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## TARGET ARTICLE

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### Toward a Conceptualization of Optimal Self-Esteem

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*In this article, I present a theoretical perspective on the nature of “optimal” self-esteem. One of my major goals is to show that optimal and high self-esteem are different from each other. High self-esteem can be fragile or secure depending upon the extent to which it is defensive or genuine, contingent or true, unstable or stable, and discrepant or congruent with implicit (nonconscious) feelings of self-worth. Optimal self-esteem is characterized by qualities associated with genuine, true, stable, and congruent (with implicit self-esteem) high self-esteem. A second major goal is to present a conceptualization of the construct of authenticity. I propose that authenticity as an individual difference construct may be particularly important in delineating the adaptive features of optimal self-esteem. Authenticity can be characterized as the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise. I argue that authenticity has 4 components: awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational. Initial data pertaining to these components are highly encouraging. Finally, I discuss some implications of the fragile versus secure high self-esteem distinction for narcissism, defensive processing models, and cross-cultural self-esteem perspectives.*

Self-esteem is an important psychological construct because it is a central component of individuals’ daily experience; it refers to the way that people feel about themselves, which reflects and affects their ongoing transactions with their environment and the people they encounter in it. Often, the role of self-esteem is framed in dichotomous terms: Do people feel that they are worthy, “good” individuals deserving of respect and liking (i.e., do they have high self-esteem), or do they feel that they are unworthy, “bad” individuals deserving of scorn, pity, and contempt (i.e., do they have low self-esteem)? However, despite the simplicity and elegance of this powerful dichotomy, multiple controversies exist concerning its accuracy. One such controversy revolves around whether low self-esteem individuals truly loathe themselves or are they better characterized as confused, uncertain, and ambivalent? A second controversy revolves around whether possessing high self-esteem is unequivocally desirable or if it has a “downside.” Related to this is whether high self-esteem individuals are of necessity defensive and self-serving, that is, must they actively counterattack potential threats to maintain their high self-esteem?

In this article, I present a theoretical perspective on the nature of “optimal” self-esteem. One of my major goals is to show that optimal and high self-esteem are

different from each other. A second major goal is to present a conceptualization of the construct of authenticity and to describe several of its central components. I address each of the aforementioned controversies with an eye toward how it relates to the distinction between optimal and high self-esteem. Before I present the heart of my arguments, I briefly address the controversy concerning low self-esteem.

#### What Does It Mean to Have Low Self-Esteem?

Until recently, it seemed self-evident that low self-esteem individuals could be accurately characterized as genuinely unhappy and dissatisfied with themselves. However, an important article by Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) suggested otherwise. Namely, these authors suggested that rather than having an intense dislike for themselves, low self-esteem individuals are uncertain and confused individuals whose self-feelings are predominantly neutral. They based this assertion on data from many studies suggesting that low self-esteem individuals typically give responses on self-esteem inventories that hover around the midpoint of response scales (which therefore on average seemed to reflect neutral self-feelings). Very

few low self-esteem individuals in these studies consistently endorsed statements reflecting clear dislike or dissatisfaction with themselves.

Moreover, other influential research has shown that low self-esteem individuals possess low *self-concept clarity* (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996), that is, that their self-concepts lack internal consistency and temporal stability and are held with little confidence. Still other important work has shown that low self-esteem individuals have “pockets” of favorable self-judgments (Pelham, 1991), which seems to contradict the notion that a core characteristic of low self-esteem is the belief that one lacks any redeeming qualities.

Despite the appeal of casting the self-feelings of low self-esteem individuals in neutral terms, this view stands in contrast to long-standing findings linking low self-esteem to depression and suicidal tendencies, especially among children and adolescents (Harter, 1993). Moreover, it seems to contradict clinical observations that cast the therapeutic setting as one in which issues of poor self-worth and negative self-concepts predominate (Mruk, 1999). In the extreme, adopting the “neutral” low self-esteem argument runs the risk of relegating “true” low self-esteem to a few mentally ill individuals not part of the general population (cf. Baumeister et al., 1989).

How then, is the controversy to be resolved? One possibility is to argue that given a person’s general tendencies to present him or herself in positive ways, midpoint or neutral responses on self-esteem scales reflect greater self-feeling negativity than their literal meaning suggests (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999). In other words, self-presentational concerns may temper the negativity of low self-esteem individuals’ public responses but not their actual personal feelings of self-worth. To the extent that this is true, perhaps obtaining more implicit responses that are less affected by self-presentational concerns would yield greater evidence of negative self-feelings. Another possibility is to accept participants’ responses at face value, which suggests that most people in the general population have “medium” to high self-esteem and that only a small minority of individuals can be characterized as truly having low self-esteem. Other potential explanations may also exist. In my estimation, available data do not allow for a definitive resolution of this controversy. However, whether one refers to low self-esteem individuals as having “low” or “medium” self-esteem is a matter of degree rather than of kind. I suggest, therefore, that this controversy does not pose a fundamental challenge to the nature of low self-esteem per se. Take, for example, the uncertainty and self-concept confusion currently identified with low self-esteem individuals whose self-esteem scores are in the medium range. For

these findings to pose a fundamental challenge to how we characterize low self-esteem, they should disappear (rather than be more evident) among more extremely low self-esteem individuals. However, I am unaware of any data currently available that supports such a supposition. At the same time, I acknowledge that this brief discussion does not fully do justice to the richness and complexity surrounding the nature of low self-esteem and its role in adjustment and psychological functioning.

### **What Does It Mean to Have High Self-Esteem?**

In my view, the controversy concerning high self-esteem does pose a fundamental challenge to the nature of high self-esteem. At its core, the controversy surrounding high self-esteem involves whether it is a “good” quality to possess. Good has several connotations in this context. First, is high self-esteem invariably good for the individual? Does the possession of high self-esteem confer benefits to the individual such as affective and psychological well-being and adaptive behavioral functioning? Second, is high self-esteem good for persons who make up the individual’s “psychological field” (Lewin, 1951) and to the greater society? As we will see, although answers exist to these questions, they are not simple ones. Two factors contribute to this state of affairs. First, as I hope to show in this article, multiple forms of high self-esteem exist, some better than others. Second, self-esteem does not exist in a vacuum; it coexists within a larger psychological system that includes personality traits and characteristics, affective predispositions, motivational tendencies, and cognitive processing modes that inform, enrich, and potentially contradict the influence of self-esteem.

Most contemporary theorists conceptualize high self-esteem as global feelings of self-liking, self-worth, respect, and acceptance (e.g., Brown, 1993; Rosenberg, 1965). This conceptualization has the advantage of anchoring self-esteem to feelings about the self as a whole, not to evaluations of one’s various characteristics or specific qualities (which I and others call self-evaluations). Considerable research supports maintaining a distinction between global self-esteem and specific self-evaluations (for a review, see Brown, 1993). Although specific self-evaluations are predictive of global self-esteem, particularly if they are central to a person’s self-definition (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993, Study 2; Pelham, 1995), combining specific self-evaluations into a summary score (with or without weighting for importance or centrality) cannot substitute for global self-esteem or even serve as its proxy. For one thing, using specific self-evaluations to predict global self-esteem leaves

unaccounted substantial self-esteem variance (approximately 50% in some cases; see Pelham, 1995). For another, specific self-evaluations are more closely related to cognitive than to affective reactions to performance outcomes, whereas the reverse is true for global self-esteem (Dutton & Brown, 1997). Some have taken findings such as these to suggest that whereas self-esteem is ultimately grounded in affective processes, specific self-evaluations are more firmly grounded in cognitive processes (see Brown, 1993). Although I basically agree with this characterization, I am not suggesting that specific self-evaluations and global self-esteem are completely independent of each other. As James (1890/1950) described more than 100 years ago and as recent research has shown (e.g., Kernis et al., 1993, Study 2; Pelham, 1995), specific self-evaluations are more closely related to global self-esteem if the self-evaluative dimension is important rather than unimportant to an individual. In fact, as I describe shortly, individual differences exist in the extent to which people hold specific self-evaluative dimensions to be important determinants of their global self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995).

