

**The birth of a well-adjusted individual in neoliberal times:
Self-esteem discourse and its implications on bodies of color**

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**A practice-based research paper submitted to the School of Social
Work of York University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work**

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Abstract

The concept of “self-esteem”, identified within sociology and psychology fields as self-concept, reflects a person’s overall subjective emotional evaluation of his or her own worth. Ever since its inception into academic literature in 1890 by the American psychologist William James, it has experience and continues to experience an important scientific status in finding out more about the human mind, human emotions and human behaviour. Self-esteem literature and research has also worked its way into social work research and practical applications especially when working with marginalized clients whom social workers wish to integrate smoothly into society either through mood regulations, behaviour interventions or other strategies such as family settlement and employment. From a post-structural and explicitly Foucauldian framework that also analyzes from post-colonial and critical race theories, I argue there is little literature within contemporary social work that looks at the problematic ways self-esteem as a dominant discourse organizes and privileges certain beliefs about the body as normal and healthy while negatively viewing others as harmful to selfhood and to the greater society. This research attempts to examine the ways self-esteem as a dominant discourse facilitates a reproduction of an Eurocentric and colonialist knowledge base that can have both discursive and material consequences for racialized clients participating in psycho-social educational programs within mental health agencies as a part of the current recovery model.

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How can the human world live its difference? How can a human being live Other-wise?
(Bhabha, 1993, p.122)

Chapter 1: Introduction

The concept of self-esteem, first developed by American psychologist William James in 1890, has had considerable influence on analyzing the psychosocial components of the self, and how we view ourselves as worthy or able to contribute to society (Flynn, 2003). James was the first scientist to propose a clear definition of the self that is professional, measurable, and with the potential to predict future successes and obstacles. Ever since his development, the concept of self-esteem has been thoroughly adapted by psychology and social science fields, and scale items such as the Rosenberg self-esteem scale, which promises to measure “global self-esteem” has become one of the most widely used tools for measuring individuals’ self-esteem levels (Flynn, 2003).

Social psychologists from classical and contemporary periods argue that people across different societies and historical periods all have a “strong and pervasive need” for self-esteem (Greenberg *et al*, 1992, p.913). Self-esteem, defined as the subjective measure of a person’s value, is a measure of the worthiness individuals place on themselves, accompanied by appraisal of the person as having intrinsically positive or negative characteristics (Sedikides and Gregg, 2007). Greenberg *et al* (1992) posited that self-esteem is a crucial psychological mechanism for protecting humans from anxious and fearful emotions, and self-esteem can serve to counter these basic human emotions in its “liberating quality” (p.921), stating that when one’s self-esteem measure is high, it can protect against both external problems and internal psychological threats.

Self-esteem appears to be the third most frequently occurring theme in psychological literature (Rodewalt and Tragakis, 2003). There have been various debates through social work and social psychology fields as to how to accurately determine one’s self-esteem, where revised and new scales are being produced. However, there is little literature within contemporary social

work that looks at the problematic ways self-esteem discourse organize and privilege certain life choices and behaviours as normal and healthy while negatively viewing others as less-than ideal.

Social work, as a profession belonging to the human service institution lacks an agreed way of knowledge building and as a discipline, often borrows from other areas such as law, medicine, psychiatry, and social psychology which collectively have been developed in a Western positivist and scientific lens of looking at human progress and well-being (Healy, 2005). This can account for social work's import of self-esteem discourse and its alignment of this psycho-social knowledge with some of social work's more progressive constructions, such as the concept of empowerment and self-determination of individuals (Cruikshank, 1993). Additionally, self-esteem discourse has been utilized by social workers working with racialized clients to develop cultural competency strategies that implement self-esteem learning with the goal of raising individual measurements of self-esteem within a culturally-appropriate framework (Joseph, 2015). This proves to be problematic in many ways, predominantly what Wong *et al* (2003) identify as the Western imperialist belief that populations of color can be made into fixed, timeless realities, ripe for Western investigation and scrutiny as "the Other", and that their mental and psychological mindsets can be knowable and made visible under various techniques and tools including the self-esteem discourse.

Chapter 2 outlines a history of how self-esteem has evolved and solidified as a dominant discourse in scientific knowledge since its first inception. Chapter 3 provides the research design and explains the methodology chosen. Chapter 4 examines the six major themes found through data analysis. Chapter 5 discusses its implications for critical social work research and practice through a meaningful engagement with post-structural and post-colonial theories.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

History of self-esteem: setting the stage for a discovery of the self

Self-esteem has a history that has been argued by Ward (1996) to be largely social. Ward (1996) sees self-esteem discourse as an example of the “sociology of concept formation” (Hacking, 1988, p.54). Self-esteem as a concept has been used for unlocking “inherent secrets” of human behaviour and a predictor of quality of life. Ward (1996) is concerned with how self-esteem came into existence, “how it has made and molded our life, our customs, our science” (Hacking, 1995, p.16).

Even though the term “self-esteem” has been known to be used ever since the 17th century, contemporary understanding and usage of the term originated with the publication of psychologist William James’ work *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, and from there it set the stage for the modern emergence and developing of self-esteem discourse (Vroom, 2015). James had framed the concept of self-esteem as a kind of feelings towards the self, and also that the “self-feeling is in our power” (James, 1890, *Rivalry and Conflict of the Different Selves* section, para 4), explaining that individuals will experience rise and fall in self-esteem depending on the ever-changing circumstances in our lives. According to Ward (1996), this laid the foundation that a well-adjusted individual was something who could control their self-feeling and direct it towards reaching for achievements that have personal meaning.

In order to understand how the modern concept of self-esteem came into constitution in the West and beyond, it is necessary to understand two shifts in human representation and thinking about the self that occurred in the late 17th century. Vroom (2015) identifies two key thinkers, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau for contributing to understandings of self-hood that provided the pre-conditions for self-esteem to materialize. In particular, Locke’s (1690) idea that the human mind starts from birth as a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*. What separates the human species from

other animals are their assumed capacity to build on a consciousness, which was what Locke (1694) named personal identity. The self will thus be building from the blank slate from birth into establishing self-consciousness, and that through means of empirical speculation, the self then can be known. The philosopher Rousseau had theorized that human beings have within themselves a true inner self, namely called authenticity (Melzer 1997). Rousseau sees the meaning of one's life as a process of finding out one's true, authentic self within the self-consciousness of the individual, to "withdraw from everything else and communion with one's inner self" (Melzer, 1997, p. 288). According to Rousseau, this state of being was highly desirable and should be one of men's most sought after virtues.

The idea of the self through the advancement of the works by Locke and Rousseau has established human consciousness as an "object of knowledge" (Vroom, 2015, p.29) that could be studied through scientific methods. Ever since the 17th century, the self would come to be understood increasing as a separate entity from other parts of the body, separate from society and as its own object worthy of human scrutiny and investigation. This idea of the true self versus the false self has been within self-esteem discourse ever since, as shown by Rosenberg's (1965) research on self-esteem, where low self-esteem becomes now linked with scientific empirical evidence to the creation of a false self:

Since people with self-esteem are more likely to present a false front to others and since people who present a false front manifest more symptoms of anxiety, we might assume that one reason with low self-esteem show more anxiety is because of their tendency to present a false front (Rosenberg, cited in Vroom, 2015, p.47).

Vroom (2015)'s analysis of Locke and Rousseau's contribution to the future establishment of self-esteem discourse points to how both frame the consciousness-self as an individual possession that has fundamentally positive attributes although it could that could be tainted if one's personal identity is not inspected by the self. Rose (1999) posits this to be one of the earliest premises of a

“positive culture” (p.220), where a secular salvation of the self to the individual is promised upon the discovery of an authentic inner self, a concept that science continues to employ as a way to illuminate and make concrete the truth of people’s psychological states.

Emergence and growth as dominant discourse

According to Ward (1996), self-esteem’s shift from a revolutionary idea to an increasingly normalized concept began to intensify between the 1940s and 1970s, it was this period that laid the foundation of self-esteem as a real and tangible research objective. Comprehensive and carefully measured clinical experiments that focused on studies of self-esteem began to gain popularity and influence. Maslow’s (1942) examination of the self looked at how human beings achieve personal success and self-fulfillment and linked self-esteem as one of the key concepts to achieving them. Maslow, as one of the founders of humanist and managerial psychology, studied the concept of self-esteem with the assumption that individuals can be oriented towards happiness by acknowledging and continuously working on improving one’s self-growth. This required a particular understanding of human subjectivity that is individualistic, deeply personal, as well as viewing the self as an object (Feher, 2014; Rose, 1999; Ward, 1996).

As the growing interest of research on the self continued to expand and gave birth to a plethora of new theories within psychotherapy and clinical psychology, Ward (1996) argues that self-esteem as a both a practical and theoretical concept was having significant implications for researchers that seek to study deviant and pathological behaviours with the human psyche. This desire to study the abnormal and construct the divide between what are considered normal ranges of the self with the abnormal cannot be fully understood unless one looked at how science and the pursuit of knowledge became quantified and the actions of improving of the self became standardized (Vroom, 2015; Rose, 1999).

Vroom (2015)'s work on the history of self-esteem discourse discussed the emergence of probability theory in the 17th century setting the foundation for its emergence as a dominant form of theorizing about social phenomena in the 19th century. Statistics and the manipulation of numbers to form a set of standards were increasing gaining ground as a way to study crime, poverty and other forms of social ills. Statistics were seen as effective means to measure human beings not as specific individuals, rather as populations. It was not only a way of providing information; rather, it itself was becoming a part of the techniques the modern state with productive powers of its own to shape what people understood to be reality (Hacking, 1991). The discovery of population as an object of study was to have profound implications for the growth of the study of self-esteem. Foucault (1984a)'s argues that this study of population became an object of the ultimate scientific investigation; there existed for the first time, standardized measurements that could be used to document and track characteristics of entire groups and look at differences and sameness on a grand scale. These statistical computations, now a familiar aspect of modern science according to Foucault (1984a) back then "were of decisive importance in the epistemological "thaw" of the sciences of the individual" (p. 202). Now it was possible to apply statistics to measure and evaluate human characteristics (Vroom, 2015).

