The Growth of Self-Esteem Within a Community of Inquiry

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Feeling good about oneself is, today, a fashionable way of describing self-esteem. Collections of more or less discrete feeling states, whether of happiness, confidence, competence, success, well-being and others, supposedly add up to feeling good about oneself. Accordingly, a villain and saint might implausibly find themselves in company, as belonging to the class of those enjoying self-esteem. That both may be victims of self-deception, pathological cases, is irrelevant, for to the extent that self-esteem is tied to feeling states, virtually anyone may be a candidate. What makes this idea of self-esteem slippery is that one may possess it irrespective of the worth of one's deeds. For the educator bent on abetting self-esteem, the task must surely be viewed with great apprehension; for whatever measures are taken, the results could be disastrous. Flattery, gold stars, slogans (we applaud ourselves), and a host of other incentives, just as they are successful in making us feel good about ourselves, could, after all, unwittingly nourish the growth of the most obdurate tendencies already in place.

The educator then must seek for outcomes supplanting or extending this notion of feeling states, since, as with a tic douloureux, feeling states choose us, we do not choose them, and their presence may or may not be conducive to warranted behavior. Unfortunately, the task is made formidable by the fact that, although how we feel about ourselves is almost always the bottom line, there is little else about which investigators of self-esteem agree. In its cover article, Newsweek reported that "a recent survey of the literature estimated that more than 10,000 scientific studies of self-esteem have been conducted. Researchers have measured it with more than 200 different tests. ...There isn't even agreement on what it is."[1] Yet state departments of education pack it into their curriculum guidelines; articles about at-risk children abound

with references to it; and its absence is intuitively connected with drugs, crime and homelessness. One might think there could somehow be agreement as to whether self-esteem is the precursor or the product of choice and action. Knowing this might at least call to question the prevailing practice of rewarding practically any socially integrative behavior, such as the child remembering to bring books to school. More likely, though, the disjunction is itself untenable and self-esteem is neither exclusively a matter of before or after. What is clear is that calls for the deployment of self-esteem measures will continue to haunt the schools. An imperative follows that we attempt to get a handle on it and investigate how Philosophy for Children might have bearing on its development.

SELF-ESTEEM AND EMPOWERMENT

One term that repeatedly figures in popular articles on self-esteem concerning children is "empowerment." The platitudinous advisory holds that children vitally need the wherewithal to come to grips with their problems and to carry out their ambitions. How empowerment dovetails with feeling states, or whether it does, is not made clear. Is the child empowered insofar as she feels competent and confident? Do the boys in Fagin's school of pickpocketing feel empowered after so much practicing, as they routinely demonstrate their competence and confidence? Even theoretical models of self-esteem speak of the need for power. John Rawls, having called "self-respect (or self-esteem) perhaps the most important primary good," goes on to say that,

> *...self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions. ...It is clear then why self-respect is a primary good. Without it, nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism.*[2]

We might conclude, then, that self-esteem and empowerment run hand in hand, producing a kind of irreducible quality of life, a backdrop or scaffolding against which purposive choice and action take place, including "a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out."[3] Empowerment for the educator would require the creation of conditions whereby this quality of life is made available to children.

However, a critical educator will argue that this is no better than equating self-esteem with feeling states. The idea of empowerment not only fails to contain a way to evaluate a "plan of life" — the villain presumably entitled to as much self-esteem as the saint — but it fails to offer a clue as to what measures would enhance empowerment or as to the multiple possible products of enhancement. Moreover, do we really want to empower the child as an end in itself, with a pat on the back and a gold star? Or is empowerment more like a necessary condition for particularized rewards? Too many teachers are self-esteem addicts in their efforts to assure classroom control or even out of genuine concern for the child's self-image. In this way, an entailment of self-esteem with empowerment is left dangling, for if nothing else, empowerment demands an object — to get a job, to write a poem or just to help with personal affairs in general. But since the object is unspecified and implies anything, the villain or saint, it implies nothing. The idea of empowerment, as it stands, is too general and it fails to provide the educator with a proper procedure, whether it is better to give gold stars or to come down hard on unruly children.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH GENUINE ALTERNATIVES

What is needed is a sense of empowerment which will theoretically apply to children, provide for proper evaluation and employ a procedure to which children will gladly accede. Those of us in Philosophy for Children will immediately think of the community of inquiry, its use with children, its self-correcting aspect, and its appeal to children. But is there, in addition, an aspect of the community which we directly associate with power and self-esteem? Is the community to be the requisite forum in which children's self-esteem will flourish? I would submit that the aspect of the community

most intimately connected with the fostering of power and self-esteem is the community's ability to generate a rich variety of genuine alternatives from which children may choose.