My view is that global self-esteem is best understood as an affective construct consisting of self-related emotions tied to worthiness, value, likeableness, and acceptance (see also Brown, 1993). Fundamentally, these are self-directed emotions that may or may not be reflected in others' sentiments toward the self. Furthermore, this constellation of emotions can reflect notions of superiority or deservingness, or it can reflect a sense of "being at peace" with oneself. However, I am getting ahead of myself here. I begin by noting that two broad perspectives exist on the nature of high self-esteem, one that portrays high self-esteem as fragile, and the other that portrays high self-esteem as secure. It is this distinction that forms the crux of my assertion that some forms of high self-esteem are "better" than others.

### **Fragile High Self-Esteem**

High self-esteem may reflect positive feelings of self-worth that nonetheless are fragile and vulnerable to a threat, as they are associated with many different types of self-protective or self-enhancement strategies (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Horney, 1950; Kernis & Paradise, 2002). This view of high self-esteem has, perhaps unwittingly, been portrayed extensively in the social and personality psychology literatures. For example, researchers have shown that high self-esteem individuals may take great pride in their successes ("I am brilliant"), yet deny involvement in their failures ("That test was stupid") (Fitch, 1970); derogate individuals who pose threats to their (or their

group's) sense of value and worth (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987); and create obstacles to successful performance so that their competencies will seem especially noteworthy should they subsequently succeed anyway (Tice, 1991). Also, high self-esteem individuals whose egos have been threatened engage in maladaptive self-regulatory processes (e.g., taking excessive risks by overestimating their competency), which result in unnecessary performance declines (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993).

One implication of these and related findings is that high self-esteem individuals are especially caught up in how they feel about themselves and will take a variety of measures to bolster, maintain, and enhance these self-feelings. In fact, Baumeister and colleagues (1989) suggested that a core component of high self-esteem is the adoption of an aggressively self-enhancing presentational style that includes self-aggrandizing and self-promotion. Importantly, Tennen and Affleck (1993) noted that routine use of these strategies is likely to backfire by undermining individuals' personal relationships and the development of skills needed to overcome future adversities. Despite this cautionary note, the belief that high self-esteem individuals aggressively pursue the maximization of their positive self-feelings has dominated the empirical social/personality literature for more than a decade. In sum, this perspective on fragile high self-esteem suggests that high self-esteem individuals' deft use of various self-protective and self-enhancement strategies is critical to developing and maintaining high self-esteem, and that without them, high self-esteem is destined to become low self-esteem. I believe that it is a mistake, however, to characterize these strategies as an inherent component of high self-esteem *per se*. Instead, I believe that use of these strategies implies vulnerability and fragility that are more likely to characterize some, rather than all, individuals who possess high self-esteem.

### **Secure High Self-Esteem**

A contrasting perspective characterizes high self-esteem as reflecting positive feelings of self-worth that are well anchored and secure, and that are positively associated with a wide range of psychological adjustment and well-being indices. Its roots lie in the writings and research of clinical and personality psychologists with humanistic inclinations (e.g., Rogers, 1951, 1959, 1961). From this vantage point, high self-esteem individuals are people who like, value, and accept themselves, imperfections and all. Importantly, they do not feel a need to be superior to others, and they do not gauge their "worthiness" by outdoing others. Instead, as Rosenberg (1965) put it, individuals with high

self-esteem are content to be on an equal plane with others. They rarely attempt strategically to bolster their feelings of worth through self-promoting or self-protective strategies, precisely because their feelings of self-worth are not easily challenged. This does not mean that individuals with high self-esteem react unemotionally to positive and negative outcomes. In fact, disappointment in failure and happiness in success are likely to be experienced. What is absent, however, is the tendency to implicate their global feelings of worth or value in everyday outcomes (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1995). Instead, the effects of specific outcomes and evaluations remain localized with respect to the content of the performance or evaluative domain, and these implications are processed nondefensively. For example, poor performance and negative feedback may lead an individual to conclude that she is not good enough to play soccer at the collegiate level. This may be profoundly disappointing to her, but it does not erode her overall sense of worthiness and self-acceptance. Conversely, positive outcomes are not sought for their favorable self-esteem implications per se. They are sought because the actions reflect one's true interests and abilities. In short, high self-esteem that is secure and well anchored neither requires continual validation nor is it highly vulnerable to threats.

Which high self-esteem perspective is correct? As I alluded to earlier, I believe that both secure and fragile forms of high self-esteem exist, and that they each characterize some individuals. It is not enough, however, merely to acknowledge their existence. For this distinction to be meaningful, it must be possible to detect which form is operative and to show that the two forms differ in their implications for other aspects of intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning. Traditional measures of self-esteem by themselves are not particularly helpful in this regard. Consider, for example, Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, one of the most widely used and well-validated measures of self-esteem (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Respondents indicate their extent of agreement with such statements as: "I feel that I have a number of good qualities"; "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others"; "I feel that I do not have much to be proud of" (reverse scored). High self-esteem is reflected by strong agreement with the first two items and strong disagreement with the last one. However, based on these responses alone, we do not know if the person's high self-esteem is secure or fragile. Additional factors must be taken into account. Recent theory and evidence suggest that at least four different ways exist to distinguish between secure and fragile high self-esteem. Each of these ways relies on theoretical concepts that focus on distinctions between various kinds of self-esteem. Moreover, each of these ways has implications for how we might understand optimal self-esteem. The next section of this article is devoted

to describing these theoretical concepts and the implications they have for distinguishing secure from fragile high self-esteem. Following this, I focus directly on the nature of optimal self-esteem.

### Is the Person Telling the Truth?

One way of distinguishing secure from fragile high self-esteem is to determine whether respondents are misrepresenting their self-feelings. Some people, out of immense desires to be accepted by others, are unwilling to admit to possessing negative self-feelings. These individuals are so afraid that others will reject them if they admit to negative self-feelings that they present their self-feelings positively, yet falsely. This combination of harbored negative self-feelings and publicly presented positive self-feelings was named *defensive* high self-esteem some time ago (Horney, 1950; Schneider & Turkat, 1975). Defensive high self-esteem is presumed to relate to heightened efforts to undermine self-threatening information and to magnify the portrayal of personal strengths unrelated to the content of the threat (Schneider & Turkat). Qualities such as these suggest that defensive high self-esteem is one manifestation of fragile high self-esteem. In contrast, *genuine* high self-esteem reflects the convergence of publicly presented positive self-feelings and privately held inner positive self-feelings. Without the strong concerns about social acceptance that characterize their defensive counterparts, those with genuine high self-esteem are less threatened by negative evaluative information. Genuine high self-esteem thus can be considered one manifestation of secure high self-esteem.

Defensive and genuine high self-esteem traditionally have been distinguished by responses to measures of socially desirable responding (e.g., the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Socially desirable responding is the pervasive tendency to endorse highly positive, yet extremely uncommon, statements concerning one's behaviors or attitudes, and to reject distasteful, yet highly common, behavioral or attitudinal statements. High self-esteem coupled with a high social desirability score presumably reflects defensive high self-esteem given the individual's pronounced unwillingness to admit to unflattering characteristics that he or she is likely to possess. In contrast, high self-esteem coupled with a low social desirability score presumably reflects genuine high self-esteem given that the person has shown few tendencies to hide negative characteristics from others.

Although genuine and defensive high self-esteem are conceptually appealing constructs that have been around for more than 50 years, they have not generated a large body of empirical findings. The research that

does exist, however, has produced findings supporting the distinction. Schneider and Turkat (1975), for example, found that compared to individuals with genuine high self-esteem, individuals with defensive high self-esteem were more likely to respond to negative feedback by enhancing their self-presentations on feedback-irrelevant dimensions. One potential direction for future research would be to isolate the implications for self-esteem processes of the self-deception and impression management components of socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1991). For the present purposes, the important point is that self-promoting tendencies are more pronounced among high self-esteem individuals who are reluctant to acknowledge and report undesirable personal qualities. This reluctance to report common, but undesirable, personal qualities characterizes one form of fragile high self-esteem.

### **What Is the Relation Between One's Conscious and Nonconscious Feelings of Self-Worth?**

A second way of distinguishing secure from fragile high self-esteem involves a consideration of both conscious and nonconscious feelings of self-worth. Specifically, some high self-esteem individuals may report favorable feelings of self-worth, yet simultaneously hold unfavorable feelings of self-worth of which they are unaware. This idea that people may possess feelings of self-worth of which they are unaware is not a new one (Freud, 1915/1957). However, with the arrival of sophisticated computer-based methodologies, it is now beginning to receive substantial attention (Farnham, Greenwald, & Banaji, 1999).

