

UNITED WISDOM

Self-Esteem: Who Sets My Inner Scale?

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“Everything added to the Self is a burden as well as a pride.”*

William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, volume I, chapter X, 1890, printed page 311. Complete sentence from the original English work; the accompanying Russian version is this article's own translation.

What this article is about

The same result can look like a success, a disappointment, or something of little importance. Much depends on the question we are asking it to answer. Is the work finished? Does it meet the requirements? Is it better than a colleague's? Is it enough to make me worthy of respect? These questions readily merge, although each requires different grounds. Imagine someone who prepares a useful report, sees another employee's more impressive presentation, and concludes that she is unsuited to her profession. In that short transition, the object, benchmark, and reach of the judgment all change. William James's historical formula, Leon Festinger's theory of social comparison, and Jennifer Crocker and Lora Park's review help us examine those changes separately. They offer distinct accounts rather than a single scale of personality. Our concern is where a criterion comes from, what it can establish, and when a local assessment becomes a judgment of the whole person.

I. What Has Been Put on the Scale?

In an invented example, Marina submits a report. The assignment lists ten required items; eight appear in her document and two are missing. She has met the deadline. A colleague produces a document with more striking charts and presents it more confidently. Their manager points out Marina's omissions and praises his presentation. Several facts can be checked separately: completeness, timeliness, visual presentation, and the audience's response to the speaker. Until we establish how they relate to the assignment, the general word “worse” conceals more than it explains. It might refer to an actual omission, a different style, or simply a difference in audience response.

Marina says, “I did this work badly.” That statement still allows clarification: which item was missing, how much it matters, and whether it can be corrected. Next comes “I am a bad professional.” This refers to many tasks, skills, and circumstances about which a single report

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provides limited information. Finally, “There is something wrong with me” removes even the professional boundary. The judgment now concerns the person as a whole. These transitions may feel natural, but each extends the conclusion. The second needs more evidence than the first, and the third imports stronger assumptions still. A completed checklist does not contain those assumptions just because the disappointment is intense.

In Crocker and Park's review, the movement from a failure to an assessment of one's worth is particularly relevant. They discuss contingencies of self-esteem: the meaning of an outcome depends on whether self-validation has been staked on it. Yet caring about work does not by itself establish that contingency. Marina might be distressed because other people need the missing information. Responsibility for consequences and a wish to demonstrate personal acceptability can accompany the same action while remaining different questions. An initial step toward precision is to name the object of judgment before debating its severity. Otherwise an attempt to “raise self-esteem” may address a feeling while leaving it unclear which actual work needs to be completed.

II. A Criterion Comes from Somewhere

An inner scale rarely introduces itself as a list of rules with an author's signature. Even so, we can distinguish where its requirements come from. One criterion follows from the task: a calculation must balance, or a letter must supply essential information. Another comes from an agreement: a report is due on a stated date. A third expresses a personal preference, such as writing vividly or speaking fluently. A fourth concerns a particular audience's reaction. Its origin does not automatically make a criterion sound or unsound. It tells us what the rule is for, who can reconsider it, and what its violation means.

If the report's two missing items enable financial data to be checked, they cannot be dismissed merely because the assessment feels unpleasant. If the document performs every required function but Marina dislikes the fact that her style differs from her colleague's, we are considering another requirement. It might become a useful direction for learning. First, however, we should ask whether adopting his style would improve this document. A different substitution is also possible: “the reader can understand the conclusion” becomes “the manager must be impressed.” Those conditions can coincide on one occasion and diverge on another. The second promises a reaction that the first does not require.

Festinger begins his theory of social comparison by distinguishing the evaluation of opinions and abilities. In the opening passages read for this article, he considers whether an independent basis for evaluation is available or whether a person turns to others. Applied to our example, this suggests a substantive question: what information is missing when we assess the report? If a clear list of required information already exists, a colleague's presentation does not replace it. If clarity remains uncertain, reading several comparable

documents might add useful evidence. This is an application to an invented case, not an office experiment conducted by Festinger. It distinguishes the origin of a criterion from evidence that the criterion suits its purpose. Someone else's standard can be accepted thoughtfully; a standard we invent ourselves also needs examination.

We can also distinguish authority to set a requirement from the ability to evaluate its fulfilment. A client may specify the information needed without knowing every condition of its preparation. An experienced colleague can check a calculation without thereby being authorized to judge another person's worth. The author knows some of her intentions but may overlook a passage that a reader finds unclear. Several participants need not compete to deliver one final assessment: each can contribute information within the scope of their task. Marina can ask for clarification while accepting that two sections really are missing. Agreeing with a precise correction does not require agreeing with every broader label uttered alongside it.

