSEI) was developed by Alanna Elovson and James Fleming in 1989 (Elovson & Fleming, 1989). It has been used to study self-concept in U. S. college students (Lefner, Fleming, Elovson, & Zotarelli, 1992) and adults (Davis-Zinner, 1990), and with a focus on independent vs. interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), in cross-cultural research by David Watkins and his colleagues (Inelman, 1996; Tam & Watkins, 1995; Van de Vijer & Watkins, 2001; Watkins, 2003; Watkins, Adair, Gerong, McInerney, Mpofu, Regmi, Singh-Sengupta, Watson, Wen, & Wondimu, 1998; Watkins, Yau, Fleming, Davis-Zinner, Tam, Juhasz, & Walker, 1997; Watkins & Yu, 1993).

The ASSEI was developed to measure the salience (importance) of various aspects of the self to self-esteem in different individuals, as well as satisfaction with each of these aspects. Hence there are two separate forms to complete, each containing the same 20 aspects of self to be rated on a 0 – 10 scale of either *importance* (salience) to self-esteem, or *satisfaction* with that aspect (e.g., “Intelligence: how smart you are”).

Assumptions in the Development of the ASSEI

1. *A self-concept instrument should tap multiple dimensions of self.* The vast body of research conducted over the last 30 years or so that has shown the value of multidimensional self-concept measures since Shavelson et al. (1976) published their classic paper (e.g., Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Byrne, 1996; Harter, 1998).
2. *A need exists for a multidimensional instrument that is geared toward the adult, non-student population – from middle teenage years throughout the life span.* Researchers in the areas of educational psychology and child development developed most multidimensional instruments with a focus mainly on the school years (e.g., Marsh, 1992a, b, c; Harter, 1985a, 1988; Harter & Pike, 1985; Fleming & Courtney, 1984; Fleming & Whalen, 1990; Song & Hattie, 1984).
3. *An adult self-concept instrument should sample a wider range of areas, more applicable to the adult population than do most multidimensional instruments.* Academic self-concept plays a major role in most existing self-concept measures, often at the expense of other dimensions

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(Hattie, 1992). We were also interested as well in designing an instrument for “the rest of us” – one that would also be useful for non-student, mature adults.

4. *Throughout the lifespan the salience of the various facets will change. The salience of the facets will also vary from individual to individual, and their importance will also differ according to status and group membership.* Recent research on the “contingencies of self-esteem” (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) also stresses this point. So, for example – and unlike most current self-concept inventories – the ASSEI has only one academic item, and that is a fairly general item. Needless to say, that would be entirely inadequate if our goal were to study the student population and self-concept in relation to school achievement. The ASSEI was designed with a wider “bandwidth” than most self-concept inventories so that the facets represent mainly higher-order dimensions of self-concept. Academic self-concept would presumably be particularly salient for students but less so for non-students. Family relations are presumably more salient for married adults than for unmarried singles. Men and women are expected to differ somewhat in their ratings of importance of different sources of self-esteem per prior findings, and so items were designed to be gender role balanced (reflecting, for example, both worldly achievement and relational aspects of self-esteem). Statistically, the salience of different facets may also change from one era to another; or from generation to generation; from nation to nation and culture to culture. Thus, the ASSEI was designed with facets broad enough to be useful in different cultural and national settings.
5. *The instrument should measure the importance of each area to self-esteem in addition to a satisfaction rating for that area.* In this principle we agree wholeheartedly with Harter (e.g., Harter, 1999). Despite some criticisms and negative findings, the need to weight importance has been considered desirable since William James (1890/1950) (Also see, e.g., Rosenberg, 1979, and Harter’s 1998, review and discussion of this issue).

ASSEI Items and Categorical Groupings

Table 1 shows seven major categorical groupings for ASSEI items. Note that the groupings occasionally overlap. For instance, responsibility to family (in the “Social” group) also has a component of Ethics and Integrity. Recognition and respect from others (Personal Achievement and Recognition) also reflects Relations with Others. Although there is some arbitrariness to these categorizations, we think they are nonetheless sound, and useful for discussion purposes.

A further scrutiny of the ASSEI importance items suggests a dichotomy of the items. Items in groups A through D in Table 1 represent a more *independent* orientation for self-concept, whereas groups E through G represent a more *relational or interdependent* orientation. One item – religion/spirituality – perhaps does not fall neatly into either of these categorizations. But because religion usually requires involvement with family and community, it seems closer in some ways to relational self.

ASSEI Factor Structure

Unlike many existing instruments the ASSEI does not sample a large number of items relating to basic behaviors. As a result, it contains fewer items than most instruments, but it also contains a wider range of potential sources of self-esteem. From a theoretical standpoint in general, and in particular when attempting to distinguish group differences (such as cultural and gender differences), ASSEI importance ratings take precedence over satisfaction ratings – the latter being “merely” a measure of

self-esteem level that can usefully be applied in individual evaluations.