In fact, evidence supporting the existence of implicit self-esteem is growing. Most important, this evidence indicates that implicit self-esteem should be distinguished from explicit self-esteem. Spalding and Hardin (1999) assessed individual differences in explicit and implicit self-esteem and examined if they differentially predicted performance-based anxiety. They found that whereas implicit self-esteem predicted participants' nonverbally expressed anxiety, explicit self-esteem predicted participants' self-reported anxiety. Hetts, Sakuma, and Pelham (1999) assessed individual differences in explicit and implicit self-esteem to examine the influence of cultural identity on each. A number of important findings emerged. For example, implicit self-esteem was influenced by participants' previous cultural socialization whereas explicit self-esteem was influenced by participants' current cultural context. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that explicit and implicit self-esteem may be dissociated from each other.

In another interesting series of studies, Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg (2001) examined

the relation between implicit self-esteem and automaticity. First, they demonstrated that people evaluated letters contained in their names more positively than non-name letters, suggesting that there exists an overall positivity bias in implicit self-esteem. Next, they demonstrated that this positivity bias was inhibited when people were induced to respond in a deliberative manner. Finally, implicit self-esteem and explicit self-evaluations were related only when respondents evaluated themselves very quickly or under cognitive load. The authors concluded that "implicit self-esteem phenomena are driven by self-evaluations that are activated automatically and without conscious self-reflection" (p. 669).

Epstein and Morling (1995) discussed implicit and explicit self-esteem within the framework of Cognitive Experiential Self Theory (CEST), which holds that people possess two separate, but interacting, psychological systems. One system, called the cognitive or rational system, operates at the conscious level according to linguistic and logical principles. Explicit self-esteem resides in the cognitive/rational system, reflecting the feelings of self-worth that people are conscious of possessing. Explicit self-esteem can be measured using standard self-esteem scales such as the Rosenberg measure. The second system, called the experiential system, operates at the nonconscious level, guided in large part by significant affective experiences and heuristic principles. Implicit self-esteem resides in the experiential system, reflecting feelings of self-worth that are nonconscious but that nonetheless can "seep through" to affect people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Implicit self-esteem cannot be assessed by directly asking people how they feel about themselves.

Epstein and Morling suggested that when people possess high explicit self-esteem, but low implicit self-esteem, they will often react very defensively to potentially negative evaluative information. This prediction mirrors the one made for defensive high self-esteem individuals. Specifically, people who report high self-esteem but who simultaneously hold low self-esteem that they are either unwilling (defensive) or unable (implicit) to admit to are hypothesized to be easily threatened by negative self-relevant information. One reason for this is that the presence of nonconscious negative self-feelings undermines the security of presented or conscious positive self-feelings, thereby increasing defensive and self-promotional tendencies. From my vantage point, high explicit self-esteem coupled with low implicit self-esteem is fragile and so may relate to self-protective and self-aggrandizing strategies even in the absence of explicit threats. In contrast, when explicit and implicit self-esteem both are favorable, one's high self-esteem is secure, making it generally unnecessary to defend against real or imagined threats, or to flaunt one's strengths.

A variety of methods can be used to examine implicit self-esteem and its implications for psychological functioning. A number of these methods focus on the assessment of individual differences in implicit self-esteem. One approach developed by Greenwald and colleagues (e.g., Farnham et al., 1999) involves the use of reaction time methods to assess the strength of associative links between self-defining terms and various positive and negative stimuli. The greater the relative strength of positive-self to negative-self associations, the higher one's implicit self-esteem (for a review of this work, see Farnham et al.). In a second approach previously discussed, Koole et al. (2001) used name-letter ratings—those in one's name versus those not in one's name—to index implicit self-esteem (see also Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985). Hetts and colleagues (2000) used several different techniques to assess implicit self-esteem. One technique involved presenting participants with either self-relevant or non-self-relevant primes followed by either positive or negative target words that were to be identified as quickly as possible. A second technique involved a word completion task preceded by self or non-self primes. Conceptually consistent findings using these two methods emerged across three separate studies.

Examining the implications of individual differences in implicit self-esteem is extremely important. In addition, a complementary strategy is to utilize the experimental setting to situationally activate implicit self-esteem by exposing people to positive or negative self-esteem relevant stimuli (e.g., words such as worthless, capable, likeable) at speeds too fast to be consciously recognized. I discuss this strategy in detail shortly. If converging findings emerge from studies that examine individual differences and those that utilize experimental manipulations, we can have more confidence that the two strategies reflect the operation of similar processes. Some time ago, Carver and Scheier (1983) made that point brilliantly, illuminating the convergence of individual differences in public and private self-consciousness and situationally heightened public and private self-awareness. The same ambitious goal can be adopted for research on implicit self-esteem, that is, to determine whether convergent findings emerge from “dispositional” and “situational activation” approaches to implicit self-esteem.

Although my colleagues and I have yet to examine dispositional assessments of implicit self-esteem, we have completed two studies that utilize situational activations. In the first study, Kernis et al. (2003) examined whether discrepant explicit or implicit self-esteem increases self-serving responding. In the first of two laboratory sessions, college student participants completed Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (explicit self-esteem) and a background survey in which they indicated whether a wide range of char-

acteristics were self-descriptive (e.g., “I have a close relationship with my mother”; “I have good social skills”; “I am a leader”; “I regularly read books for pleasure”).

Approximately 1 or 2 weeks later, participants returned to the lab to do several different tasks. The first task was described as a “visual perception task,” but, in actuality, it was designed to activate either positive or negative implicit self-esteem. Participants were seated in front of a computer screen and asked to indicate whether each of a number of “flashes” appeared to the left or the right of a fixation point in the center of the screen. We intended that the fixation point, “I AM,” would serve to activate the self-system. Depending on the condition, the “flashes” were self-relevant words presented para-foveally for 90 milliseconds that were either all positive (e.g., capable, talented, likable, worthwhile) or all negative (e.g., cruel, insecure, worthless, inconsiderate), each followed by a mask of random letters. Following another task, participants read a description of a fictitious college student and then rated the extent to which various attributes contributed to her successful graduation from college. These were the same attributes that participants previously said were or were not self-descriptive. A measure of self-serving responding was created by computing the average importance rating given to those attributes previously deemed non-self-descriptive and subtracting it from the average importance rating of self-descriptive attributes. Computed this way, higher scores reflect the self-serving judgment that successful college performance is more dependent on those attributes that one possesses than on those attributes that one does not possess. This task has been used to assess self-serving responses by Dunning and his colleagues in several studies (e.g., Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995).

As anticipated by the theorizing of Epstein and Morling (1995), self-serving responses were greater among those high self-esteem individuals who were presented with negative as opposed to positive self-relevant words; conversely, among low self-esteem individuals, self-serving responses were greater among those who were presented with positive as opposed to negative self-relevant words. This pattern of findings was reflected in an Explicit SE  $\times$  Implicit SE interaction; neither of the main effects for explicit nor implicit self-esteem approached significance.

The findings of this study converge with those of another (Kernis et al., 2003, Studies 1 & 2), in which we examined whether implicit/explicit self-esteem discrepancies predicted negative judgments of an outgroup member. Participants were non-Jewish undergraduate women whose implicit and explicit self-esteem were assessed as in the Abend et al. study. All participants watched a simulated job interview of a woman who, through many indirect cues, was por-

trayed as Jewish (the tape was the one used by Fein & Spencer, 1997). They then rated the applicant's suitability for the job plus her general personality characteristics. Analyses revealed the same pattern on the two sets of ratings. High explicit self-esteem participants rated the applicant lower if they were subliminally exposed to negative as opposed to positive self-relevant stimuli. Conversely, among low self-esteem individuals, ratings of the applicant were lower if they were subliminally exposed to positive as opposed to negative self-relevant words. This pattern of findings again was reflected in Explicit SE  $\times$  Implicit SE interactions ( $p$ s < .06); the main effects for explicit and implicit self-esteem did not approach significance.