III. James's Fraction and Its Denominator

In his chapter on the consciousness of self, James considers which possible selves a person chooses and what that person stakes aspirations on. His example involving psychology and Greek shows that different domains do not matter equally: another person's superiority can be painful in one and leave him unconcerned in the other. He then introduces a formula with success as the numerator and pretensions as the denominator. The formula makes the adopted expectation visible. A result alone cannot tell us whether it satisfies what someone expected of themselves. Both elements have to be named, rather than the achievement alone.

To explain the fraction, take some deliberately invented numbers. With success set at eight and pretensions at ten, the ratio is 0.8. If success stays at eight while pretensions rise to sixteen, the ratio is 0.5. Keeping pretensions at ten but raising success to nine gives 0.9. These numbers explain the structure of a fraction: changing the denominator changes the ratio without changing the numerator. They have no units of psychological self-esteem and represent neither probabilities nor a reader's test scores. In Marina's case, eight completed items out of ten is a way to describe the completeness of a fictional document. It does not calculate her general relationship to herself. The use of division in both examples does not make them the same measurement procedure.

The formula also does not require us always to lower expectations. If the missing items really are necessary, lowering the standard may conceal an error. Learning a skill, clarifying available resources, or negotiating a deadline might be more appropriate. In another situation, the requirement to be first at everything deserves reconsideration because it does not follow from the quality of this particular task. The historical analogy offers two directions of inquiry: what happened and what was expected. Its limit appears when that distinction is converted into a

universal numerical law. James uses strong formulations characteristic of his argument; we can examine the reasoning without transferring every formulation into contemporary psychology or pretending that a single fraction explains all human experience.

IV. Why Look at Other People at All?

Social comparison can serve a specific informational purpose. A beginning editor may not know whether an instruction is clear. Reading several texts addressed to the same audience can reveal an effective sequence of steps or a term that needs explaining. Comparison helps articulate a criterion that was previously missing. In the selected passages from Festinger, comparison with others appears when an available nonsocial basis for assessment is lacking. This is a theoretical proposition from 1954, developed alongside reports of earlier research. It does not establish that every person necessarily behaves alike under every set of circumstances.

For Marina, the usefulness of comparison depends on what she takes from the other report. She can ask why her colleague's chart makes a discrepancy easier to see. That question concerns the chart's function, and an answer can be examined using her own material. Asking why the colleague received louder praise is different. The purpose of the presentation, audience preferences, and circumstances unknown to Marina may all matter. The reaction remains an event, but its informational content is limited. The volume of applause does not directly establish either document's completeness or either author's overall professional suitability. A response can be genuine without answering every question we attach to it.

Sometimes a comparison serves several purposes at once. It may help someone acquire a technique, locate their position in a group, and feel confirmed. Consequently, “stop comparing yourself” is too broad for the situation considered here; it also closes a useful channel for learning. A more precise approach is to identify the question this comparison can answer. To find a clearer way of displaying data, similarity of task and the explanation's structure matter. To find out whether a contribution is valued, a conversation about that contribution is more relevant than a contest over presentation. This separation does not command an unpleasant feeling to disappear. It clarifies which information has arrived, which is still needed, and which conclusion was never contained in the observation. Other people's experience can remain useful without each success being assigned the task of judging one's entire life.

V. Choosing the Person We Compare With

Comparison involves both a measure and a selected participant. Festinger proposes that the tendency to compare oneself with others diminishes as differences in abilities or opinions increase. In the context read here, comparability matters, while qualifications and more complicated cases appear nearby. This is not a rule that lets us predict every comparison partner someone will choose. It draws attention to comparison conditions. An experienced specialist, a beginner, someone doing another task, and someone with different resources may all produce interesting results without furnishing equivalent benchmarks for a particular attempt.

In James's historical example, a fighter surpasses nearly everyone but selects the one opponent who remains superior. His assessment turns on the significance assigned to that opponent rather than his standing among the majority. The example reveals a requirement to be the best; it is not an experimental refutation of Festinger's hypothesis. Someone can want to learn from an outstanding practitioner while recognizing that the practitioner's result arose under different conditions. An example of what is possible differs from a condition for feeling satisfied with oneself. The former shows a direction; the latter establishes which present result the person will accept as sufficient.