Children without choice are not likely to feel good about themselves or to have the power to make a change. Powerless, they feel, instead, the constraint of fate; choices become a reaction to events rather than reflective, purposive decisions. Of course, there may be benighted rewards with accompanying feelings of satisfaction and well-being, but this is only the sham that years of benign neglect has allowed. To bring this out, the Philosophy for Children program is being used throughout the Paterson, New Jersey school system, specifically as a program to promote self-esteem. In this pull-out program, trained guidance counselors work with small groups of at-risk fourth graders in *Pixie* in the hope of making inroads into children's thinking, children whose only **apparent** alternative is the consuming world of drugs. The attack has been two-pronged; to foster children's thinking skills which, in turn, will lead to more favorable judgments about their lives. To the extent that the drug culture is pervasive, as is the case in Paterson, life's opportunities are spelled out contextually. A child's closest family contacts may be the only trustworthy conduits of information and opportunity. And when these contacts are themselves caught up in the culture, the chances for their children or siblings are grim. In the schools, since other preventive measures have failed, those using admonishments and lurid pictorial descriptions, it is thought that Philosophy for Children will offer a needed alternative. With its dialogical format, Philosophy for Children enables children to confront together a common experience, but with a twist, namely, that the children exposed will have a better chance of making enlightened judgments. But this would seem no more than saying that the Paterson children will be in a position to experience the possibility of genuine alternatives.

The Paterson experiment is mentioned, not because the final verdict is in (though first year results have been encouraging), but because of what it possibly portends. Children constrained by context are not in a favorable position to think beyond the alternatives offered by that context. Nevertheless, the community of inquiry is cited as a rigorous alternative, in the hope that it will prove more worthy than the failed attempts at countervailing admonishments, all the autopsic pictures of fried brains.

Still, one might cynically insist that this proposal is based on the gratuitous assumption that children will identify genuine alternatives. One might contend that the homogeneity of the group will be inversely related to the group's ability to generate novel and warranted alternatives. As one Paterson teacher challenged, "Where's the database for these kids?" In the event that a community of inquiry is so compromised by a hostile environment, it might be contended that possible alternatives, inasmuch as they appear independent of the community's deliberations, will have little chance of being perceived as such. Paulo Freire's example of the disproportionality between the compesino's solitary and desperate existence and the potential power of the community comes to mind. Or consider this portrait of migratory workers.

> *There is ...a city in a region which has made great use of migratory labor. The laborers come from a different country. They come into a strange land, with a strange language and strange customs. Frequently, for various reasons, they move into the city. There the strangeness increases. These people live more or less as a group, out of economic necessity and for mutual comfort. Many of them are afraid to go from their familiar area to other areas of the city. ...What stops them? They are, as we say, legally free. ... But are the newcomers free? I think not. They lack knowledge. Not only are they ignorant of their "rights" but they feel the positive barrier of fear, the fear of a different and unfriendly world.*[4]

These workers fail to see the alternatives open to them; even those derived from fundamental rights go begging, such as sanctions to use the schools, visit churches or grocery stores. According to Rawls's theoretical model, they are not only victims of ignorance but their self-esteem has been sorely jeopardized as well, for "the basis for self-esteem in a just society is ... the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties."[5] Obviously, there will be no "publicly affirmed" rights, if those most in need are unable to claim or affirm

them, bring them to public view. However, our main objective is fostering the conditions of children's self-esteem, and though the distribution of rights may cast a permanent shadow of concern, more immediate measures in the lives of children are surely in order.

GENUINE ALTERNATIVES CONDITIONED BY SOCIAL RELATIONS

Perhaps it is that children share interests with current feminist critique, foremost with that which challenges an asocial and individualistic approach to self and self-esteem, and which rather identifies a web of social relations as the proper locus of the subject.[6] Awareness here would avoid an overly intellectual, abstract, and potentially self-serving preoccupation with claims and the affirmation of rights. Moreover, by removing the need for constructing a totally exclusive and autonomous subject, one whose sole interest is a monadic view of the universe, the concrete needs and problems of society might be permitted to emerge, take shape and command our attention.

> *All of this is not to say that we ought not to think of persons as having rights. Rather, it is to suggest that an exclusive or even a strong emphasis on respecting ourselves as rights-bearers does not offer us a way of viewing and valuing ourselves that could serve as the basis for the transformation of society along more integrative lines.*[7]

This move would certainly better serve the interests of the Paterson children and those in similar states, whose lives have been blatantly entangled in social disintegration, and whose fund of self-esteem has been assaulted. True, these children seem to represent the extreme edge, albeit comparable with the virulence to be encountered in other inner city environments, but it would not follow that a more benign setting undercuts a social and relational origin of self-esteem. On the contrary, perhaps the real extreme is the child without access to any relationships, the autistic child perhaps, in which case, the absence of self-esteem is a given. As I suggested above, the alternative life choices open to children, those to be discovered in the world as it is, would constitute the significant variables. Their discovery would seem improbable without adequate input from the community at large.