Among the statistical researchers of self-esteem discourse, Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale was among the first to use a large-scale format, one that still used today to measure the level of individuals' self-esteem. This has moved self-esteem from a concept residing mainly in the mind into a numerical value that can be extracted from the body (Vroom, 2015; Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Ward, 1996). Furthermore, self-esteem had become a concept that was reified and given a shape and form; it was now identifiable, concrete, and can be subjected to repeated testing and clinical trials operating in various contexts, populations and academic settings (Vroom, 2015). Whereas James' (1890) original explanation of self-esteem was abstract and located within the

psyche of individuals, now self-esteem is able to be objectified as a trait that can be isolated and measured, as well as a skill that can be improved upon with specific modifications (Vroom, 2015; Feher, 2014; Rose, 1999).

Within the last 30 years, there have been three general strands of research on self-esteem by clinical psychologists, behavioural scientists, and psychotherapists as well as others in the discipline of the human sciences. Cast and Burke (2002) posited that the science of self-esteem has been researched first as an outcome – focusing on processes and strategies that will produce and sustain individual self-esteem. Secondly, self-esteem has been researched as a self-motive, explaining the wide of range of human behaviour tendencies that is connected to producing positive evaluations of the self. Finally, self-esteem has been researched as acting as a protective factor between the individual psyche and traumatic, violent or harmful incidents that can cause temporary or permanent damage to mental and emotional well-being. Ward (1996) suggests that during this period of modern science achievements, self-esteem as an academic network has become as strong and legitimate a concept as psychology itself. This was partly made possible precisely because the concept of self-esteem had “recruited a vast series of human and non-human allies” (Ward, 1996, p.8). Foucault’s concepts to historicize discourse have influenced much of the post-structural analysis on self-esteem, such that self-esteem discourse cannot be meaningfully looked at without looking at how the rise of a discipline coincides with its political usefulness and potential for economic profit and social regulation (Foucault, 1980). It is with this in mind that the next portion seeks to interrogate self-esteem’s relationship to the various social and political structures in contemporary society.

Self-esteem’s entrenchment in policy, economic, and social institutions

Rose (1999) asserts that “the self is a vital element in the networks of power that traverse modern societies” (p.217). Self-esteem, now understood to be a self-object (Feher, 2014) is shaped

through the rapid growth of a series of technologies, each with its own complexity and large-scale structural features that are rooted in various “political, scientific, philanthropic and professional authorities” (Rose, 1999, p. 217). For self-esteem to be seen and held as a dominant discourse of modern human subjectivity and an ideal form of the human condition and individual progress, it had to break through the boundaries of clinical science and psychotherapy and become a mass idea, a consumer item that could extend its desirability and utility beyond the academic intelligentsia (Vroom, 2015; Feher, 2014; Rose, 1999; Ward, 1996).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the network of self-esteem as Ward (1996) puts it; “began to develop new coalitions outside the human sciences” (p.8). The concept of being able to improve on the self (Rose 1999) was aligning with the existing social movements in that era, such as how self-help movement, educational pedagogy, and correct ways to parent just to name a few. Feher (2014) discussed at length how the humanist foundation of psychology, which puts forth that everyone has the potential to succeed was increasingly gaining leverage in popular discourse. This interested public policy to be geared towards encouraging the fostering of self-esteem – due to its potential and promise to make citizens develop their skills abilities and to contribute to the contribution of nation building during the post-war years in North America and Europe. Characteristics such as ambition, motivation, self-love, confidence, were now linked to self-esteem as they can all be self-objects and models of success that can be internalized, learned, and circulated within society as consumption items (Rose, 1999).

According to Vroom (2015), Rousseau’s view of the authentic and moral human being as ultimate virtue became a driving ontological and epistemological force behind the moralizing of self-esteem discourse, making it a crucial pre-condition for self-love. By the 20th century, self-esteem was already very much part of modernity and the “modern ideal” (p.52). Contrastingly, low self-esteem has been constructed as a metaphor for disease and deficiency, the idea that

beneath many social problems and individual suffering lays the problem of low self-esteem (Sender and Sullivan, 2008; Pollack, 2000; Cruikshank, 1993). Individuals through educational, clinical and socio-political institutions were taught that one can never have too much self-esteem, and that possessing higher self-esteem was always a good thing. Vroom's (2015) analysis echoes those of Rose (1999), who looked at the construction of morality as a new kind technology and subjectification that was applied to the population:

Morale was a powerfully mobile notion, linking up the psychiatric register, the notion of public opinion, the control of news and propaganda, public support for civilian and military authorities, the consequences of policy changes in army life, and much more... Each individual was now a wanted, contributing member of a cohesive society. Social solidarity and psychological relations were becoming the central terms in accounting for mental health. (Rose, 1999, p. 23-25).

These consequences as outlined by Rose (1999), explained that while psychotherapy and its languages and technologies seemed far away from political issues and policy formations, one example of such regulation and cultivation of the human psyche would be Cruikshank's (1993) compelling analysis of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, a state sanctioned public education campaign that came out in 1990 to promote self-esteem as a way to eradicate social problems such as unemployment, welfare dependency, drug use, and child abuse. The Task Force's message regarding encouraging everyone to grow their self-esteem because it "challenges us to be more fully human." (Cruikshank, 1993, p.332). Cruikshank (1993) argues that these are precisely the type of scientific innovations that use technologies (such as self-esteem) as productive powers to constitute a certain type of normal selves, what Hacking (1986) refers to "making up people" (p.9), such as the creation of the California Task Force where self-esteem improvement has been made into an individual responsibility and a duty for citizens of the state, it appears though that citizenship has acquired a definite subjective form (Rose, 1999).

Foucault's (1984c) analysis of human sexuality posited sexuality as a legitimate and concrete domain of knowledge and a type of normalization that enables the man to recognize himself as a sexual-object-subject (p.333). For self-esteem discourse to rise from a singular mention on James' (1890) book chapter to a discourse worthy of implementation from the government of education in California, self-esteem has been created as a kind of "truth". (Foucault, 1980), as a kind of human nature that constitutes its citizens as a psychological individual, ready to undergo a series of changes for moral and societal improvement (Vroom, 2015; Feher, 2014; Rose, 1999; Ward, 1996; Cruikshank, 1993).

Foucault and biopower: self-esteem as self-governance in (neo)liberal times

Foucault's (1984b) concept of biopower proves to be useful when analyzing self-esteem as both a discourse as well as a productive knowledge base. Greco's (2009) analysis of thinking about healthy societies through a Foucauldian lens argues that it is dangerous to reduce biopower as a medically enforced mode of normalization, oppressive from the top down. Instead, she positions biopower as a feature of the modern liberal state where it acknowledges the power of life, and is itself a power that is creative, innovative, and takes various shapes that open space for opportunities, ideas and techniques that can be used for optimizing the utility and efficiency of populations. Specifically, self-esteem discourse can be looked at from the follow perspective:

We need to be suspicious of biopower, it is because it goes beyond its association with the state or the medical profession, but rather it defines the horizon of our thinking when it comes to articulating values and freedoms. "There is no longer anything outside health" – there is nothing that cannot be assessed in terms of whether or not it facilitates health, and there are no values that cannot be translated into a norm of health. (Greco, 2009, p.17)

Similarly, one could make the same argument about self-esteem and the citizen as a psychological individual (Rose, 1999). Feher's (2014) analysis of self-esteem is as an asset crucial to the formation of the invested self – a marker of subjects living in the neoliberal era. Feher (2014) introduced the idea of acquiring self-esteem to have psychic capital, which along with other

kinds of capital one needs to have for upward mobility in a capitalist, liberal society. Originally confined to only the clinical psychology field, the measured possession of self-esteem would be the indicator to doctors and psychotherapists that the therapy was a success. Once introduced to the public, self-esteem and its discourse morphed into a certain type of desirable capital, growing one's self-esteem will become imperative to the development of independent, self-reliant individuals that neoliberalism espouses.

Sender and Sullivan (2008) suggest that self-esteem improvement exercises are much like fashion makeovers for people are identified as “bad dressers” (p. 34). Not only are subjects oriented to become better consumers after the makeover, they are also restored as rational, upstanding individuals with the power to lead independent choices. Vroom (2015) suggests that the rise of neoliberalism brought along with it strategies of self-directed self-esteem which can be understood as technologies of mastering the self. The belief that self-esteem as a technique to govern the self can hold one responsible for their decisions in life, furthering their independency and self-determinacy. In this way, self-esteem “is the affect correlated to neoliberal conditioning” (Feher, 2014, Lecture 7). It is here that Feher takes Foucault's (1984b) idea of biopower as mastery applied at the level of life itself further, and also extends beyond Cruikshank's (1993) argument that self-esteem becomes a social obligation of the modern citizen (Gibbins and Taylor, 2010). Self-esteem in Feher's (2014) imagination takes on a much more seductive and creative subjectivity, as something that is equal to financial credit, where concrete markers of high self-esteem becomes the psychic dimension of credit, something he claims that:

People have to make themselves attractive; the main point is not to sell what you have, but to maximize the value of who you are...the psychic asset that is fundamental is no longer satisfaction, but self-esteem. (Feher, 2014, Lecture 3).

Kenny (2015) discusses Foucault's 1978 lectures on neoliberal governmentality, in particular, Foucault's focus on American neoliberalism that has been shaped by Chicago School

economists, where the rationality of the market is extended to all corners of life. For Kenny (2015), there is no real barrier between neoliberal economic rationale and the biopolitical domain where the “particular *figure of the human* that it envisions” (p. 13, author’s emphasis) gets constituted as healthy, desirable individuals. In an increasingly financialized world that is measured by discourses surrounding what is “good” and “bad” credit, Feher (2014) suggests the psychological discourse of self-esteem is no longer just bound to medical and psychological knowledge base; rather it seamlessly aligns with human capital discourse, where improving one’s self-esteem is the one of the most telling practices that aims at maximizing one’s psychic credit and increasing feelings of appreciation towards the self (Feher, 2014, 2009). The site of self-investment literally becomes one’s own psyche and mental capacity (Kenny, 2015; Feher, 2014). Building on this, I argue that a kind of self-esteem ethic is also created, aligning with Rose (1999) when he argues how Western ways of progress have urged and encouraged humans to become “ethical beings” for the sake of their salvation (p. 245). It is this ethic that subjects them to resist or take up particular moral goals for themselves, rooted in the quest to acquire various forms of capital. Foucault’s 1979 college lectures on the birth of bio-politics suggests that there is no way of living as ethical subject, except through particular modes of subjectification which involves the never-ending processes of improving the self (Rose, 1999).

