

A Brief Discussion of Self-Esteem as Described by Nathaniel Branden, Ph.D (Excerpt)

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Many clients lament experiencing a lack of self-esteem, but are often unable to define what it is they are missing. Nathaniel Branden, Ph.D, is a renowned philosopher and psychologist who has written prolifically on the concept of self-esteem (e.g., 1969, 1971, 1992, 1997). He defines self-esteem as the “disposition to experience oneself as competent to cope with the challenges of life and as deserving of happiness” (Branden, 1992, p. 18). According to Branden, self-esteem is composed of *self-efficacy* and *self-respect*. Self-efficacy is

confidence in the functioning of my mind, in my ability to think, in the processes by which I judge, choose, decide; confidence in my ability to understand the facts of reality that fall within the sphere of my interests and needs; cognitive self-trust; cognitive self-reliance. (p. 16)

Self-respect is an “assurance of my value; an affirmative attitude toward my right to live . . . be happy; [and] appropriately assert [myself]. . . The feeling that joy is my natural birthright” (p. 16).

Self-efficacy requires a metaphysics grounded in objective reality, and an epistemology that postulates minds capable of perceiving it (Branden, 1997). Branden’s underlying philosophy supports self-efficacy by holding that reality is objective, is governed by laws and therefore predictable, and it is understandable through the employment of human consciousness. These concepts are briefly discussed below.

First, Branden (1997) asserts that reality is objective. Reality is not unknowable, subjective or constructed by one or more human minds (see, for example, Efran, Lukens &

Lukens, 1990). Rather, it is simply the “*object of consciousness*” (Branden, 1997, p. 26). In addition, reality includes both the external universe as well as a person’s internal world. Thus, emotions are facts: “Once an emotion exists, it exists; it is a fact of reality - the reality of one’s own person” (p. 27).

Second, the universe is governed by laws of logic: the laws of identity, causality and noncontradiction (Branden, 1969, 1997). The law of identity is the “ultimate (metaphysical) root of our certainty” (1997, p. 21). It states that a thing is what it is: “A is A” (1997, p. 21). In other words, to *be* is to be *something* - something with a specific nature, a specific identity.

The law of causality provides that a thing acts in accordance to its nature (Branden, 1969, 1997). Stated conversely, the nature of a thing, or entity, determines the scope of its actions. A corollary to the law of identity is the law of noncontradiction, which provides,

Nothing can be A and not-A at the same time and in the same respect. Nothing can be an attribute and not an attribute, true and not true, a fact and not a fact, *at the same time and in the same respect*. (Branden, 1997, p. 23)

Hence, a person cannot, at same time and in the same respect, be responsible and irresponsible, or loving and contemptuous. Such contradictions signal an error in cognition.

Finally, Branden (1969) defines *consciousness* as a state of awareness: “To be conscious is to be conscious of something” (p. 22). Consciousness connects humans to reality. It operates both externally and internally, facilitating knowledge of the environment, as well as self-awareness. Branden (1969) emphasizes that for humans, consciousness is a choice. “[Man] must direct his mental effort and integrate his mental activity to the goal of conceptual awareness - by choice” (p. 40). Such awareness, is an issue of degree, from passivity and oblivion to full mental focus (1969).

In my view, one of the most significant aspects of Branden's philosophy is its demystification of the world. Many of us are born into family and social environments replete with contradictory messages. For example, mother may be crying but insists nothing is wrong. Father may preach the importance of family, yet is rarely home. Religious leaders might extol god's exquisite love while wielding the hammer of eternal damnation as punishment for failure to comply. In order to experience self-efficacy, as opposed to helplessness and anxiety, we require a means of discerning the truth. In this endeavor, only *reason* - the faculty by which we apply the principles of logic - can untangle an often ostensibly twisted reality and uncover the truth about our environment, other people, and ourselves. In this way, "The laws of identity and noncontradiction are more than principles of logic; they are protectors of our sanity" (Branden, 1997, p. 26).

References

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