Trudy Govier has described the conditions for "procedural autonomy," an expression borrowed from the work of Diana Myers, and argues that self-esteem, self-respect, and especially self-trust are those antecedent conditions, for " ...without self-trust a person cannot think and decide for himself or herself and, therefore, cannot function as an autonomous human being."[8] From a feminist point of view, Govier finds procedural autonomy attractive and persuasive because it allows individuals, though members of groups, "...to speak and act in ways not representative of those groups."[9] In order to avoid the pull of conventional values that prescribe particular modes of thought and action, a scaffolding of self-esteem, -respect and -trust is necessary, for

> *(p)rocedural autonomy has, as its necessary condition, a reliance on one's own critical reflection and judgment, and that reliance is possible only if one has, and can maintain against criticism, a sense of one's own basic competence and worth.*[10]

That procedural autonomy has not been generally available in the lives of women is a deceptive observation, if it is thought that **only** women have thus suffered (Govier certainly does not make this assertion), for this scaffolding may be absent in the lives of many men as well — but more pressing for us, absent in the lives of children. Therefore, a parallel case needs to be set forth for children. In the tradition of Philosophy for Children, I would propose that children need to think for themselves in order that the modes of thought and action of the group are continually appraised for cogency, accuracy and worth. Following Govier, since the presence of procedural autonomy is required in order to make the appraisal, to challenge the group, thereby, guaranteeing that self-esteem, -respect and -trust are in place, a way to help these latter dispositions grow in the lives of children is in order.

From a normative point of view, this case for children is admittedly loaded and contentious. That children should be empowered to think for themselves is a supposition of the Philosophy for Children program, not a view necessarily held by

many persons entrusted with children's education, even as they applaud efforts to raise the self-esteem, -respect and -trust of children. Yet, if Grovier is correct, and I think she is, these same persons are inconsistent, for to approve of the latter without it sometimes entailing instantiations of the former seems quite unlikely. Children enjoying self-esteem, -respect and -trust will occasionally need to think for themselves, and in so doing, make judgments and choices contrary to those of the group. To be consistent, adults wishing to suppress the autonomous thinking of children should also wish to suppress the self-esteem of children.

By arguing that procedural autonomy permits one to speak and act contrary to the ways and beliefs of one's group, Govier substantially makes the case for enabling children to think for themselves. This would also be consistent with my above contention that the crux of understanding self-esteem is in its relation to children's ability to choose among competing alternatives, or more concretely, to make life choices which will serve them well. One would hope as much for our example, the children in Paterson, whose choices are all too often only those sanctioned by the group. In line with Govier's position, where there are instantiations of procedural autonomy, allowing one to choose contrary to the group, the necessary conditions of self-esteem, -respect and -trust will be in place. This granted, one further implies that these concrete occasions will allow children to choose among alternatives, and choose especially those which will serve as favorable life choices.

SELF-ESTEEM, THINKING FOR ONESELF AND COMMUNITY

Finally, thinking for oneself seems to emerge as a paradox. For if thinking for oneself **only** identifies one as speaking and acting contrary to one's group, thus, strengthening an asocial autonomy rather than the social transactions called for in feminist critique, children's choices become meaningless. There would be no antecedent context to which choices could be referred, no social fabric to which the child voices assent or rejection, for even a negative set of social relations conveys meaning. However, if thinking for oneself is thought of as the **result** of group membership, whether or not one speaks and acts contrary to the group, the emphasis shifts from **actually** being different to the **capacity** for being different. Rather than supposing that thinking for oneself is a solitary activity, without reference to the group, it is precisely the group that makes it possible. Without the critical and corrective potential of the group, the individual is held hostage to an idiosyncratic personal perspective, thus, effectively avoiding new ends and purposes.[11] We are left, then, with a series of conditionals: where there are instantiations of procedural autonomy, the necessary conditions of self-esteem, -respect and -trust are in place; where the necessary conditions are in place, the capacity for choosing contrary to the group is warranted by the group; where the capacity is warranted by the group, thinking for oneself emerges as the basis for choice and action. Above, we saw the entailment of self-esteem and thinking for oneself, that it would be inconsistent affirming the former while contesting the latter, and now we can appreciate how both are products of a community of inquiry, the critical and vigorous component of Philosophy for Children.

Feminist critique properly identifies the locus of self-esteem within a web of social relations. It does not, however, indicate how self-esteem may grow and flourish. Philosophy for Children does articulate the practice required for fostering self-esteem. As indicated earlier, fostering self-esteem is eminently tied to the initiation of children into a community of inquiry, its preeminent characteristic being the capacity for critical self-correction, for without this check, there is only the individual's tunnel vision or the bullying by an unreflective group. The fact of benighted self-esteem, that is, feeling good about oneself for dangerous or self-defeating reasons, can conceivably be fostered by a variety of groups, but the community of inquiry insists on reflection and criticism by its membership, that is, the activity of the community provides the mechanism for informed choices. In an environment where new and genuine alternatives are generated through critical discussion, and where such activity forms the basis for thinking for oneself and self-esteem, the prognosis for children is vastly improved.

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