Van de Vijver and Watkins (2000) performed exploratory, multilevel factor analysis of the ASSEI importance items for an international sample of over 5,000 college students and adults from 18 countries and five continents. The countries sampled filled a broad range of varying degrees of individualism/collectivism according the Hofstede (1980) indexes. For the overall analysis, a scree test (Cattell, 1966) indicated three factors, two of which were particularly strong; however, the multilevel analysis (Muthén, 1991, 1994) showed that only two factors (one representing independent self, the other interdependent self) were consistently equivalent across cultures. Items on their third factor were related to public self (physical appearance, physical abilities, grooming, and likeability). But these items coalesced into the independent factor when just two factors were extracted.

Table 1
ASSEI Items Grouped into Logical Categories

A. Outward Self: Appearance and Popularity

1. Looks and physical attractiveness.
2. Physical condition, strength, and agility.
3. Grooming, clothing, overall appearance.
4. Being liked by others, your popularity and ability to get along, your social skills.

B. Intellect and Abilities

5. Intelligence, how smart you are.
6. Level of academic accomplishment, years of education.
7. Being a cultured and knowledgeable person, knowing about art, music, and world events.
8. Having special talents or abilities – artistic, scientific, musical, athletic, etc.

C. Personal Achievement and Recognition

9. Earning a great amount of money and acquiring valuable possessions.
10. Being recognized for your accomplishments, earning the respect of others for your work.
11. Doing what you set out to do personally, meeting the goals you set for yourself.

D. Personal Control

12. Having influence over the events or people in your life.

E. Ethics and Integrity

13. Being a good person, your friendliness and helpfulness to others.
14. Being a law abiding, responsible citizen.
15. Being an honest and truthful person in your dealings with others.
16. Having the courage of your convictions, speaking up for what you think is right, even when it is not popular to do so.

F. Relations with Others

17. Relationships with your family, being on good terms with your family, having good feelings for each other.

18. Meeting or having met your responsibilities to your family, i.e., being a good parent, spouse, son, or daughter.
19. Having a loving, close relationship with someone.

G. Religion/Spirituality

20. Belief in a higher power, your spiritual convictions.
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Based on analyses at the national as well as individual level, Van de Vijer and Watkins believe the two factors reflect constructs of independence/interdependence at *both* levels of analysis. We conclude the ASSEI measures constructs related to public and private self-concept, as discussed by Triandis (1989) and others, but not collectivist (or group) self-concept. Thus, we think that “Relational Self” may be a better (or at least alternative) name for the second ASSEI factor than “Interdependent Self.”

The number of useful factors is still an open question – it is possible, for example, that just two instead of three factors held within cultures in the Van de Vijer and Watkins analysis because of small sample size for certain groups, or it may be that two factors is the “true” number for some, but not all, cultures.

Three aspects of self? The inner, outer, and other. In summary, the factor structure of the ASSEI in different studies suggests that either two, or possibly three, factors may be useful. When two factors are retained they may be called “Independent (or Individual) Self” and “Interdependent (or Relational) Self.” When a third factor is retained, it consists of items related to concern for the impression that one makes on others (physical appearance and physical abilities, grooming, being liked). These might reasonably be called the “Inner,” “Outer,” and “Other” aspects of self as they pertain, respectively, or “Personal Self,” “Impression on Others,” and “Relational Self.”

Scoring the ASSEI

For clinical and counseling purposes, a person is asked to observe the larger discrepancies between importance and satisfaction ratings on corresponding items, but especially for items rated high on importance yet low on satisfaction. Many researchers use discrepancy (subtractive) scores on self-esteem inventories, but these are problematic for statistical purposes (Byrne, 1996). Harter (1998) and Marsh (1993) discuss other useful ways to evaluate such discrepancies in self-concept research.

When examining group differences in importance or in satisfaction, we recommend that individual scores be “ipsatized” by norming or standardizing within individuals to control for the tendency of some individuals (or groups) to make more extreme responses than others. Ipsatized scores may also be summed to obtain factor “scale” scores.

Psychometric Properties of the ASSEI

Davis-Zinner (1990) found median test-retest reliabilities of .69 and .67, respectively, for ASSEI importance and satisfaction ratings for a two-week testing period, which seem respectable for single items. Total ASSEI satisfaction scores (but not importance scores) were significantly related to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), with $r = .37, p < .001$. When differentially weighted for importance this correlation increased ($r = .52, p < .001$). Total satisfaction scores had only moderate correlation ($r = .28, p < .001$) with the Marlowe-Crowne Scale of social desirability (Crowne &

Marlowe, 1964).

Toward Further Research

The ASSEI has proven useful in studying differences in culture and gender, though more work is clearly needed in both of these realms. Additionally, studies of differences in salience of the various items and dimensions of the ASSEI across the lifespan, and differences between socioeconomic and political groups are of interest as well. We hope that future research will address such questions.

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