Self-esteem as universal: the rise of a global self-esteem discourse

Through self-esteem’s idealization as a dominant discourse of the 20th century, self-esteem as a psychological, social and health concept was increasingly going through processes of normalization, what Vroom (2015) defines as the process of attempting to bring not only individuals, but populations with a standard of what the desired level of self-esteem ought to achieve. Foucault (1991a) argued that to examine a dominant discourse involves not to see the discourse as so much a thought, but to look at the “practical field in which it is deployed” (p.61).

This involves the various strategies, techniques, innovations, methods, practices and beliefs that have been constituted in order to bring the population to self-identify, and strive for this standard for increased self-esteem (Vroom, 2015). The techniques of capturing and numericalizing self-esteem levels were what Hacking (1991) calls “moral science” (p.181), used to study mass behaviour and the interior constructions of populations, to sort out the normal from the deviant. Self-esteem discourse was no longer satisfied with figuring out the self-feeling of individuals, now it was shifting to construct broad, universalizing categories. Enter the concept of global self-esteem, whose supporters argue that self-esteem is a universal human concern that claims to be upheld by both theoretical and empirical knowledge (Tafarodi & Swann Jr., 2001; Mruk, 2008).

Greenberg *et al*'s (1992) article was one of the first researches on self-esteem of its kind to systemically study what they identify as self-esteem as universal, not just linked to specific localities with specific individuals. Calling self-esteem a “vital human need” (p. 913), the authors argue that self-esteem can act as successful buffers against anxiety, and individuals that possessed higher levels of self-esteem were suffering from less anxiety when exposed to stressful ideas of harm, threat, and even death. With this, Greenberg *et al* (1992) positioned self-esteem as a defensive structure with the capacity to protect human beings from “basic human fears...and may ultimately have the liberating quality of leading to the consideration of alternative meanings of addressing our most basic human problems” (p.921).

Self-esteem was now capable of solving problems on a universal and global stage. The research that solidified the concept of a universal, global self-esteem was Rosenberg *et al*'s (1995) article comparing global self-esteem with specific self-esteem, where global self-esteem was equated with concepts of self-acceptance and self-respect. The research concludes that global self-esteem when compared with specific self-esteem was a better predictor of one's overall psychological well-being that was seen as more focused on the changing of specific behaviour

outcomes. Global self-esteem through these studies became strongly tied to the meaning of self-worth and the development of an inherent value system. Self-esteem as a scientific object became an increasingly important aspect of human personality (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Watson, Suls & Haig, 2002; Cast & Burke, 2002;).

Other studies on self-esteem after the influential works on global self-esteem included further analysis and categorization of different types of self-esteem, such as Stinson *et al's* (2015) research on differentiating those who have lowered self-esteem from higher self-esteem individuals, their different trajectories when in intimate, romantic relationships, and different kinds of social risks that are linked to different levels of self-esteem. It was argued that a lack of self-esteem within humans is one of the primary warning signs of dysfunction and “an assumed ‘risk’ condition in virtually all contemporary models of disordered behaviour (Bednar & Peterson, 1995). Self-esteem was now used to measure a variety of human activities from school performance to relationship choices, from how an individual sees herself or himself to how successfully or unsuccessfully manage friendships (Mruk, 2008; Zhang & Postiglione, 2001). There are studies on how self-esteem as something linked to the neural activity in the human brain (Wu *et al*, 2014) and can be successful at protecting the individual from incidences of violence and terror (Schmeichel *et al*, 2009).

Self-esteem has been seen by both its supporters and critics as the “feeling of self-appreciation” (Hosogi *et al*, 2012, p. 5; Feher, 2014) and something indispensable for people living out their lives in modernity. What is different is how this type of technology is taken up ontologically; either as transcendentally self-evident or socially constructed as a part of truth production (Foucault, 1991b). Feher (2014) argues that neoliberalism and modern science brought about two polarizations of the human condition: living as self-loathing and living as self-appreciation. In Feher’s argument, self-esteem becomes one of the investments that the self willing

acts on to the self to increase credit (Ewald, 1991). The discourse of self-esteem, with its productive, but also limited power becomes oriented towards self-appreciation and minimizing risk (Greenberg *et al*, 1992; Hosogi *et al*, 2012). Self-esteem thus can be understood as what Ewald (1991) calls a “moral technology” (p.206), in the business of mastery over human life, having a means of disciplining one’s future so that one’s relationship with the world can undergo a transformation to ensure that “one retains responsibility for one’s affairs by possessing the means to repair its effects” (p. 207).

Flynn’s (2003) work challenged the idea of a universal standard of self-esteem from a feminist theory viewpoint and was a much needed deconstruction for the universal self-esteem momentum; she argues that much of the Western-borne theory and measurement of self-esteem have inherent cultural and gendered assumptions about human nature. Flynn (2003) also points to the privileging of self-esteem discourse to value the autonomous man, subsequently judging all inferiority and deviance from this standard of human representation. Flynn (2003) suggests that instead of claiming truth to a universal self-esteem scale, researchers should be taking into account the socialization of gendered and cultured selves when examining self-esteem levels of different groups. While Flynn’s argument seems to be giving much of the psychology field dedicated to the self-esteem empire a much needed shake, she ultimately attributes self-esteem to be of unshakable and unquestionable existence in this world. With her analysis, self-esteem is not a technique of the self (Cruikshank, 1993) but a truth that already reflects the kind of knowledge production being circulated. Flynn’s critique was about whether or not a practice in an established domain is true or false, however, the establishment of that domain itself remains unchallenged (Foucault, 1991b). Citing Crosby’s (1992) analysis of theorizing difference within postmodernist ideas, Flynn (2003) omits in her critique “the question of a theory of the production of knowledge...the problem is that differences are taken to be self-evidence, concrete, *there*, present in history and therefore the

proper ground of theory” (p.137, author’s emphasis), thus returning her critique of self-esteem to a site of “ultimate normativity” (Butler, 1992, p.8).

Knowledge as colonizing: Self-esteem’s contact with racialized bodies

Self-esteem discourse as an universal and global knowledge in the 20th century was now taken to be a legitimate domain of knowledge (Vroom, 2015; Cruikshank, 1993), in Foucault’s (1984c)’s study of the history of sexuality, self-esteem as a self-evident, scientific concept was now “a type of normativity and a mode of relation to the self” (p.333). There is a large body of existing and forthcoming literature on self-esteem from fields such as personality and behavioural sciences, adult and adolescent sciences, human health, psychology and psychiatry that studies whether or not different races and ethnicities have different inherent standards when it comes to measuring self-esteem.

According to the literature found on self-esteem and process of identity-formation, studies starting in the early 1950s have focused on how high levels of self-esteem is associated with a positive ethnic identity achievement that can manifest in a variety of behavioural and cognitive outcomes such as school achievement, emotional growth, and workplace success (Lin, Wu & Chen, 2015; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). When looking at self-esteem studies conducted across the globe, researchers have tended to view Eastern and Western cultures as separate, monolithic static entities. Asian countries are found to be highly collectivist, while Western countries are highly individualist, with results indicating that Chinese people have consistently self-identified in less positive terms than people living in the West, and report lower levels of self-esteem and well-being in comparison to Western countries while at the same time acknowledging that high-self-esteem is still a universal imperative; (Liu & Xin, 2014; Schnittker, 2002; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2001; Cai & Brown, 2010; Cai, Wu & Brown, 2009; Boucher *et al.*, 2009; Yamaguchi *et al.*, 2007; Spencer-Rodgers *et al.*, 2004). Research concludes for Chinese and other Asian immigrants

immigrating to Western countries, that a healthy dose of self-esteem can help protect them from discrimination in the new host society (Watkins & Gutierrez, 1989; Chung & Watkins, 1992; Tafarodi & Swann Jr., 1996). Characteristics for accurate measurements of a “Chinese self-esteem” were based on speculations of Chinese culture, parenting styles, politics of Communist China, family dynamics, birth cohorts, socio-economic status and the Chinese school curriculum (Wang & Ollendick, 2001; Chen *et al.*, 2016; Chiu, 1993). Cross-cultural psychology focusing on levels of happiness, capacity for achievement in life, and increasingly, the study of self-esteem levels and feelings about the self was becoming prominent and gaining scientific merit as many more research studies continued in the footsteps of the idea of global self-esteem being applicable to everyone (Vroom, 2015; Feher, 2014; Ward, 1996).

Recently, there have been studies done which argue that the Chinese population does have higher levels of self-esteem than as reported in past studies, or on par with those of their Western counterparts. While the studies are focused to see how in the past, research may have been too problem-oriented when looking at self-esteem levels in the Eastern world, nevertheless these new findings reinforce the idea that there is a universalist stance on global self-esteem that is similarly understood around the world regardless of differences in socio-economic status, language, and culture (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Self-esteem “is a universal phenomenon that stems from common human motivations” (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) has been maintained in research as a self-evident, stable rationale since scientific methods and practices cannot exist without a certain “regime of rationality” (Foucault, 1991b).

To understand the dangers of a universal, global concept of self-esteem, it is necessary to look at the complex ties that exist between colonial techniques and psychology as technology of the self which can effectively govern racialized bodies. Stoler (1995) describes this process as

technologies of ongoing normalization, which suggests that racism has always been a part of part of biopower, not separate from it. Rather,

Racism is more than an ad hoc response to crisis; it is a manifestation of preserved possibilities, the expression of an underlying discourse of permanent social war, nurtured by the biopolitical technologies of “incessant purification.” Racism does not merely arise in moments of crisis, in sporadic cleanings. It is internal to the biopolitical state, woven into the weft of the social body, threaded through its social fabric. (Stoler, 1995, p.69).