Taken as a whole, the findings of these two studies point to the conclusion that simulating a discrepancy between individuals' explicit and implicit self-esteem is associated with heightened self-serving and self-protective responses. With respect to naturally occurring discrepancies, high explicit self-esteem paired with negative implicit self-esteem is probably more common than low explicit self-esteem paired with positive implicit self-esteem (Epstein, 1983; Losco & Epstein, 1978; O'Brien & Epstein, 1988). We did not attempt to identify such pairings in the two studies reported here. Instead, we exposed participants to a manipulation that we presumed would situationally activate implicit self-feelings. Given that implicit self-esteem was situationally activated, the pairing of negative implicit self-esteem with high explicit self-esteem is not puzzling. In the "real" world, some high self-esteem individuals may commonly experience nonconscious negative self-feelings. The converse, presumably, is true for some portion of low self-esteem individuals (i.e., they experience nonconscious positive self-feelings). However, resolution of this issue must await future research.

The findings from these two studies should not be taken to mean that every individual, despite the security of one's self-esteem, will be equally affected by the subliminal priming manipulation. To date, we know only that the manipulations we employed were powerful enough to yield effects without controlling for various forms of fragile high self-esteem. I recognize that some people with high explicit self-esteem may be more highly affected by the priming manipulation than others. This is an important agenda for future research. For example, it is possible that stability of self-esteem (to be discussed shortly) moderates the priming manipulation's impact on defensiveness and self-serving responding.

I should acknowledge that although we prefer to characterize the priming manipulation as activating implicit self-esteem, we do not have direct evidence that this is in fact the case. One source of evidence already noted would be that convergent findings emerge when dispositional assessments and situational activa-

tions are utilized. Accumulating these data will take time, but they are vital to our understanding of implicit self-esteem. Pending these data, some readers may prefer to characterize our situational manipulation as a threatening (or supportive) priming manipulation that may not activate the implicit system per se. In any event, with additional data, we will be in a better position regarding how best to characterize our priming manipulation.

The literature on implicit self-esteem, attitudes, and stereotypes is burgeoning. Many recent issues of major social and personality journals have at least one article that addresses a variety of important and timely questions. Given my goal for this article, reviewing all of this work is not feasible. Nonetheless, these papers raise several important issues that deserve mention, if not definitive resolution. One issue involves the fact that although several procedures purport to tap into individual differences in implicit self-esteem, they display little if any convergence with each other and as predictors of relevant phenomena (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000). Some procedures rely exclusively on associationistic principles, others on availability or accessibility processes, and still others on ratings of self and non-self-relevant stimuli (i.e., letters of the alphabet). These discrepancies lead one to raise the question "Will the real implicit measure please stand up?" I cannot answer the question here based on available data. Consequently, I urge interested scholars to employ multiple measures of implicit self-esteem so that, through the accumulation of relevant data, we can separate the "wheat from the chaff."

A second issue is that implicit self-esteem measures tend to correlate minimally if at all with explicit measures, and they are sometimes not predictive of the same phenomena (Hetts et al., 1999, Study 2). Some may see this as a problem, arguing that implicit measures should relate to explicit measures and in fact be more powerful predictors because they skirt the detrimental influences of self-presentational concerns.

My view is different. I believe that implicit self-esteem indicators will prove to be valid in their own right. Whether they converge with explicit measures can be adequately addressed both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, one would not necessarily expect strong convergence if one assumes that implicit self-esteem develops over time via the repeated influence of factors of which people are likely to be unaware (particularly when people reach adulthood). Negative implicit self-esteem may be built up through associations with events and people whose impact is not directly felt by the individual, but that nonetheless exert their influence. In contrast, I believe that people can often point to those defining instances that dramatically affected (and still affect) their explicit self-esteem (e.g., parental divorce, difficulty finding an intimate partner, being cut from the high school band

or football team, etc.). It follows that many interesting questions involve discrepancies between individuals' implicit and explicit self-esteem and how they jointly predict psychological adjustment and other criterion variables. Finally, I think that implicit self-esteem processes are important in their own right and that directly examining them can lead to answers that are not necessarily congruent with answers obtained for implicit attitudinal or stereotyping processes per se.

These considerations aside, I tentatively characterize the findings of Kernis et al. (2003, Studies 1 & 2) as providing among the first empirical support for Epstein's (1983, 1990; Epstein & Morling, 1995) assertion that discrepant explicit and implicit self-esteem has important implications for psychological functioning. In my view, implicit self-esteem that is discrepant with explicit self-esteem undermines the security of explicit self-esteem. When high explicit self-esteem is undermined by discrepant negative implicit self-esteem, self-serving responses help to bolster conscious positive, but fragile, self-feelings. Conversely, when low explicit self-esteem is accompanied by positive implicit self-esteem, self-serving responses may serve to undermine conscious negative self-feelings, if only temporarily. This undermining of conscious negative self-feelings may increase low self-esteem individuals' felt safety or risk-taking to engage in self-protection and self-enhancing strategies (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). These assertions are speculative, however, and they await direct empirical support.

As should be obvious from the present discussion, much more research is needed before we fully understand the joint roles of explicit and implicit self-esteem in psychological functioning. However, the data obtained by my colleagues and me indicate that self-promoting or defensive behaviors do not depend on high self-esteem per se. Recall that no main effects emerged for either explicit or implicit self-esteem. Instead, crossover Implicit Self-Esteem  $\times$  Explicit Self-Esteem interactions consistently emerged. These findings suggest that it is when high self-esteem is paired with nonconscious negative self-feelings, or when low self-esteem is paired with nonconscious positive self-feelings, that such behaviors become readily apparent.

### **Is the Person's Self-Esteem Dependent Upon Certain Outcomes?**

Deci and Ryan (1995) distinguished contingent high self-esteem from true high self-esteem. As they stated, "Contingent self-esteem refers to feelings about oneself that result from—indeed, are dependent on—matching some standard of excellence or living

up to some interpersonal or intrapsychic expectations" (p. 32). Individuals who possess contingent high self-esteem are highly preoccupied with their achievements and how they measure up in other people's eyes. They are concerned about where they stand on specific evaluative dimensions (e.g., How good an athlete am I?); place great importance on how they are viewed by others (e.g., Do most people like me?); and they engage in a continual process of setting and meeting evaluative standards (e.g., I need to get an A on my calculus exam) to validate their positive self-feelings.

In other words, contingent self-esteem involves a highly ego-involved form of self-regulation in which one's behaviors and outcomes are linked directly to self and other-based disapproval (Deci & Ryan, 1995). For contingent high self-esteem individuals, poor performances may trigger feelings of incompetence, shame, and worthlessness. Deci and Ryan (1995) pointed out that people with contingent high self-esteem will go to great lengths to avoid such painful experiences, even if it means distorting their performances or derogating the sources of negative feedback. Conversely, because good performances validate contingent high self-esteem individuals' feelings of overall value and worth, these experiences are eagerly sought and may, in the extreme, even be fabricated.

In Deci and Ryan's (1995) and my own views, high self-esteem that is contingent is fragile because it remains high only if one is successful at satisfying relevant criteria. If one is continually successful, high self-esteem may seem secure and well anchored. As Deci and Ryan emphasized, however, it is not, because the need for continual validation drives the person to attain ever more successes. Should these successes cease, the person's self-esteem may plummet. The self-regulatory processes associated with contingent self-esteem are especially powerful precisely because they involve the linking of behaviors and outcomes to self and other-based demands and approval (Deci & Ryan, 1995). In short, for people with contingent high self-esteem, the pursuit and maintenance of positive self-regard often become the "prime directives" that channel their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

True high self-esteem, in contrast, reflects feelings of self-worth that are well anchored and secure, that do not depend upon the attainment of specific outcomes, and that do not require continual validation (Deci & Ryan, 1995). According to Deci and Ryan (1995), true high self-esteem develops when one's actions are self-determined and congruent with one's inner, core self, rather than a reflection of externally imposed or internally based demands. Activities are chosen and goals are undertaken because they are important to the individual. Furthermore, relationships with others are characterized by mutual acceptance, intimacy, and understanding (e.g., Ryan, 1993).