Suppose Marina compares her first report with the presentation of an employee who has prepared such documents for ten years. For learning how to display figures, this may be a useful comparison. To judge how well a beginner has completed a first stage, experience needs to be considered. That difference does not excuse every omission: required information is still required. It helps identify which differences need immediate correction, which concern further learning, and which do not yet belong to the assignment. Choosing a similar colleague does not settle everything either. If first place is the only acceptable outcome, comparability remains while a victory requirement is added separately. Stating that added condition makes it less likely to pass unnoticed as a simple quality check.

VI. An Important Domain and Conditional Worth

A person can care deeply about work without staking their entire acceptability on each result. A domain's importance concerns where attention and effort go. Conditional worth concerns the meaning given to success or failure. In the selected opening of Crocker and Park's review, the questions meet through domains on which people base self-validation. The authors propose a research account of goals rather than a method for uncovering someone's hidden motivation from one remark. Their conclusion explicitly qualifies the universality of possible costs and calls for more direct tests of the proposed goals.

Consider two explanations of an additional hour spent working. Marina might say, “I will check the table so that the other department receives reliable information.” Alternatively: “If anyone finds an error, it will show that I am worth nothing.” Both explanations can accompany careful checking; observing the action does not establish which predominates. Even a person's own explanation may be incomplete. Yet the stated goals raise different questions. The first directs attention to data and consequences. The second adds a promise that the task will provide a final answer about the person—an answer a table was never designed to supply. The distinction concerns the added meaning, not the outward seriousness of the work.

The implication is not that concern for work is wrong or that seeking recognition always causes harm. The review acknowledges possible benefits and does not expect identical costs for everyone on every occasion. Nor does moving to more “internal” standards automatically remove contingency. A person might demand independence, moral perfection, or constant calm just as rigidly. Thus “whose criterion is it?” needs a further question: “what is it supposed to validate?” A self-chosen standard can guide a task, or it can demand repeated proof of personal acceptability. Specificity and feedback can help with the former. The latter does not become settled simply because the person now names themselves as the source of the requirement.

VII. A General Attitude and a Response to an Event

A broader relationship to oneself differs from the feeling that follows a particular assessment. In the selected section, James notes that favourable standing and reputation do not necessarily coincide with felt assurance. Crocker and Park discuss the distinction between relatively stable self-esteem and pursuing an increase on a specific occasion. Historical “self-feeling” and modern constructs are not one scale. Nevertheless, the comparison permits two questions instead of one: how does someone generally regard themselves, and what changed after today's result? Neither question has to be answered by the intensity of one immediate reaction.

Yesterday Marina might have regarded herself as a capable beginner, then felt strong disappointment after the manager's comment. That does not by itself establish a complete revision of her position for the future. The reverse is also possible as an ordinary illustrative case: praise brings pleasure for a while without resolving a longstanding question about the requirements a person tries to meet. In conversation, naming the event, time, and object of evaluation can be more informative than reaching for the broad adjectives “high” or “low.” “After that comment, I doubt whether I know how to check this table” tells us more about the present problem than “I have low self-esteem.”

This does not require constant analysis of every feeling. Sometimes a person needs rest, assistance with the task, or another person's quiet presence rather than a fresh classification.

When a decision actually depends on evaluation, however, its time boundary matters. An unwelcome result today can identify a skill worth learning without describing the whole future. A recurring difficulty, meanwhile, calls for accumulated information to understand its structure. The distinction preserves both possibilities: acknowledging an enduring problem when evidence supports it and avoiding the assignment of a final verdict to one event. This article cannot establish a reader's condition; it offers language for asking questions rather than an assessment of their psychological makeup at a distance.

VIII. What Does Feedback Actually Tell Us?

Useful feedback connects an observation to a criterion and a possible action. “Two sections are missing, so the department cannot compare expenses” provides something to check. “You are not good enough again” does not identify the missing information or the required correction. Of course, precise wording may still hurt, and clumsy wording may contain real information. The point is to examine the content without promising that a particular conversational style automatically changes the feeling. The more clearly the object is specified, the more clearly a subsequent decision can be grounded.

Marina can ask which sections are required, what will count as a completed corrected version, and when it is needed. The future assessment then has an endpoint. If completion remains “make sure nobody is disappointed,” the task depends on an indefinite range of reactions. This need not be a consciously chosen goal. Sometimes nobody states it, but the person silently appends it to the assignment. Festinger discusses changes in aspiration after information about results; Crocker and Park distinguish goals at different levels. Together these passages let us separate the next working target from the meaning attached to it. A revised target can concern the report without promising a revised identity.