As self-esteem discourse and the consciousness of self-value, self-worth and self-appreciation become increasingly an international project, research on cultural variations in psychology and personality studies have been critiqued as static, and ahistorical, conformed only to simplistic and homogenous East-West binaries (Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2008). Under the guise of science-as-neutral enterprise, non-Westerns are being seen and consumed as a certain type of “Other” (Said, 1979). This kind of consumption and shaping into a particular subjectivity, as discussed at length by Foucault (1991), does not purely exist in symbolic form, but rather it is constituted in real practices, as “there is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them” (p.369). Bhatia (2002) argues that Asian subjects are constructed as inferior and primitive in their psychological evaluations from Western psychology, and have urged for the recognition that historical legacies continue to shape and constitute the identity of Asian immigrants in the West, since their human development cannot be separated from the technologies of colonialism. Joseph (2015) posit that colonial dominance has always been rationalized by a Western imperative to introduce modernity and civilization to the East, and this is shown through self-esteem discourse’s attempts to legitimize that a healthy, standardized self-esteem level can protect and buffer the individual from any potential risks, harm and threat, even in the face of death (Stinson, *et al.*, 2015; Schmeichel *et al.*, 2009; Greenberg *et al.*, 1992). As self-esteem increasingly becomes a weapon against risks of all kind - even mortality, the transformation is not only a transformation of understanding to concepts such as sensibility or

intuition, but a transformation of human understanding itself (Ewald, 1991). If we frame issues that surround racialized immigrants settling into Western part of the world such as racism, legal discrimination, systemic employment barriers and other issues as ‘risk’, then it is not hard to see how self-esteem concepts can be an effective approach to solve a wide variety of social and structural issues. Similar to Cruikshank’s (1993) analysis of a regime of self-esteem, social problems such as high crime levels and poverty are promised to be solved by challenging not external factors, but challenging our internal selves, to better govern and orient our internal self using the techniques of self-esteem (Lemke, 2002). Self-esteem is seen as the neoliberal state’s way of solving problems of inferiority and any barriers one may encounter in life by way of building one’s capacity for future success (Feher, 2014). Instead of focusing on present hardships, one is encouraged to imagine a future where one masters high self-esteem and therefore holds a sizeable ‘insurance’, a kind of “political technology” (Ewald, 1991, p.207) to create solutions to problems that are now seen as calculable, contained, and individualized. It seems though with mastering self-esteem, life itself has been mastered. Kenny (2015) offers a thoughtful analysis on how in neoliberal times, death is no longer seen as a disease outcome, but instead a decision outcome; one that is future-oriented, concerns with risk-minimizing and maximizing the rational behaviour of investing in and managing one’s life (Feher, 2014). This rendering of human health and human self-esteem as human capital effectively shapes structural issues of exploitation, colonial legacies and inequity as consumer choices; one can choose to overcome them if one chooses self-esteem. It is the ability to feel appreciative about the self, regardless of external situations and past histories.

Self-esteem discourse within social work

Social work as a professional discipline has long been, and continues to engage with psychology and psychological expertise, directly adapting from many taken-for-granted

knowledge bases such as authenticity and empathy (Healy, 2005). Among the psychology discourses that the social work profession utilizes to constitute its program goals and outcomes, self-esteem discourse remains central to the management and intervention of mental health strategies and technologies (Feher, 2014; Ward, 1996; Cruikshank, 1993). There have been suggestions that social work interventions need to directly target raising clients' level of self-worth and self-appreciation as it is useful for managing their mental illnesses (Kahng & Mowbray, 2004). A study from the University of Toronto (Khanlou, 2004), suggested development of youth's self-esteem is necessary particularly in multicultural and immigrant-receiving settings, since it was a key factor in determining their school performance, relationships, and attitude towards themselves, as well as protecting them from any mental health issues which could arise from low-esteem. This was reinforced in a reported conducted by the *Ontario Center of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health* (Mulligan, 2011) which concluded low self-esteem is one of the biggest risk factors for the onset of mental health problems and has been identified as a "risk marker" (p.5), with positive self-esteem as a standardized protective factor against illnesses such as depression, eating disorders, and other "high risk" behaviours (p.3). A webpage on the Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario has a self-help portion on their website, dedicated to parents, teachers, and caretakers to teach children on achieving high self-esteem levels (McGuire, 2007) in several prescriptive steps, with the caution that low-self-esteem can lead to reduced ability to deal with stress both in one's youth and adult life.

Foucault (1984d) on his discussion of a history of ethics examined how "people act onto themselves to give their life certain values. It is a never-ending process that involves "making one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a technique, for an art" (p.362). Self-esteem discourse's entrance into social work's goal-setting and intervention strategies signaled the constitution of a certain governable body; particular kinds of practices are set up for people of all

different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to invest in a “mastery of the self” (Foucault, 1984d, p.358) that is tied to a set of social political strategies to ensure a certain kind of governable outcome (Lemke, 2002; Rose, 1999).

The vast ranges of technologies in the neoliberal state are developed for the purpose to ensure and maximize the efficiency of bodies; managing their emotional and mental states in a consumer society remains paramount as it sets the precondition for them to live as consumers (Greco, 2009). However, Feher (2014) and Ewald (1991) suggest that bodies are not only the individuals that consume capital; bodies are also to be understood as capital themselves. Specifically, a certain representation of the human condition has to be constituted into the ‘real’ before bodies can both consume, and become consumed (Feher, 2014). Spivak’s (1988) analysis sheds light on how knowledge about non-Western and ‘Third world’ populations was always enmeshed with the political and economic interests of the West. The interest to find out and locate the Asian population’s self-esteem level, possible reasons why their level of self-esteem differs from the those Western-born, and suggestions for improving their levels of self-esteem all contribute to the idea that knowledge about racialized individuals can become packaged as a consumer item, produced and reproduced so that the racial differences can be essentialized to allow for specific interventions that end up being consumed by the racialized bodies in a circular fashion (Crosby, 1992). In the confined space that self-esteem discourse allows for, the understanding of East-Asian bodies remains to be filled with immovable features that are understood to be ahistorical and static; only this way could they then be “researchable and knowable” (Poon, 2011; also see Wong *et al.*, 2003). Racialized populations becomes objectified as a site of knowledge where particular truths in the form of scientific ‘facts’ become produced, rationalized, and distributed for structured practices that allows for the knowledge to become naturalized, and it gradually “possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and ‘reason’”(Foucault, 1991b),

allowing for social work interventions to be consumed and reproduced in particular ways that does not challenge what self-esteem discourse self-evidently considers to be real and essential.

This research attempts to analyze how social and cross-cultural psychology practices are built upon historical legacies of colonialization and imperialism, as well as creating subjectivities under a Western gaze. Situating the issue in poststructuralist ideas, I argue that these historical and political legacies affect and influence the ways that ethno-specific mental health agencies take up the concepts of self-esteem in a politically neutral, culturally competency-driven direction which aim to create particular self-governing subjectivities that are oriented to be a certain kind of moralized, liberal being. By framing self-esteem as a technology of the self that enables racialized subjectivities to be consumed by the West as autonomous, ahistorical, and ultimately responsible for their own trajectories of settlement life in Canada, the author posits that it is necessary for social work practitioners to re-examine current understandings of self-esteem and how it has shaped the way they practice and design psycho-social education and health promotion programs for racialized clients.

Theoretical perspective

A poststructuralist paradigm will be used for this research, anchored by Foucault's analysis on bio-politics, discourse, subject formation, knowledge/power, and the formation of the neoliberal state. Particular attention is paid to how discourse is related to what Foucault (1984) identifies as "regime of practices" that possesses its own specific logic and strategies, to expose not only self-esteem discourse's arbitrariness, but how it connects with a multiplicity of historical processes and how those contributed to its current existence and influence. This research aims to challenge essentialized notions of defining the self as well as truths that can transcend time and locale. The aim of this research is to propose a refocusing of current research on modernist conceptions of

self-esteem, as well as add to the emerging body of poststructuralist research on self-esteem discourse, linking it to post-colonial and critical race theories.

Chapter 3: Research Design

A practitioner manual designed for a psycho-education self-esteem program published in 2014 from one ethno-specific mental health agency located in Toronto, Canada will have portions selected for manual coding by the researcher and analyzed to look for common themes. This research uses secondary qualitative data – data that is already available and created for another purpose than what the researcher intends to do with it. I use this data to produce a discourse analysis in order to pursue a research interest which is different from that of the original work. I will be looking at the original data collected from a critical social work perspective and asking different questions than what the original data was meant for (Moore, 2006).

Object and process of analysis

I have chosen to deconstruct and examine self-esteem knowledge base as a discourse and look at its governing effects through the text analysis of a facilitator's manual for social workers to conduct a series of self-esteem workshops as object of analysis. The manual is 127 pages long and consists of self-esteem theory, research and findings, goals and objectives of the program, guidelines for facilitators as well as workshop outlines. The workshops are divided into a lecture-style portion for the first hour followed by group exercises during the second hour to demonstrate the theories that were taught. The participants from this workshop were all adult clients from an East Asian background diagnosed with one or more multiple mental health illness. The clients were handpicked by the workshop's program manager. Clients were on medication and supportive counseling, and were believed to benefit from learning about how to improve self-esteem – as a means to further aid their recovery processes. This approach to focus on the discursive effects of text looks at the representations of self-esteem discourse, and the consequences of these representations in relation to the realm of the social, because we still remain in a social dialogue with the meanings produced by the text, and readers of the text may engage in an interpretive

dialogue with it (Bakhtin, 1981). The text was broken down into dominant themes to see the ideological and discursive assumptions. Selections of the portions quoted in findings were made based on its ability to examine conceptions of self-esteem discourse tied to governmentality and self-regulation, and elements of colonial and Eurocentric techniques that are embedded within the workshop rationale, goals, and exercises.