True high self-esteem is not “earned,” nor can it be “taken away.” It is not “overinflated,” nor is it “underserved.” Doing well is valued because it signifies effective expression of one’s core values and interests, and it is this effective expression that is valued, not high self-esteem per se. Directly pursuing high self-esteem reflects contingent, not true, high self-esteem. Importantly, individuals with true high self-esteem do not take poor performances as indicative of their incompetence or worthlessness. Instead, they nondefensively use poor performance as a source of information to guide their future behavior. As previously noted, people with true high self-esteem do not react unemotionally to poor performances. Specifically, individuals with true high self-esteem may feel disappointed and perhaps somewhat sad or irritated; however, these individuals are unlikely to feel devastated or enraged (Deci & Ryan, 1995). The latter feelings are more likely felt when one’s self-esteem is heavily invested in the outcome (i.e., high ego-involvement).

Building on Deci and Ryan’s (1995) framework, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) provided evidence that individual differences exist in the specific criteria that people with contingent high self-esteem attempt to satisfy to maintain their positive self-feelings. For some people, academic competence is most critical, whereas for others, it is social acceptance that matters most. Other major categories of contingencies, each having its own criteria to be met, include one’s physical appearance, God’s love, power, and self-reliance. Initial empirical efforts to assess individual differences in the strength of these various contingencies have been very encouraging (see Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). I see great potential value in determining the precise nature of individuals’ self-esteem contingencies and the way in which they play out in people’s specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

For the present purposes, however, I focus less on the specific content of one’s contingencies than on whether contingencies per se are operative. In this vein, Kernis and Paradise (2003) examined the role of contingent self-esteem in predicting the intensity of anger aroused by an ego-threat. We developed a measure of contingent self-esteem (the Contingent Self-Esteem Scale, Paradise & Kernis, 1999) consisting of 15 items, each of which is rated on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Sample items include “An important measure of my worth is how well I perform up to the standards that other people have set for me” and “Even in the face of failure, my feelings of self-worth remain unaffected” (reverse-scored). The scale is internally consistent ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and it displays considerable test-retest reliability ( $r = .77$  over approximately 4 weeks).

We reasoned that people with highly contingent self-esteem would be easily threatened by an insulting

evaluation and that they would deal with this threat by becoming especially angry and hostile. Participants were undergraduate women whose self-esteem level and degree of contingent self-esteem were assessed. Subsequently, they participated in a laboratory session in which their “presentational skills” ostensibly were rated by an unseen observer who was in another room. Through random assignment, some women received an evaluation that contained insulting statements about their appearance and mannerisms, whereas other women received a generally positive evaluation. Following receipt of the evaluation, they indicated how angry and hostile they felt. As anticipated, the more contingent the women’s self-esteem, the angrier they reported feeling in response to the insulting treatment. This effect occurred after controlling for the effect of self-esteem level, supporting the notion that contingent self-esteem reflects a form of fragile self-esteem associated with heightened vulnerability and reactivity to self-esteem threats.

Several weeks later, participants also completed the Anger Response Inventory (ARI; Tangney et al., 1996), a self-report instrument that taps various aspects of the experience and expression of anger, including anger intensity, intentions for expressing anger, and tendencies to engage in physical or verbal aggression. Consistent with the laboratory findings, the more contingent the women’s self-esteem, the more intense their anger response to hypothetical scenarios (though here, the effect was marginally significant). Additionally, the more contingent the women’s self-esteem, the more malevolent their intentions for expressing their anger (i.e., they wanted to get back at or hurt the instigator) and the greater their desire to “let off steam.” However, rather than attack the instigator directly, women with highly contingent self-esteem, compared to women with less contingent self-esteem, were more likely to focus their anger inward and stew about it, chastise themselves for not doing anything, and lash out at innocent others and things. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that women with highly contingent self-esteem are easily angered but that they do not deal with this anger in constructive ways.

In summarizing her research, Harter (1997) noted that “adolescent females who report that appearance determines their sense of self-worth as a person (1) feel worse about their appearance, (2) have lower self-esteem, and (3) also report feeling more affectively depressed compared to females for whom self-esteem precedes judgments of appearance (Harter, 1993; Zumpf & Harter, 1989)” (p. 163). Likewise, Harter, Stocker, and Robinson (1996) found that adolescents whose self-esteem is dependent upon the approval of others were especially preoccupied with the opinions of others, thought that they received low and fluctuating levels of social support, and reported low and fluctuating feelings of self-worth. Additionally, in a study

on contingent self-esteem and self-reported anger, Kernis, Paradise, and Goldman (1999) found that college students whose self-esteem is highly contingent on having power over others (using the measure developed by Crocker, Luhtanen, & Bouvrette, 2001) reported especially high tendencies to experience anger.

Crocker, Sommers, and Luhtanen (2002) examined the relation between contingent self-esteem and college seniors' reactions to being accepted to or rejected by the graduate schools to which they had applied. Compared with baseline days on which participants received no news, the stated self-esteem of individuals whose self-esteem was contingent on academic competence was especially likely to rise with news of acceptance and decline with news of rejection. Importantly, none of the other contingencies showed similar effects, suggesting the importance of the match between life events and particular self-esteem contingencies (for further discussion of this issue, see Crocker & Park, 2002). In other research, Crocker (2002) reported that the contingencies of social approval and physical attractiveness were predictive of depressive symptoms among first-year college students.

Neighbors, Larimer, Geisner, and Knee (2001) found that the more contingent college students' self-esteem (assessed by the Paradise & Kernis, 1999, measure), the more they reported drinking alcohol to enhance their mood, improve their social functioning, prevent peer rejection, and cope with their problems. In addition, contingent self-esteem was related to greater frequency of alcohol consumption and to alcohol-related problems.

In sum, recent research and theory offer encouraging support for the construct of contingent self-esteem, its assessment, and its implications for distinguishing between fragile and secure self-esteem. At least two measurement instruments are available (Crocker et al., 2001; Paradise & Kernis, 1999), which hopefully will facilitate additional research. I will return to a discussion of the assumptions that underlie these two measures in a later section.

### **To What Extent Do Current, Contextually Based Feelings of Self-Worth Fluctuate?**

A fourth way to distinguish between secure and fragile high self-esteem is based on the extent to which a person's current feelings of self-worth fluctuate across time and situations. These short-term fluctuations in one's immediate, contextually based feelings of self-worth reflect the degree to which one's self-esteem is unstable: the greater the number of fluctuations, the more unstable one's self-esteem. Stability of self-esteem is conceptualized as distinct from self-esteem level, in that the latter reflects the positivity of

one's typical or general feelings of self-worth (for reviews, see Greenier, Kernis, & Waschull, 1995; Kernis, 1993; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

A considerable body of research supports the usefulness of distinguishing among high self-esteem individuals based on how much their immediate feelings of self-worth fluctuate (e.g., Kernis et al. 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989; Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991; for summaries, see Greenier et al., 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). Stable high self-esteem individuals have positive, well-anchored feelings of self-worth that are little affected by specific evaluative events. In contrast, unstable high self-esteem individuals possess favorable, yet fragile and vulnerable feelings of self-worth that are influenced by specific evaluative events (Greenier et al., 1999). These events may be internally generated (e.g., reflecting on one's earlier interactions with others) or externally provided (e.g., a positive evaluation).

A core characteristic of people with fragile self-esteem is that they react very strongly to events that they view as relevant to self-esteem; in fact, they may even see self-esteem relevance in cases where it does not exist. As in Deci and Ryan's (1995) conceptualization of contingent high self-esteem, people with unstable high self-esteem are thought to be highly ego-involved in their everyday activities. Elsewhere, we (Greenier et al., 1999; Kernis, Greenier, Herlocker, Whisenhunt, & Abend, 1997) have portrayed this heightened ego-involvement as an "evaluative set" comprised of several interlocking components. First, an *attentional* component involves "zeroing in" on information or events that have potentially self-evaluative implications. Second, a *bias* component involves interpreting ambiguously or non-self-esteem relevant events as self-esteem relevant. Finally, a generalization component involves linking one's immediate global feelings of self-worth to specific outcomes and events (e.g., a poor math performance is taken to reflect low overall intelligence and worth). Each of these components may operate outside one's awareness or be consciously and deliberately invoked.