An overly reassuring reply also deserves examination. A friend who says, “You are wonderful; ignore it” may be expressing support, but the statement does not establish whether the missing sections are needed. Support and assessment need not be set against each other. Someone can merit attentive treatment while remaining responsible for an unfinished document. Praise of the entire personality also does not teach a specific skill. A conversation can preserve three distinct messages: “I am here,” “there is an error here,” and “this is a possible next step.” None has to perform the others' task. Correction then need not depend on first proving that the person is flawless, nor does companionship have to depend on denying an identifiable mistake.

IX. How a Reasonable Benchmark Changes

Reconsidering a criterion is not equivalent to abandoning quality. Sometimes new information about the task appears: readers need a different explanation. Sometimes time or resources change. Sometimes a person realizes that demanding first place has no connection to the usefulness of the work. These changes have different grounds and consequences. If Marina finds an error in the figures, refining the standard should not conceal it. If the team revises a deadline after changing the assignment, the original date may cease to be a fair measure of completion. Before altering the benchmark, we need to understand what actually changed.

The history of a criterion can help too. Perhaps comparing visual presentation became habitual in a previous job, where reports were prepared for public talks. In the new department, the ability to verify a calculation matters more. The earlier criterion was not meaningless; it may simply fit the new action less well. Marina can retain a skill in attractive presentation without asking it to decide whether the document is complete. This inquiry does not require discovering one “true” scale for an entire life. Different tasks can legitimately use different measures. Consistency may lie in how a choice is explained rather than in keeping every measure unchanged forever.

A revision becomes substantive when its new completion condition can be described. “Do well enough” remains vague until we know enough for what. “Add two sections, check the totals, and ask a user to read the explanation” is more concrete. Even this plan must not be presented as a universal recipe for self-respect: it addresses a particular piece of work. If someone remains dissatisfied with themselves after completing it, that does not prove they carried it out incorrectly. The promise attached to the plan may have been too broad. Completing an action and reaching final satisfaction with oneself operate at different levels. Clarifying the boundary makes it possible to pursue a real aim without requiring it to resolve every inner question at the same time.

X. Who Sets the Scale Today?

The title's question cannot be answered with a single name. A criterion can combine the task's requirements, accepted agreements, another person's example, and one's own expectations. What matters practically is identifying their part in the judgment being made now. In Marina's report, required sections come from the assignment, striking presentation is demonstrated by a colleague, first place comes from an added expectation, and the judgment of her entire personality arises through a further step. Once named, each component can be addressed within its scope: complete a section, learn a technique, reconsider a victory condition, or ask what grounds the generalization.

Having a part in setting an inner scale means participating in choosing and explaining a criterion. It does not imply complete control over responses, independence from relationships, or permission to call every outcome good. Another person's assessment may be accurate and one's own mistaken. Self-direction can therefore coexist with checking facts and being willing to learn. If a rule is retained, it helps to know which task it serves. If it changes, the reason can be named. If a result remains unsatisfactory, it can be described without turning an identified deficit into an exhaustive portrait of the person. Responsibility need not require that the portrait be exhaustive.

James draws attention to the denominator of expectations. Festinger considers the conditions under which comparative information is sought. Crocker and Park propose examining goals of self-validation while acknowledging limits in the research account. These lines do not merge into a new test. They leave the reader with more precise questions about a particular episode. What happened? Where did the benchmark come from? Which question does the comparison answer? What meaning was added to the fact? An answer may still be missing; it can be sought with someone who understands the task or is able to listen attentively. Leaving a question open matters in itself: incomplete information does not have to become a complete verdict. A scale becomes more available for discussion when its structure stops hiding inside one sweeping word about oneself.

What this means in practice

If you would like to apply these distinctions to an ordinary, manageable case, choose a recent action with clear boundaries: a sent letter, an explanation you prepared, or a small project. You need not choose a painful event. First, describe the result so that another person could understand what happened: which information was included, which deadline was met, and what remains unfinished. If precise information is lacking, specify what is unknown. This note requires neither praise nor blame. Its function is to record what you can presently say about the action.

In a second note, name the criterion. Did it come from the assignment, an agreement, a personal preference, or comparison with another person? What does it help you check? If several benchmarks are involved, list them separately. For instance, a report's completeness and a presentation's beauty need not have equal importance to its user. Where necessary, identify a question to ask someone who knows the task. Do not pretend that the missing answer has already been obtained just because a criterion has been named.

In a third note, state the meaning you added to the outcome. This might be “I need to learn to check totals,” “I wanted to come first,” or a broader judgment about yourself. Consider what additional grounds that conclusion would require. Then choose just one possible action that

fits the identified issue: correct an item, clarify a rule, learn a technique, or gather more information. You may stop at a question rather than select an immediate action.