The study wishes to interrogate self-esteem discourse as a social construction with political consequences and asks the following questions within the research: what does it mean to be an East Asian minority in Canada with a positive level of self-esteem? What is being constructed in these moments of education and health promotion as a normalized range of behaviours and actions under the self-esteem discourse? Lastly, what particular subjectivities and truths are being produced in self-esteem discourse, and how does it link to colonial legacies of truth-making? Focusing on Rossiter's (2005) conceptual framework for doing discourse analysis, I wish to reveal the constructed and managed space that self-esteem discourse produces and how the clients are constructed within that space as particular subjects when participating in a self-esteem building program. Also, social work's implication in the creation and facilitation of these subjectivities will be examined.

Author's role and ethical considerations

As the researcher, I acknowledge that I am neither an observer nor a non-participant in this research since I am using a workshop curriculum I took part in its completion from when I was a Bachelor of Social Work placement student at the agency. The research question originated from my observations and reflections while participating in the design of the self-esteem workshop curriculum; I had ambivalence towards the framing of self-esteem as an objective scientific concept, and wanted to explore its hidden political rationality (Foucault, 1984c). This sparked my

interest in wanting to interrogate the epistemological foundations of self-esteem from a post-structural critique and method.

The agency name and all identifying factors of the manual to any individual (names of facilitators and/or participants, location of workshops, etc.) will be removed from the analysis and will not be a part of the practice research paper to ensure confidentiality.

Foucauldian discourse analysis as methodology

The research employs Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) as methodology for data analysis. FDA can be interpreted as both a methodological approach and theoretical framework (Garrity, 2010), since a Foucauldian understanding of discourse analysis as a methodology requires the researcher to be immersed with Foucault's work as well as post-structural theoretical approaches. FDA is associated with a constructivist paradigm (Chambon, 1999; Jansen, 2008; Garrity, 2010), where essential notions of defining the self as well as truths that can transcend time and locale were challenged under Foucault's work (Chambon, 1999). According to Foucault, there can be no truth that exists outside of society or that is completely liberating in a social justice sense, because truth is a "thing" of this world (Foucault, 1984, p. 72). Truth is understood in this ontological position as a system that is formulated by multiple forces of constraint existing in society. FDA wishes to disrupt and unsettle taken-for-granted ideologies and its manifestations by questioning discourse and the social practices it allows (Graham, 2005). Graham's (2005) quote from Stephen Ball (1996) gives a strong argument of what FDA is well-situated to examine, that "the point about theory is not that it is simply critical...but to engage in struggle, to reveal and undermine what is most invisible and insidious in prevailing practices." (p.4). In critical social work research and in this proposed study, FDA can be a useful theoretical framework as well as a way of doing discourse analysis that allows the researcher to rethink assumptions about social

reality and current practices of social change, exploring the power relations and power effects embedded in different discourses (Garrity, 2010; Powers, 2007).

Chapter 4: Findings

Six central themes that intersect to show how the discursive constructions of self-esteem allow it to become a powerful social norm were found using Foucauldian discourse analysis while doing textual analysis of the manual “*En route to rebuilding self-esteem*”: *A manual for facilitators*. The key findings are as follows:

Self-esteem as legitimatizing the healthy human condition

This manual, designed to be 127 pages long and which includes the content and exercises to conduct eight two-hour workshops, includes in the beginning a lengthy portion on the rationale and theories behind the concept of self-esteem, as to be understood in the health and mental health sector. Here, the understanding of self-esteem starts to emerge, as something that legitimizes what is a healthy human: what constitutes a healthy mind and body? The manual’s beginning section starts by answering some of these questions in relating it to how self-evaluation, the processes of how one is to look at himself or herself, is a crucial indicator of any kind of meaningful self-understanding:

Self-evaluation is crucial to mental and social well-being. It influences personal goals, aspirations and interaction with others. There is an unhealthy cycle in which poor self-esteem will lead to mental health problems which subsequently will further worsen self-esteem (2014, p.2)

Furthermore, the manual defines the term self-esteem both in its practical application and its theoretical understanding in the following:

Self-esteem is the evaluative and affective dimension of the self-concept, and is considered as equivalent to self-regard, self-estimation and self-worth. It refers to a person’s global appraisal of his/her positive or negative value, based on the scores a person gives him/herself in different roles and domains of life. Other definitions includes our attitudes to ourselves – how happy we are with the type of person we are, our confidence in our own abilities, how we see ourselves in our community and society – how we compare ourselves to others, and connect with those around us. (2014, p.2).

The manual draws from positivist, scientific knowledge that has been researched and published in the academic disciplines of psychiatry and psychology which indicates that self-esteem is a tangible “thing”, something not fluid or hidden in the layers between human consciousness and sub-consciousness, but a material and fixed object that can be extracted from the mind when asking individuals to score on themselves. In this way, self-esteem becomes a researchable object that could be effectively measured by self-reporting, tested and verified by scaling, and is seen as having far reaching consequences such as affecting personal goals and social relationships that can be enhanced or undermined by one’s level of self-esteem.

The manual’s given explanation of self-esteem also draws a clear line between what are considered positive and negative values in human characteristics and personality, and illuminates from this explanation the underlying assumption that human individuals can clearly distinguish and articulate which are their negative and positive values based on how they see themselves operating in different categories of life.

The manual’s definition of self-esteem links numerous links between having positive (high levels) of self-esteem and the human mind and body being healthy and oriented towards a generalized vision of success. This linkage has been reinforced in the manual’s definition of what is high self-esteem:

What is high self-esteem – we are comfortable with who we are. People with high-self-esteem often have the confidence to influence decisions, to express their individuality and to find success in life (2014, p.2)

The connection between high self-esteem and being content with “who we are” was explicitly mentioned both in the above definition and in other portions of the manual where positive self-esteem was discussed. Self-esteem seems to be inherently tied to the overall health and wellness of the human body and mind, but this definition also points to the interesting aspect of functionality of the human recognized as an individual. It seems that high levels of self-esteem not only make us

have a positive acknowledgement to ourselves, it guarantees more control and agency towards our lives because of the correlation it has with the generalizing promises that high self-esteem brings, without locating them in any specific domains or current and historical lived experiences. It is from here that the image of what is a life that is desirable and healthy is defined: it includes having the confidence to believe that one has control, the power to express their individuality, and the ability to find success in life. Achieving self-esteem has been conceptualized as a pre-condition for all these traits that have been discursively constructed as desirable and achievable by working on the self.

Low-esteem as transgression of the model citizen

The manual's explanation for low self-esteem connects the phenomenon with an overall "negative opinion" of oneself, where one judges and evaluates themselves on a negative level and sees little worth and value in themselves as a person. Someone who is with low self-esteem is characterized as thinking and behaving in an number of ways that is suggesting they deviate from the norm of what is considered a healthy person with positive levels of self-esteem. The manual outlines what facilitators of the workshop should be specifically looking for in their participants:

People with low self-esteem probably:

1. Say a lot of negative things about themselves, criticize themselves, their actions, or joke about themselves in a negative way.
2. Not recognize their positive qualities or compliments given to them.
3. Focus on what they did not do or the mistakes they made.
4. Often feel sad, depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed, frustrated, and angry.
5. Have difficulty speaking up for themselves and their needs, avoid challenges and opportunities or be overly aggressive in their interactions with others (2014, p.4)

Low self-esteem is framed as being problematic and something inside ourselves that does harm to us rather than good. Using high versus low, positive versus negative self-esteem as a powerful binary in the discourse of self-esteem, a distinction between the kinds of citizen we should aspire to become, and what kind of selfhoods we should carefully avoid due to its

transgressive nature has been constructed. Having a negative way of viewing and understanding oneself, as the manual emphasizes, goes beyond just the study of the individual. It is also strongly related to how the individual relates to society as the next portion of the manual outlines:

Impacts of the person's life:

1. Affect performance at work or at school
2. Less likely to stand up for themselves or protect themselves from being bullied, criticized, or abused by their partners or family members.
3. Avoid activities where they could be judged or evaluated in some way, such as competitive sports, dancing, art/craft classes or participating in any type of competition or exhibition.
4. Might drink excessive amounts of alcohol or abuse drugs
5. Not bother to dress neatly, wear clean clothes, style their hair or buy new clothes (2014, p.4-5).

From analyzing the characteristics of people with low self-esteem to looking at the impacts on the person's life, there appears to be a deliberate expansion into the social and economic realms of the consequences of low self-esteem. There is the connection of the citizen not being able to achieve their production benchmarks whether academically or in the workplace. Self-esteem's protective factor as a way to cope with life's barriers and challenges acts as a subtext which runs through self-esteem discourse – these discursive constructions frame the person with low self-esteem as unable to successfully adjust and live within a neoliberal and capitalist environment, where the neoliberal virtues of productivity, independence, and rationality are understood in the context of this manual to be skill sets not fully appreciated and learned by the workshop's target audience. Similarly, while understood in the concept of self-care, people with low self-esteem also do not adhere to the capitalist way of living, through constant consumption of material goods as well as identity and image building. There is also a real fear that the transgressive citizen, due to their predisposition of having negative self-esteem, will engage in activities that are destructive to the self as well as to societal well-being:

Self-esteem is not only seen as basic feature of mental health, but also as a protective factor that contributes to a better health and positive social behaviour through its role as a buffer

against the impact of negative influences. It is seen to actively promote healthy functioning as reflected in life aspects such as achievements, success, satisfaction, and the ability to cope with life stresses and chronic diseases. Unstable self-concept and poor self-esteem can play a critical role in the development of an array of mental disorders and social problems, such as depression, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, anxiety, violence, substance abuse and high-risk behaviors. These conditions not only result in high degree of personal suffering, but also impose a considerable burden on society (2014, p.4).

Here, self-esteem seems to provide a kind of freedom from multitude of society's ills, where empowerment in the form of positive self-esteem can achieve personal goals of success and satisfaction that is in accordance with the knowledge base of positive psychology where a positive evaluation can lead to individuals achieving the maximum degree of self-actualization, but also goes on to produce an ideal citizen of the state, someone who experiences growth and can successfully avoid personal problems that includes in them an element of the social, since they are constructed as burdensome in the imagined community. We can see how low self-esteem in this case, is no longer a personal issue to be worked on privately, but a transgression with consequences that threaten the well-being and stability of society.