Research relevant to this evaluative set is reviewed in detail elsewhere (Kernis & Paradise, 2002). Briefly, compared to people with stable self-esteem, people with unstable self-esteem (a) experience greater increases in depressive symptoms when faced with daily hassles (Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts & Monroe, 1992), (b) have self-feelings that are more affected by everyday negative and positive events (Greenier et al., 1999), (c) take a self-esteem protective rather than a mastery-oriented stance toward learning (Waschull & Kernis, 1996), (d) focus more on the self-esteem threatening aspects of aversive interpersonal events (Waschull & Kernis, 1996), (e) have more impoverished self-concepts (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000), (f) regulate their goal

strivings with less self-determination (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, et al., 2000), and (g) report greater tendencies to overgeneralize negative implications of specific failures (Kernis et al., 1998). Taken as a whole, these findings point to the utility of using stability of self-esteem to distinguish between fragile and secure forms of high self-esteem. I turn now to this issue.

People with unstable high self-esteem are more defensive and self-aggrandizing than are their stable high self-esteem counterparts, yet they are lower in psychological health and well-being. Defensiveness often manifests itself in frequent outbursts of anger and hostility, which are often aimed at restoring damaged self-feelings (Felson, 1984; Feshbach, 1970). Kernis and colleagues (1989) reported that unstable high self-esteem individuals scored the highest on several well-validated anger and hostility inventories (e.g., the Novaco Anger Inventory; Novaco, 1975); stable high self-esteem individuals scored the lowest; and stable and unstable low self-esteem individuals scored between these two extremes. As evidence of self-aggrandizing tendencies, Kernis et al. (1997) found that people with unstable high self-esteem were more likely than those with stable high self-esteem to boast about a success to their friends; after an actual success, those with unstable high self-esteem were more likely to claim that they did so in spite of the operation of performance-inhibiting factors (Kernis et al., 1992).

Additional evidence concerning the fragility of unstable high self-esteem comes from a recent study involving people in intimate relationships (Kernis, Paradise, & Goldman, 2000). We drew some research by Lydon, Jamieson, and Holmes (1997). Lydon et al. distinguished between being in a relationship with someone (i.e., “unit” phrase) from the period when a relationship is wanted but not yet formed, which they called the pre-unit phase. During the pre-unit phase, seemingly innocuous events—for example, not returning a phone call—are imbued with a great deal of meaning and implications regarding the fate of the relationship and the way in which one is viewed by the desired partner. Rather than focus on re-

lationship stages, however, we focused on the degree to which individuals’ high self-esteem is secure or fragile. We reasoned that individuals with secure (stable) high self-esteem would interpret and react to ambiguously negative actions by their partners by treating these events as innocuous, either by minimizing their negative aspects or by offering a benign interpretation of them. In contrast, individuals with fragile (unstable) high self-esteem were expected to imbue these events with adverse self-relevant implications, either by personalizing them or by resolving to reciprocate in kind to get even with their partner. If we were correct, this would suggest that fragile, but not secure, high self-esteem individuals are prone to interpret their partners’ actions in ways that foster a vicious cycle of negativity within their intimate relationships.

Participants in this study read nine scenarios that depicted ambiguously negative events in which their partner might engage. Each event had multiple, plausible causes and implications for self, partner, and the relationship. Participants rated the likelihood that they would respond in each of four different ways designed to capture this multiplicity of potential causes and implications. Two response options signaled overinvestment of the self and implied that the self was somehow threatened by the event. Of these, one (personalizing) involved magnifying the event’s negative implications for the self. The other (reciprocating) involved resolving to “get even” with the partner as a way to deal with the self-esteem threat. The two remaining response options captured reactions or interpretations that did not involve overinvestment of the self. Of these, one (benign) involved a transient externally based (usually partner-related) explanation. The other (minimizing) involved taking the event at “face value,” that is, not making a big deal of it. Two sample scenarios and accompanying response options appear in Table 1.

Our findings provided strong support for our hypotheses. Specifically, unstable high self-esteem individuals reported being most likely to engage in “personalizing” and “reciprocating” response options,

**Table 1.** *Example Scenarios and Response Options*

- 
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Your partner gives you a nice birthday present, but it isn’t what you have subtly let him/her know that you really wanted. How likely is it that you would...                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. think that you must not be important enough to him/her. (Personalizing)</li> <li>B. enjoy the present you got. (Minimizing)</li> <li>C. think that circumstances beyond his/her control must have prevented it. (Benign)</li> <li>D. in the future give him/her a present other than what you know he/she clearly wants. (Reciprocating)</li> </ul>                                      |
| 2. You see your partner speaking seriously with one of his/her close friends. When they notice your arrival, the tone of the conversation quickly changes. How likely is it that you would... | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. just join in the conversation. (Minimizing)</li> <li>B. be highly suspicious that your partner must be hiding something from you. (Personalizing)</li> <li>C. think that they are sharing something personal between them, as close friends do. (Benign)</li> <li>D. show your partner how it feels by creating a similar situation with one of your friends. (Reciprocating)</li> </ul> |
-

whereas stable high self-esteem individuals reported being least likely to engage in them (low self-esteem individuals fell between). Conversely, stable high self-esteem individuals reported being most likely to engage in “benign” and “minimize” reactions, whereas unstable high self-esteem individuals reported being least likely to engage in them (low self-esteem individuals again fell between). These findings are important because they point to the operation of dynamics associated with fragile high self-esteem that until now have been ascribed to low self-esteem individuals (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998), or to those highly sensitive to rejection (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

To the extent that these findings reflect stable and unstable high self-esteem individuals’ actual responses to partner behaviors, we would also expect differences to emerge in their ratings of relationship quality and satisfaction. Participants completed a modified version of Spanier’s (1976) Relationship Quality Scale twice, once at the same session that they completed the scenario measure and again approximately 4 to 6 weeks later. Importantly, unstable high self-esteem individuals reported lower relationship quality at time two (with or without controlling for time one scores) than did stable high self-esteem individuals.

The defensive and hostile reactions reported by unstable high self-esteem individuals presumably had cumulative, adverse effects on the development of intimacy, trust, and security in their relationships. These effects may accrue for both partners in an intimate relationship, although for now, we can speak directly about only one partner. Fragile high self-esteem individuals presumably felt barriers to increased intimacy with their partners, though they may have been unaware that these barriers were in part of their own making. Importantly, these barriers can undermine relationship quality and satisfaction. An important direction for future research is to incorporate partners into the analysis. Many provocative questions then can be addressed. For example, are partners of unstable high self-esteem individuals more likely to engage in potentially threatening behaviors than are partners of stable high self-esteem individuals? Do they generally treat their mates with less respect so that our participants’ responses reflected reality? That is, do partners get caught up in the cycle of overreaction and defensiveness that characterizes fragile high self-esteem individuals and become active participants themselves? Answers to questions such as these will provide important information about how processes associated with fragile and secure high self-esteem may undermine or promote the development of mutually satisfying intimate relationships.

Turning to another topic, the enhanced tendencies toward self-enhancement and self-protection exhibited by unstable high self-esteem individuals apparently do

not translate into greater psychological adjustment and well-being. This is expected if indeed unstable high self-esteem is a form of fragile high self-esteem. Paradise and Kernis (2002) administered Ryff’s (1989) psychological well-being measure to a sample of college students who also completed measures of level and stability of self-esteem. Ryff’s measure assesses six core components of psychological well-being: (a) *self-acceptance*, the extent to which individuals hold positive self-directed attitudes (“I like most aspects of my personality”); (b) *positive relations with others*, the extent to which individuals have relationships characterized by love, friendship, and identification (“I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others”); (c) *autonomy*, the extent to which individuals are self-determining, independent, and self-regulating (e.g., “I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important”); (d) *environmental mastery*, the extent to which individuals can deal successfully with environments and demands that make up their everyday lives (“I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life”); (e) *purpose in life*, the extent to which individuals believe that life has purpose and meaning (“Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them”); and (f) *personal growth*, the extent to which individuals value and envision continued development (“I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world”).

Consistent with Ryff’s (1989) findings, high self-esteem individuals reported greater autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and personal growth than did low self-esteem individuals. Importantly, differences among high self-esteem individuals also emerged as a function of self-esteem stability. Specifically, compared with individuals with stable high self-esteem, individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported lower autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others. In essence, whereas stable high self-esteem individuals reported that they functioned autonomously, possessed a clear sense of meaning in their lives, related effectively within both their physical and social environments, and were highly self-accepting, the same was less true of unstable high self-esteem individuals.