This sequence is an editorial way of organizing reasoning, not a validated treatment or assessment questionnaire. It does not promise to change how a failure feels. If writing is unappealing, you can discuss a single distinction with a suitable person or leave the exercise aside. Its purpose is to make the particular transition between an event and a judgment visible.

Key quotation

> *“Self-esteem = Success / Pretensions”*

James, chapter X, printed pages 310–311. An explicitly identified formula fragment, with spacing normalized and surrounding punctuation omitted. This is a historical explanatory analogy, not a procedure for calculating a psychological score.

Connections between traditions

1. A chosen aspiration — an available comparison measure. James, chapter X, pages 310–311, relates the significance of an outcome to selected pretensions; Festinger's hypothesis II considers social comparison when nonsocial grounds are unavailable. The connection asks us to identify the task before asking how adequacy is judged. A historical fraction and a theoretical hypothesis do not form a shared numerical scale of dignity.

2. An important domain — conditional self-validation. James's psychology and Greek example on page 310 distinguishes the importance of domains. Crocker and Park, pages 392–393, discuss domains on which validation of personal worth is staked. The connection adds a question: why should success here say something about the whole person? Caring about a task does not itself establish contingent self-esteem, and a historical illustration cannot replace a contemporary experiment.

3. A local measure — an enlarged conclusion. In his opening discussion Festinger distinguishes opinions, abilities, and criteria for ordering results; Crocker and Park, page 392, describe the passage from failure to a judgment of oneself. The connection separates task information from the additional premise that extends it to the entire person. It does not erase genuinely unfinished work: a local deficit can remain an accurate fact.

4. A general attitude — today's feeling. James's Self-Feeling section considers divergence between favourable reputation and felt assurance; Crocker and Park, pages 392–393, distinguish relatively stable self-esteem from pursuing a rise on a particular occasion. The connection permits a temporary response and a broader position to be named separately.

Historical self-feeling and modern state and trait constructs are not identical, and no assessment of the reader follows.

5. A comparable participant — a demand for first place. Festinger's hypothesis III concerns differences between comparison participants; James's fighter on page 310 selects the single opponent who surpasses him. The connection distinguishes an informative model from a requirement to defeat that particular model. James's illustration does not experimentally test or refute Festinger's hypothesis.

6. A future working target — a higher-order goal. Festinger's selected opening derivations discuss aspiration changes following feedback; Crocker and Park, page 393, consider the hierarchy of goals. The connection distinguishes a recorded outcome, a future task target, and its meaning for self-validation. The three-note distinction proposed here is editorial reasoning, not an established way to change self-esteem or uncover hidden motives.

Primary sources

1. William James. *The Principles of Psychology*, volume I, chapter X. Original English work, Henry Holt, New York, 1890; Christopher D. Green's transcription retains printed page markers. Selected passages on the empirical and social self, the Self-Feeling section, and parts of Self-Seeking were read, especially pages 310–312. The epigraph is a complete sentence on page 311; the key quotation is the formula fragment on pages 310–311. Russian versions are this article's own translations. Reading of the entire chapter or book, or complete comparison with a scan, is not claimed. Historical clinical descriptions are not adopted.

2. Leon Festinger. *A Theory of Social Comparison Processes*. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 1954, 117–140; publisher record. Substantive reading used a retyped copy of the primary work, labelled as retrieved from hum.sagepub.com on 12 September 2007. The opening and hypotheses I–III, selected hypothesis IV and qualifications, the complete Summary, and explanatory endnotes were read. Most of the middle, the underlying experiments, and the facsimile body were not separately read. Bounded paraphrases are used without direct quotation; theoretical propositions are not presented as a contemporary study of digital comparison.

3. Jennifer Crocker and Lora E. Park. *The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(3), 2004, 392–414. Primary PDF linked by the coauthor's laboratory. The opening on pages 392–394, selected discussions of contingencies and alternative goals, and the complete conclusion on page 407 were read. This is a research review and proposed goal account; most middle sections and cited original experiments were not separately read. The authors' qualifications about costs not occurring for everyone and the need to test inferred goals directly are retained. Direct quotations, questionnaires, and figures are not reproduced.

Tags

self-esteem, self-image, self-knowledge, inner criterion, evaluating results, pretensions, William James, Leon Festinger, social comparison, Jennifer Crocker, Lora Park, contingent self-esteem, goals, feedback, professional role, learning, success, failure, expectations, quality criteria, responsibility, recognition, reputation, assurance, object of judgment, limits of inference, choosing a benchmark, everyday reasoning, history of psychology, relationship to oneself

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