Self-esteem, achievement as responsibility

The manual outlines the overall goal of the workshop as a way to foster growth through psycho-education and engage participants in exercises and activities that can coincide with supportive counselling to achieve a "healthy self-esteem" (2014, p.11). The objectives of the workshop are as follows:

Healthy self-esteem is thinking about ourselves and our worth in a balanced way, the objectives of the workshop are:

1. To develop a balanced view of the "self" by recognizing, acknowledging, and celebrating our strengths and successes, as well as recognizing and accepting our weaknesses.
2. To make decisions about whether or not to improve the weaknesses.
3. To identify negative core beliefs and unhelpful rules and assumptions (cognitive distortions)
4. To adjust unhelpful rules and assumptions by disputing them and developing realistic expectations and positive beliefs

5. To develop balanced self-evaluations
6. To engage in helpful behaviours
7. To develop mutual support among participants (2014, p.15).

The manual's outlined objectives see healthy self-esteem as something that can be achieved from within. What is important about this change that the individual must undergo is that through the exercises and activities that the manual outlines, the participants should arrive at a decision to want to improve their self-esteem and decide for themselves that they want the change to happen. In the manual's stated objectives, the theme of individual responsibility surfaced even though it was not made explicit. It was assumed that through learning about the rationale of how to enhance one's self-esteem and self-evaluate it correctly, the self would become better and this objective improvement will be detectable and measurable. The objectives send confusing and at times contradictory messages, such as the first objective which points to a balanced way of viewing the self that involves recognizing and accepting weaknesses, but the second objective posits that the individual as already having the control and agency to improve on their weaknesses. Behind the imperative to obtain self-esteem is a moral and ethical code to living – one can take up acquiring higher levels of self-esteem only if one chooses to change, as it is a display of our own request and agency to become better. This request of changing the self, from the self is supported by other messages from the manual:

Recovery goals of this workshop includes:

1. Finding a new identity which incorporates illness but retains a core, positive sense of self.
2. Building a meaningful life which makes sense of illness, and despite illness, one can be engaged in life and involved in the community.
3. Find, maintain and repair hope: believing in oneself and having a sense of being able to accomplish things, being optimistic about the future.
4. To take responsibility and control: feeling in control of one's illness and in control of life (2014, p.15).

The recovery goals outlined by this manual suggests that self-esteem is linked to mental illness recovery in a manner that building a meaningful life can be only be achieved if one chooses to

work on building a positive sense of self that links their personal recovery goals and desires to the kind of life outlined as worth pursuing by the existing social order. One can be engaged in their life, their community, and feel optimistic of their place in the future if the personal goals and social goals can align and form a harmonious partnership where one becomes an expert on managing their illness and their outlook on life. In order to take responsibility as an individual and also as a citizen, the path is to work on improving their self-esteem.

Self-esteem as consumerism

The manual devotes an entire session that is titled “Look Good, Feel Better” (2014, p.98) drawing an explicit link of the relationship between positive self-esteem and one’s appearance:

Your appearance is one situation factor you can generally control. While there is no one-and-only way to look, “authentic”, “appropriate”, “attractive” and “affordable” are key words to dress by. While it is important to like what you wear and the way you look, it is more important to understand why or why not and specifically how this affects you, others, and your life and the achievement of your goals (2014, p.97).

A link is made between one’s physical appearance and their traits that are suggested to also have the ability to be empirically measured. Markers of dressing well as outlined by the manual such as authenticity, appropriateness, attractiveness and affordability are set to be benchmarks of a consumerism that is deliberately disciplined and regulated through outlining the consequences of failing to consume as so:

Your appearance is the one personal characteristic that is immediately obvious and accessible to others. You can’t hide it. Your appearance makes a strong statement about your personality, values, attitudes, interests, knowledge, abilities, roles, and goals. You are able to create a positive impression, decrease barriers between you and others because of unattractive, inappropriate, distracting, or offensive appearance (2016, p.97).

The rationale of this session explains how if one can control their outer appearance through purchasing personal items, one can control the way they feel about themselves and any external situation they are in:

A positive personal appearance is a fast, effective way to boost self-confidence and overcome anxiety regarding ability or acceptance. When you appear attractively dressed and groomed, personally authentic, and appropriate for the occasion, you feel more comfortable, confident, capable, cooperative and productive. You will feel less awkward, insecure, submissive, out-of-place, or out-of-order (2014, p.97).

Consequently, how participants may feel in any given time due to their appearance can influence and direct the way they behave:

A positive personal appearance is one of the most effective ways to improve behavior and enhance performance level or productivity. When you appear attractively dressed and groomed, personally authentic, and appropriate for the occasion, you act more at ease, mannerly, competent, and naturally able to do your best. You will not act defensive, defiant, arrogant, affected, superior, or conceited (2014, p.97).

The above explanations outline the session's purpose; it communicates that one's outer appearance can unshackle positive character traits that previously were hidden under what is considered to be inappropriate appearance choices. The idea of individual freedom in the form of choice runs through the entire session plan, as physical appearance, grooming and dressing are all individual decisions determined by their personal taste and level of understanding about self-esteem knowledge. The way the manual frames concepts of authentically and having a more genuine personality as part of the discovery of a better self that is supposed to arrive with the building up of positive self-esteem suggests that their current states of being is seen as an unauthentic, inappropriate of being and carrying oneself in the world. The real self, the ideal self who is already known as equipped with positive self-esteem, positive self-confidence is supposed to combat the 'false self' in a battle whose outcome can be decided if the participants choose to purchase certain items and consume in disciplined, particular ways.

This push of participants towards fulfilling a certain idealized version of themselves through purchasing material items is argued by Feher (2014) as a key tenet of neoliberal aspirations where individuals are caught between a constructed polarization between self-loathing and self-appreciation. Looking your "best" does not mean workshop participants are given free

rein to present themselves however they want; rather, there are particular benchmarks to what constitute as “attractively dressed and groomed” (2014, p.97). As the workshop content suggests, enhancing personal appearance also enhances productivity and the overall competency of a person. An ideological link is made to how a person can best be utilized in a neoliberal and capitalist society where self-esteem in the format of outer appearance gives someone “credit”. In the neoliberal era, this individualized sense of human capital in the form of personal credit is intricately connected to self-esteem, where it belongs to the broader category of measuring the desirability of an individual (Feher, 2014; Greco, 2009).

Self-esteem as mastery

The manual extensively uses cognitive behavioural therapy within its workshop exercises with the rationale that changing cognitive thinking patterns will result in different behavioural outcomes, as well as develop a more positive way of looking at and understanding the self which makes developing higher levels of self-esteem possible. In particular, the manual contains portions devoted to changing what it names “distorted thoughts” which suggests a certain mastery over individual’s thoughts could then change the environment’s influences on the individual:

Often what provoke our negative self-evaluations are not external events themselves, but how we think about those events. If we can change how we think, we can change how we feel about ourselves and how we act in those situations (2014, p.63)

In this framing of self-esteem, its connection to benefiting the individual is no longer bound to something as simply feeling good about oneself, but relates to acquiring a certain mastery of the self that promises to completely control external events by evaluating its impact on the self in a very specific and disciplined way. For the last session of the self-esteem workshop, participants received a list of advice for increasing self-esteem that they were to take home with them and practice. They emphasize that thinking about oneself positively, despite whatever one’s environment bring them, is already half the battle in the building of high self-esteem:

1. Do activities that you enjoy.
2. Spend time with positive, supportive people.
3. Be helpful and considerate to others.
4. Try not to compare yourself to other people.
5. Try to do regular exercise, eat healthily and get enough sleep.
6. Be assertive – don't let people treat you with a lack of respect.
7. Use self-help books and websites to develop helpful skills, like assertiveness or mindfulness.
8. Learn to challenge your negative beliefs.
9. Acknowledge your positive qualities and things you are good at.
10. Get into the habit of thinking and saying positive things about yourself (2014, p.107).

The manual stresses the importance of warding off and learning to not look at events negatively, as it warns of consequences that would come if one does not vow to take this kind of training of the self on:

Cognitive distortions are thoughts that are automatic and we are unconsciously aware of, and cause us to perceive reality in a negative way when we are judging people and issues. These thought reactions and “thinking traps” came from our habitual thinking processes. If we don't change the patterns of our thought reaction, then we cannot walk out of these “thinking traps”, and may never get rid of the overall negative outlook on life (2014, p.63).

In this explanation of cognitive distortions and its consequences, the distinction between high and low self-esteem is becoming increasingly reified within discursive construction. These concepts of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ thoughts, through their repetition on paper and explanation grounded in psychological research, appear to be accepted in the manual as self-evident and transcendental humanist experiences, legitimized by various ways of measuring the degree that individuals are involved in “thinking traps” using models such as cognitive-behavioural therapy. Negative outlook on life is framed as something completely influenced by thinking attachments that comes from within; the human cognition is seen to be separated from society or any external forces as the focus becomes increasingly self-directed and individualistic.

Self-esteem as break with tradition

This manual was designed with East and Southeast Asian participants in mind, and it uses many cultural competency and culture-bridging techniques within its exercises, including getting workshop participants to reflect on their Asian heritage and upbringing and how that may have hindered their growth of positive self-esteem. This is portrayed in the manual's explanation of the origins of negative self-esteem:

Although it is not possible to identify one cause of low self-esteem for everyone, the strongest influence on self-esteem is our family, particularly when children are very young. We form our beliefs about ourselves over a long period of time and this process is likely to be affected by a range of different things. Early years development is crucial, and parents' self-esteem has a significant influence on their children's self-esteem (2014, p.3).

The manual goes on to emphasize a variety of East-West differences through its exercises, such as the differences between individualist and collective cultures and parenting characteristics that emphasize a child's emotional well-being or academic achievements that can lead to different developments of self-esteem. The emphasis of bringing out the "new self" as well as saying goodbye to the old self is a dominant theme throughout the manual, as the last workshop is titled "Celebrating the new self" (2014, p.105).