These findings suggest that whereas possessing stable high self-esteem may provide the basis for functioning effectively in various realms, unstable high self-esteem may undermine (or at least not promote) effective functioning. It may also be the case that effective functioning in a variety of behavioral and psychological domains may foster well-anchored, positive self-feelings, whereas ineffective functioning may undermine the security and/or favorableness of one’s

self-feelings. This latter explanation is consistent with the findings of Deci and Ryan (1995), who asserted that true high self-esteem develops naturally out of the satisfaction of one's needs for self-determination, competence, and relatedness. A third possibility emphasizes the reciprocal influences that self-esteem and other aspects of psychological well-being may have on each other. For the present purposes, distinguishing between these scenarios is not necessary. What is important is that each emphasizes the important linkages between self-esteem and other indices of psychological well-being.

Although differences exist between our conceptualization of unstable high self-esteem and Deci and Ryan's (1995) conceptualization of contingent high self-esteem (see Kernis & Paradise, 2002, and later in this article), here I note several important features that they share. First, both emphasize the link between feelings of self-worth and specific outcomes. Second, both describe enhanced tendencies to be caught up in the processes of defending, maintaining, and maximizing one's positive, though tenuous, feelings of self-worth. Likewise, stable and true high self-esteem both are taken to reflect secure, well-anchored feelings of self-worth that do not need continual validation. Pleasure following success and disappointment following failure are reactions thought to characterize people with either stable or true self-esteem, but these reactions are not tinged with defensiveness or self-aggrandizement (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis et al., 1997).

### **Toward a Conceptualization of Optimal Self-Esteem**

What, then, is optimal self-esteem? I have laid much of the groundwork for answering this question throughout this article, but it is now time to be explicit. I believe that optimal self-esteem involves favorable feelings of self-worth that arise naturally from successfully dealing with life challenges; the operation of one's core, true, authentic self as a source of input to behavioral choices; and relationships in which one is valued for who one is and not for what one achieves. It is characterized by the relative absence of defensiveness, that is, being willing to divulge negative behaviors or self-aspects in the absence of excessively strong desires to be liked by others. Moreover, it is characterized by favorable implicit feelings of self-worth that stem from positive experiences involving one's actions, contextual factors, and interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, it is characterized by minimal if any dependence upon specific outcomes or achievements (it is not contingent), and its contextual component does not exhibit substantial fluctuations (it is stable).

I propose that authenticity as an individual difference construct may be particularly important in delin-

eating the adaptive features of optimal self-esteem. Authenticity can be characterized as reflecting the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise. As I describe, authenticity has at least four discriminable components: awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational orientation. The awareness component refers to having awareness of, and trust in, one's motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions. It includes, but is not limited to, being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, trait characteristics, and emotions. Another aspect of this component is being aware of one's inherent polarities, or, as Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951/1965) put it, being aware of both "figure" and "ground" in one's personality aspects. In the view of Perls and colleagues, people are not exclusively masculine or feminine, extroverted or introverted, dominant or submissive, and so on. Rather, one aspect of these dualities predominates over the other, although both aspects exist. As individuals function with greater authenticity, they are aware that they possess these multifaceted self-aspects, and they utilize this awareness in their interchanges with others and with their environments. In short, the awareness component of authenticity involves knowledge of one's needs, values, feelings, figure-ground personality aspects, and their roles in behavior.

As infants develop, awareness is facilitated by what is called *intersubjectivity*:

"a state of connection and mutual understanding that emerges during interaction with another person. ... A reasonable degree of match between the child's experience and the adult's feedback is necessary in order to establish a state of intersubjectivity; different types of mismatches, such as when the caregiver fails to reflect the same emotional tone or energy level that the infant is feeling, can make the infant quite distressed and may lead to a disrupted sense of self (Stern, 1985)." (Hoyle et al., 1999, pp. 31-32)

Perhaps the most damaging type of exchange for a child's developing awareness involves a parent explicitly denying the legitimacy of a child's inner experience, perhaps even punishing it. Consider the following example. Children have lots of energy, and they are often fidgety at airports during long layovers. Seeing parents take turns walking with their children to burn off some of this energy is very common. In stark contrast, I recall an instance in which a child repeatedly slid off the chair onto the floor only to be forcibly plopped back into the chair by his parent, who repeatedly admonished him to "sit still." Eventually, the parent's will overpowered the child's and, though looking extremely miserable, the child sat still. Continual punishment or contradiction of a child's inner experiences may lead the child to ignore or dismiss these experiences in favor of those of the parental figure (cf. Deci

& Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1993). Some years ago, Sullivan (1965) called these self-aspects the “bad me” or “not me.” As we will see, elements of the “bad” or “not” me also figure in the display of inauthentic or “false-self” behaviors (Harter, 1997).

A second component of authenticity involves the unbiased processing of self-relevant information. In other words, it involves not denying, distorting, exaggerating, or ignoring private knowledge, internal experiences, and externally based evaluative information. Instead, it involves objectivity and acceptance of one’s positive and negative aspects, attributes, and qualities. Some people, for instance, have great difficulty acknowledging that they may not be very skillful at a particular activity. Rather than accept their poor performance, they may rationalize its implications, belittle its importance, or completely fabricate a “new” score. Others may have difficulty accepting and incorporating into the self the various “ground” aspects of personal qualities, as if some “alien,” and not they, possesses these qualities, though at some level they are aware of the existence of these qualities. Still others have difficulty acknowledging certain emotions in themselves, such as anger or anxiety, and instead misrepresent them as sadness or boredom, respectively. These defensive processes are motivated, at least in part, by self-esteem concerns, and we would expect to find them both for negative and positive information. People may delude themselves into believing that a triumph over a clearly inferior opponent validates their own extremely high level of ability, or they may take it for what it is: I beat this person, which if not a fluke, suggests that I have greater skills than this person, but it does not by itself show that my game is a dominant force.

This discussion of the unbiased processing stage of authenticity is consistent with recent conceptualizations of ego defense mechanisms. Like research on self-esteem, research on defense mechanisms has proliferated in recent years. This interest has been fortified by findings linking individual differences in defense styles to a wide range of physical and psychological indices. Notable in this regard is Vaillant’s longitudinal work showing that adaptive defense styles that involve minimal reality distortion predict greater psychological and physical well-being many years into the future (e.g., Vaillant, 1992). In contrast, maladaptive or immature defenses that involve greater reality distortion and/or failure to acknowledge and resolve distressing emotions relate to numerous psychological and interpersonal difficulties, including poor marital adjustment (Ungerer, Waters, Barnett, & Dolby, 1997).

A third component involves behavior, specifically whether people act in accord with their true self. In my view, behaving authentically means acting in accord with one’s values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments through acting “falsely.” Harter

(1997) suggested that three distinct motives underlie the display of false self-behavior among adolescents. The first motive involves devaluation of the self in which actors dislike themselves or significant others dislike them. The second motive involves wanting to please or be liked by others. The third motive involves wanting to experiment with different selves as a form of social role-playing:

Those citing motives emphasizing devaluation of the self report the worst outcomes in that they (1) engage in the highest levels of false self behavior, (2) are more likely not to know who their true self really is, and (3) report the lowest self-esteem coupled with depressed affect. Those endorsing role experimentation report the most positive outcomes (least false behavior, most knowledge of true self, highest self-esteem and cheerful affect), with the approval seekers concerned with impression management falling in between. (Harter, 1997, p. 90)

In my view, role experimentation need not be inauthentic. I argue that in the vast majority of cases, it reflects an extension of one’s true self in action. Adolescents are constantly experiencing new situations, meeting new people, and so forth. Identities may feel new or experimental in these novel contexts. They can reflect authenticity, however, to the extent that they are informed by what one knows to be true of the self. Moreover, role experimentation may be a catalyst for self-improvement and growth. In contrast, in those instances where one deliberately enacts an identity opposed to one’s true self, role experimentation is likely to be inauthentic. As an example, recall the *Seinfeld* episode in which George Costanza thinks about how he would normally react and deliberately does exactly the opposite.