Self-esteem in this context is discursively constructed to signal a break of tradition and past culture of viewing and understanding the self, as emphasized by idea that self-esteem achievement is a value that is out of sync with Asian cultures:

Some traditional standards were passed down from our cultural background and become fixed in our thinking, but these rigid cultural standards are not necessarily useful in our current lifestyles. If we insist on using the tradition values in our present lives, we will create a lot trouble and worry for ourselves and others (2014, p. 109).

In this excerpt from the manual giving participants advice on how to achieve "positive and energetic thinking", several comparisons are made. Cultural standards are considered to be rigid, where the current lifestyle is constructed to signal a certain type of freedom from that rigidity.

Traditional culture understood in this passage is something monolithic, static, and not a viable option for the modern society. It suggests a tension of the carrying of values seen as “traditional” as a social and psychological burden, as they do not fit with the new, liberated selves that are achieved through the growth of high self-esteem.

The key themes that have been discussed (self-esteem as legitimizing the healthy human condition, low self-esteem as transgression of the model citizen, self-esteem achievement as responsibility, self-esteem as consumerism, self-esteem as mastery, and self-esteem as break with tradition) all intersect to form a concept of what the idealized citizen ought to think and be in a neoliberal society. Notions of individual responsibility, consumerism as authenticity-finding, mastery over one’s life by oneself, rejecting one’s ‘traditional past’ to better embrace the current lifestyle evokes what Cruikshank (1993) calls a “state” of self-esteem, where subjects, through the psycho-education of self-esteem advocated by politicians, social workers, teachers, and other members working in the field of human services, have come to recognize themselves as needing self-esteem to belong to a democratic citizenship, as truly liberated subjects. Indeed, the message of the manual espouses the hope that participants, after participating in the workshop will go on to break free of the shackles of their mental illness and better integrate into society because of their new and more successful sense of self-worth, self-appreciation, self-confidence and self-esteem. The next chapter discusses some of the implications that this self-esteem discourse has for racialized subjectivities, what it does for subjects’ self-knowledge produce and what it constrains.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The “*En-route to rebuilding self-esteem*” workshop manual that was developed by one ethno-specific mental health agency in the Greater Toronto Area included much of the literature that views self-esteem as blending seamlessly with a neoliberal ideological climate. The section below discusses three implications of the findings from the interrogation of the manual: 1) a knowledge base of self-esteem that has been increasingly applied to the normalization and the regulation of the self; 2) a knowledge base of self-esteem where the ideal (and inadequate) construction of the modern citizen emerges; and, 3) a knowledge base of self-esteem which outlines the various ways people can “fail” to reach their full potential by not governing themselves in the correct formats. These are reflected on in the context of the literature.

Self-esteem as technology of the self

Self-esteem has been introduced in the manual as a concept that is self-evident, valid and an individual and complete knowledge base, ready for the participant’s discovery of its value. This concept has been established in the manual as rooted in science, and discovered with the advancement of human progress and the development of fields such as psychology and psychiatry. Ward (1996)’s traces the progress of self-esteem discourse as taking on transhistorical and universal qualities, something that exists throughout human history and not bound to specific historical and material contexts. Self-esteem, like other concepts that claim to be essential truths, has a history that is a social one, where it was deliberately “made and molded our life, our customs, our science” (Ward, 1996, p.1). I argue that the knowledge base of self-esteem takes on an arbitrary and constructed nature, not merely tapping into a truth, a sort of already established order of human nature. Self-esteem discourse acts as both a conceptual and practical technology, with productive and constraining powers that are actively involved in engaging with specialized knowledge of how to be a “self” (Cruikshank, 1993).

Looking at self-esteem discourse and the implications it has on the creation and regulation of selfhood from a Foucauldian analysis signals that techniques in the form of psycho-education and mental health interventions need to also not be separated from an interrogation of the origins and meanings of these techniques (Canguilhem, 1996, p.27). If left uninterrogated, self-esteem as a dominant discourse remains to exist in a dehistoricized and apolitical representation of a social reality (Bannerji, 2011, p.236) that continues to view the techniques and instruments of achieving and measuring self-esteem as nothing more than neutral scientific processes of measuring a truth that already exists in this world. These series of techniques, such as Rosenberg's Global Scale of Self-Esteem and steps to challenge what are constituted as negative thinking, all obscure any kind of critical thinking about self-esteem's epistemological roots and its usefulness as a technology that is concerned with how to live one's life and feel about oneself while living life.

Self-esteem as political and economic imperatives

As findings from data analysis suggests, self-esteem has been conceptualized by mental health and social work workers alike as the go-to solution for most, if not all of human problems encountered in society. Achieving high self-esteem, argued by Cruikshank (1993) has become what she terms "liberation therapy" (p.329). Self-esteem, promised to lead to plenty of personal (you will no longer feel down, or negative) and social (people will enjoy being around you more, more success in work or school) benefits, has established itself as authority in another realm of human life, as a pathway of political self-actualization to proper citizenship. As the data findings suggest, building up one's self-esteem has become something "we owe to society" to lessen the costs of social problems (Cruikshank, 1993, p.329), as the various techniques of achieving self-esteem through reframing negative thinking has become more than just problem-solving for individual issues, but extends to problem solving in the social realm, such as integrating people suffering from mental health illness back into society as adjusted, useful, and happy citizens.

The suggestions offered to the workshop participants and its relation to the rationalization and sustaining of capitalism cannot be ignored. Participants are encouraged not to only ‘think the part’ that promises self-esteem, but also to ‘dress the part’ which translates to ‘buy the part’ that can visibly make sure that one is on the proper path to building higher levels of self-esteem. Participants are encouraged to make purchases of clothing and other items that can improve their personal image, so they not only feel better on the inside, but also pass as “good” in a normative gaze where self-regulation and governing is paramount.

Gibbins and Taylor (2010) use Foucault’s idea of governmentality to look into the construction of “deviant dressers who makes bad choices” (p.42), where the neoliberal investor banishes mismanagement that made them a bad consumer, followed by chances for redemption, of becoming a “good” or enlightened consumer (Feher, 2014). Bannerji (2011) posits that in order for capitalism to grow and keep expanding, it needs to destroy and purge within itself so it can advance. The making of certain consumer items an ethical and moral threat and other items things that can redeem and improve one’s outer and inner qualities can be seen as one of the ways self-esteem discourse works with the capitalist economy to keep consumerism alive and ever-important to the esteem in humans.

The manual’s targeted ideal participants, after experiencing the workshop, ought to have gone through a personal epiphany where they begin to reflect and interpret any problems in their lives – barriers to job, services, interpersonal relationship troubles, etc. as originating from a lack of self-esteem (Vroom, 2015). Self-esteem discourse thus emerges victorious as an intervention not only towards mental health recovery, but also for all forms of recovery since race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability become non-issues under the humanist slogans of “feeling good about oneself”. Structural and systemic barriers that may led to individual troubles in life are obscured from view and not discussed, as well as people’s experiences interacting with the neoliberal and

capitalist society. This normalization of self-esteem as prerequisite to meaningful citizenship intensifies the emphasis on the individual, as a rational and stable being with the agency to improve his or her immediate situation, regardless of the socio-political and economic context that he or she is in. In this way, citizenship has acquired a measurable, definite, and scientific standard that can assess and evaluate which people are decent citizens or deviants (Rose, 1999).

Self-esteem as colonial project

The manual makes references to the participant's tradition as something passed down from cultural background as fixed and rigid thinking, something that is out of tune with Western modern society's advancements, and definitely a barrier in the path of pursuing positive self-esteem. It was suggested to participants that in order to not create "a lot of trouble and worry for ourselves and others" (2014, p. 109), participants should not insist on using their traditional values as it clashes with present life. This idea links back to the desire of being a master of the self, where rational thinking becomes the standard of how one knows they have achieved the necessary control over their thoughts, their behaviours, and their appearances.

A Foucauldian analysis of self-esteem unsettles the idea that discovering one's self-esteem can lead you to become your true self, and shows how through the discourse of self-esteem, the workshop participants have been constituted as subjects of this knowledge base that sets the standards of what is considered a rational and true way of being. Thus, becoming the master of oneself is about how one can be considered as normal or deviant, and how one can fit in with others, or become singled out as abnormal and needing intervention. Foucault (1984)'s critique of this technology of the self was about how the desire to achieve mastery over one's mind and body can be dangerous when it is assumed as part of human nature. The below quotation illustrates the evolution from achieving mastery in order to rule over others toward mastery of the self in order to prove one's humanness and belonging:

You have to be the master of yourself not only in order to rule others, but you have to be the master of yourself because you are a rational being. And in this mastery of yourself, you are related to other people, who are masters of themselves (Foucault, 1984d, p. 358).

The manual's rationale of a binary arrangement between Eastern versus Western differences by equating East with 'tradition' and 'cultural background' (Okazaki, David & Abelmann, 2008), where the West as modern, explained by its presence in the lives of the participants as 'current lifestyles' pits two value concepts directly against one another. Park (2005) discusses how when culture as a conceptual framework is talked about with an imaged neutrality or objectivity, then culture as a nexus of power relations that is actively involved in constituting and maintaining dominant discourses remain hidden. Park (2005) describes how it becomes problematic when culture is spoken and rationalized as a sole characteristic of an individual or a group of people, where it is understood as a totalizing and monolithic experience:

Culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference, comparison and differentiation, unity and diversity, cohesion and dispersion, containment and subversion (Young, 1995, quoted in Park, 2005, p.22).

Similarly, Bannerji (2011) posits that when the concept of 'tradition' and 'modern' becomes thought of as an unchangeable nature, as antithesis of each other that shares fundamental differences on how humans ought to live their lives, they become used as ideological weapons for which the superiorization of one group over another is legitimized:

As conceptual categories, then, tradition and modernity are cultural and not social or historical. In fact they are value categories, categories of moral/cultural/aesthetic judgement. This is what implicates them – as categories or a composite of paradigm – into relations of ruling, of capital, class, colonialism and imperialism. Depending on the political standpoint, 'tradition' or 'modernity' becomes the value of choice. Neither reveals their historicity as concepts, and both rest on the social relations and principles of property, class, colonialism and imperialism (Bannerji, 2011, p.237).

Ironically, life barriers as suggested in the manual do not touch on race, ethnicity, or any cultural references that Asian populations in particular face in Canada. In fact, the sole roots of the

problem to all the participants are demonstrated as due to them having low self-esteem. The only time “our cultural background” factors into the building of self-esteem as a weakness that needed to be identified as so and purged is when it gets into the way of acquiring more self-esteem due to its apparent rigid characteristics and nature of antiquity . The paradox that lies within the psycho-education attempts at building up the self-esteem of racialized populations suggests a colonial framework where Asian immigrants are seen as already connected to a certain kind of deficit cultural essentialism captured as ‘traditions that should be broken’. The suggestion that modern, currently lifestyles in which knowledge about self-esteem that should be highly valued and desired clashes with the cultural backgrounds of the workshop participants further legitimizes the establishment of an “essential difference between these antithetical spaces of the West and the East – zones of irreducible otherness” (Bannerji, 2011, p.242) within the empirical human sciences of self-esteem, rationality, and positive psychology. Members born from Asian countries that immigrated Canada and face various socio-economic barriers as well as systemic discrimination are conceptualized as not fitting in with a Western sense of the self due to their inherent and transhistorical identities with traditional culture, where the true self that could be thriving is hidden through what is understood to be a negative level of self-esteem. One only need the correct training, and to exert notions of such as empowerment and self-care on herself or himself to achieve becoming a valued member of society, also becoming a modernized citizen in the meantime.

The manual stresses in its ground rules section that every participant has a “unique lived experience” (2014, p. 22) and that there are various differences within everyone so there is no one way to have positive self-esteem. Thus the workshop contents emphasize diversity within Asian culture that includes different historical development, customs, literature, music, etc. However, Asian culture becomes ideologically viewed as monolithic and totalizing as an untroubled

knowledge base in order for self-esteem to be taught, and for workshop participants to learn to break out of their traditional past so they can better attain self-esteem. The multitude of differences within ‘Asian culture’ in its content does not challenge the production of epistemological knowledge of the Eastern world as a rigid, fixed, and ultimately “traditional” space. It is precisely the holding of this contradiction where self-esteem discourse can be ideologically unified as socially diverse (Bannerji, 2011) that concepts such as diversity, and skill sets such as cultural competence and cultural sensitivity can be allowed to thrive while discursively maintaining white supremacy. Workshop participants could only learn and understand themselves through participating in the self-knowledge that they are different from the West, where self-esteem both polarizes and reifies these grand truths about the different parts of the world producing different kind of inner selves – argued by Nandy (1983) to be a crucial operational aspect of the productive effects of colonialism:

This colonization colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds (Nandy, 1983, xi)

In this construction of the human self, self-esteem discourse is ultimately colonial in its formulation and assumptions about human nature as it is framed as a psychological necessity, a way to achieving self-love, self-acceptance and having knowledge about the self. This necessity to understand the self first requires racialized subjects to recognize the inherent irreconcilability of difference. Having self-esteem discourse divorced from its neoliberal and capitalist context, it is romanticized as the Western world and the emergence of the modern individual that gave birth to the self, where Others can only be increasingly brought toward understanding the self if one chooses to discard his or her ‘otherness’ and become true masters of themselves through the achievement of self-esteem.

Conclusion

This research is inevitably incomplete and context-specific to the manual being analyzed, and by the ideas advocated by Foucault and other poststructuralist scholars who used concepts of governmentality, biopower, and technologies of the self to demonstrate how self-esteem has been taken up as a dominant discourse. Nonetheless, this research has addressed a gap within the literature utilizing a Foucauldian framework to critique self-esteem; namely, the connection between self-esteem as a human services intervention to help racialized populations and its relationship to postcolonial ideas of human development.

Self-esteem originating from a single entry clustered with other terms while discussing thinking about the self from William James in 1890, to its development of massive and intricate project of self-knowledge has been a recent invention and coincided with the emergence of neoliberal capitalism (Vroom 2015; Feher, 2014; Lemke, 2005; Ward, 1996). As a dominant discourse widely used and circulated in current mental health and social worker interventions, it has the ability to regulate selfhood in a way that determines if one is a good enough citizen or not, if one is a good enough consumer or not, and if one is a good enough “Other” or not. Cruikshank (1993) comments that this new form of governance cannot be critically assessed if one is to continue with the binaries of which the self-esteem discourse as constructed for us, such as individual versus collectivity, East versus Western differences, negative thinking versus positive, authentic versus the false self. Social workers working on developing interventions for marginalized and racialized populations may reflect on how these techniques supposedly dedicated to fostering empowerment and self-reliance involves viewing others in a particular way, a way of viewing others that is decidedly “Othering”. My research proposes a different approach to conceptualizing our relationship with self-esteem as engaging not in something that is neutral and self-evident, but a dominant discourse supported and upheld by its interlocking nature with other

power relations such as colonialism and consumerism. I ask the question to social workers when formulating interventions to work with racialized communities often with the emphasis of successful integration, how do we recognize the Other in all their complexity and humanity? The kinds of governing techniques social workers take up without challenging its values and meanings behind the techniques has a profound effect on the human beings we come into contact with and kind of knowledges that become reproduced and upheld as self-evident truths.

I end with arguing that social work scholars cannot simply rest on critiquing the *content* within the realm of discourse as if the political project is just to find wrongdoings in established rationale and science, concerning oneself only with false or contradictory accounts, harmful representations and distorting stereotypes of marginalized populations and suggesting that once injustices are fixed, the modality and its internal logic can be assured to be good again (Foucault, 1984d, Lemke, 2002; Bannerji, 2011). Rather, one must attempt to expose the sinister naturalizations constituted and reconstituted in the ontological and epistemological knowledge of the self that shapes human growth as a singular, individual experience and violently separates them from any meaningful interrogation of historical and current neoliberal and capitalist advancements.

For practitioners to utilize the practices and techniques of this discourse to adapt self-esteem to various cultures does nothing to unsettle and examine the discursive construction itself. One would need to interrogate how self-esteem has been widely produced and reproduced as a legitimate knowledge base that organizes the way racialized populations come to understand themselves as well as what unequal power relations, such as racism and imperialism stay hidden. Social work practitioners and scholars can critically reflect on even “progressive” and diversity-oriented works of self-esteem education as intervention, to look at what kind of self-evident truths they reinforce and sustain as unquestionable. This paper has attempted to outline some of the governing practices that “cuts across symbolic systems” (Foucault, 1984d, p.369) into the material

and everyday intervention practices by illustrating how a self-esteem workshop manual reflect the ideological underpinnings that continues to fuel the superiority of a particular image of the self that sustains Western superiority based on binary constructions.

I invite social workers using self-esteem pedagogy to investigate what becomes essentialized and naturalized in their practices that are reflective of a discourse of self-esteem, and to identify the harmful effects of its rationality. An intervention that seeks to evaluate and modify the self does not have to start with what constitutes an ideal self as if it was a transcendental truth – we can instead work to assess the gaps and contradictions of this discursive construction and ask how one becomes subjected to self-governance under the discourse of self-esteem.

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Appendix

Form TD1: Thesis/Dissertation Research Submission

(Please print clearly or type)

Students must complete the top portion of this form and deliver it along with copies of completed appropriate documents (as indicated below) to their program office.



Student Heidi Zhang ID# 212681987

Program Master of Social Work Degree MSW Date Jan. 18, 2016

Title of Research Proposal The birth of a well-adjusted individual: Self-esteem discourse and its implications on bodies of color

Type of research	Documents to submit
Please check one:	Program will forward the following to FGS, 283 York Lanes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No human participants →	<input type="checkbox"/> TD1 form <input type="checkbox"/> Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> TD 4 form (if involves animals or biohazards) + HPRC Approval Certificate
<input type="checkbox"/> Human participants, minimum risk, with written consent → <input type="checkbox"/> Human participants, minimum risk, with verbal consent	<input type="checkbox"/> TD1 form <input type="checkbox"/> Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> TD2 form (original + 1 copy) <input type="checkbox"/> Informed consent documents (written or verbal script) (original + 1 copy) <input type="checkbox"/> TD3 form <input type="checkbox"/> TCPS Tutorial Certificate dated within last 2 years
<input type="checkbox"/> Human participants, funded by faculty research grant →	<input type="checkbox"/> TD1 form <input type="checkbox"/> TD4 form + HPRC Approval Certificate <input type="checkbox"/> Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> TCPS Tutorial Certificate dated within last 2 years
<input type="checkbox"/> High risk or funded →	<input type="checkbox"/> TD1 form <input type="checkbox"/> Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> Completed appropriate HPRC package plus 6 copies (submit to FGS for forwarding to HPRC) <input type="checkbox"/> TCPS Tutorial Certificate dated within last 2 years

- TD1 = Thesis/Dissertation Research Submission Form
- TD2 = York University Graduate Student Human Participants Research Protocol Form
- TD3 = Informed Consent Document Checklist
- TD4 = Statement of Relationship between Proposal and an Existing HPRC Approved Project

Graduate Program Director Recommendation:

I recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies approval of the proposal for the above student. The Supervisory Committee has reviewed the Research Proposal and has recommended it be submitted for approval.

Supervisory Committee <i>(Please print/type) (If additional members are on the committee, please attach listing)</i>	Member of York Graduate Program in <i>(list program relevant to this supervision; See FGS Appointment list www.yorku.ca/grads/fmr.htm)</i>	Date	Supervisory Committee Approval <i>(Please sign or attach e-mail indicating approval of proposal)</i>
Supervisor:			
Member:			
Member:			
Member:			

A TCPS tutorial certificate dated within the past 2 years must be attached.

Graduate Program Director Signature

Date

Associate Dean, FGS Signature

Date

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Heidi Zhang

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

Date of Issue: 4 October, 2015