Admittedly, instances exist in which the unadulterated expression of one’s true self may result in severe social sanctions. Here, I would expect authenticity to reflect a sensitivity to the fit (or lack of) between one’s true self and the dictates of the environment and an awareness of the potential implications of one’s behavioral choices. Authenticity is not reflected in a compulsion to be one’s true self, but rather in the free and natural expression of core feelings, motives, and inclinations. When this expression stands at odds with immediate environmental contingencies, I would expect that authenticity is reflected in short-term conflict. How this conflict is resolved can have considerable implications for one’s felt integrity and authenticity. Rather than focusing exclusively on whether authenticity is or is not reflected in one’s actions per se, focusing on the manner in which processes associated with the awareness and unbiased processing components inform one’s behavioral selection is likely to be useful. For example, if a person reacts to pressure by acting in accord with prevailing social norms that stand in con-

trast with his or her true self, then authenticity may be operating at the awareness and processing levels, but not at the behavioral level. Conversely, one may be highly aware of one's true self and attempt to freely act in accord with it, but then severe sanctions follow. The next time that situation is confronted, the person may engage in the socially called for behavior. Here again, authenticity may be operating at the awareness and processing level, but not at the behavioral level. In short, sometimes the needs and values of the self are incompatible with those of society. I believe that in these instances, authenticity is reflected in awareness of one's needs and motives and an unbiased assessment of relevant evaluative information. In some cases the resulting behavior may also reflect authenticity, but in other cases it may not. In essence, I am suggesting that the awareness, unbiased processing, and behavior components of authenticity are related to, but separable from, each other.

A fourth component of authenticity is relational in nature, inasmuch as it involves valuing and achieving openness and truthfulness in one's close relationships. Relational authenticity involves endorsing the importance for close others to see the real you, good and bad. Toward that end, authentic relations involve a selective process of self-disclosure and the development of mutual intimacy and trust. In short, relational authenticity means being genuine and not "fake" in one's relationships with close others.

I believe that in childhood and adolescence challenges to one's self-authenticity are self-esteem "moments" that are pivotal in the development of one's later self-esteem, depending upon the choices and decisions made by the individual (cf. Mruk, 1999). These challenges can take many forms. For example, when parents take it upon themselves to portray their children's state of being in a way contrary to the children's direct experiences, some children may react to the authenticity challenge by denying their own experience (i.e., suppressing their awareness) and embracing that of their parents (e.g., behaving inauthentically by claiming tiredness when a parent says, "You look tired"). Others may react not by denying their own experiences but by distorting them so that they fit with their conceptions of what it is to be a good boy or girl (i.e., engage in biased processing). Still others (probably more likely with increasing age) acknowledge the discrepancy and value their own experiences while recognizing that alternative interpretations exist; rather than denying or distorting their own experiences, they recognize and trust in the validity of their inner world.

Some years ago, the anthropologist Carlos Castenada wrote a book titled *A Separate Reality* (1971). One of the core messages of his book is that there exists no single physical, social, or psychological reality. Multiple realities coexist, and it is up to individuals to learn about and accept these multiple reali-

ties. Castenada's central argument is that individuals are free to choose their own reality, but they must have trust in it and recognize that it is not the only reality. This point is central to my conception of authenticity. Individuals may attempt to impose their view of reality on a given person, who then must choose between this externally provided reality and a self-generated reality. A steep hill can be portrayed by a comrade as an unbelievable burden for a backpack-laden urban traveler whose goal is to get to the top. Or, the trees, gardens, and people encountered on the hill can serve as sources of information, inspiration, and energy, and, in essence, constitute a different reality along the way. The point is that there is a choice among multiple coexisting realities. A similar choice may exist when one is deciding about how one's true self is to play out in one's behavior. As long as a person is aware of the "reality" he or she buys into, and that it represents only one "reality," I would argue that this awareness provides a sense of freedom ("I am forgoing a different reality") and responsibility ("It is my reality") that promotes authenticity.

The characterization of authenticity offered in this article owes a great deal to Rogers' (1961) conceptualization of a self-actualizing or fully functioning individual, who possesses the following characteristics (taken from Cloninger, 1993). First, the fully functioning individual is *open to experience*, both objective and subjective, that life has to offer. Accompanying this openness is a tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to perceive events accurately, rather than defensively distorting or censoring them from awareness. Second, fully functioning individuals can *live fully in the moment*; they are adaptable and flexible, and they experience the self as a fluid process rather than a static entity. Third, they inherently *trust their inner experiences* to guide their behaviors. As Cloninger stated

The person perceives inner needs and emotions and various aspects of the social situation without distortion. The individual integrates all these facets of experience and comes to an inner sense of what is right for him or her. This sense is trustworthy; it is not necessary to depend on outside authorities to say what is right. (p. 258)

Fourth, a fully functioning person experiences *freedom*. This freedom may be reflected in the attitudes one adopts toward experiences—even if the environment is immovable, one still has a choice about how to respond and feel about it. Fifth, the fully functioning individual is *creative* in his or her approach to living, rather than falling back on well-established modes of behavior that become unnecessarily restrictive. This creativity is fueled by a strong trust in one's inner experiences and a willingness to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

In sum, the view of authenticity offered in this article is that it reflects the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise. I believe that experiencing oneself as authentic provides the basis for experiencing optimal self-esteem. At many steps along the way, however, obstructions may occur. First, blockages may occur at the "awareness" stage—people may be unattuned to their motives, feelings, and self-relevant cognitions. People low in private self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) may be particularly susceptible to this type of blockage, as may repressors and people with low implicit self-esteem. Second, blockages may occur at the "unbiased processing" stage—people may deny, distort, or ignore their private knowledge and experience. People with defensive, contingent, and unstable self-esteem may be particularly susceptible to a blockage at this stage. Third, blockages may take place at the "behavior" stage—people may suppress the behavior that represents their true self and substitute more palatable behavior instead. Again, self-esteem and self-evaluation processes are important here, and so blockages at this stage may be particularly associated with defensive, contingent, and unstable self-esteem. Finally, blockages may occur at the relational stage, perhaps related to such factors as fear of rejection (Downey et al., 1998).

Brian Goldman and I are developing a self-report measure, the Authenticity Inventory, that assesses each of the four components of authenticity just discussed. In line with our conceptualization, the measure contains items that comprise four subscales: awareness ("For better or for worse, I am aware of who I truly am; I am aware of when I am not being my true self; I am aware of my darkest thoughts and feelings"); unbiased processing ("I find it easy to pretend I don't have faults (reversed); I prefer to ignore my darkest thoughts and feelings (reversed); I generally am capable of objectively considering my limitations and shortcomings"); behavior ("When I am nervous I smile a lot (reversed); I find it easy to pretend to be something other than my true self (reversed); I rarely if ever put on a 'false' face for others to see"); and relational ("My openness and honesty in relationships are essential for their development; Some people would be shocked or surprised if they discovered what I keep inside me (reversed); In general, I place a good deal of importance on people understanding who I really am").

Although the scale is still in development, I can report some preliminary data. In a sample of approximately 70 individuals, total authenticity scores were positively related to life satisfaction and high self-esteem and negatively related to contingent self-esteem and negative affect. Subscale analyses revealed that life satisfaction was positively related to the awareness, unbiased processing (marginally), and relational subscales; self-esteem level was positively related to

the awareness and behavioral subscales; contingent self-esteem was negatively related to the behavior subscale; and negative affect was negatively related to the awareness and relational subscales. These preliminary data are consistent with at least two published papers that support the general proposition that authenticity is related to adaptive psychological functioning. Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) examined the degree of psychological authenticity that participants felt across five social roles (student, employee/worker, child, friend, and romantic partner) and its relation to various markers of psychological adjustment. Participants rated their felt authenticity within each of these roles, using the following five items: (a) I experience this aspect of myself as an authentic part of who I am; (b) This aspect of myself is meaningful and valuable to me; (c) I have freely chosen this way of being; (d) I am only this way because I have to be (reversed); and (e) I feel tense and pressured in this part of my life (reversed). In two separate studies, higher mean levels of felt authenticity across these five roles predicted greater psychological adjustment and physical well-being.

McGregor and Little (1998) examined participants' ratings of how consistent their personal projects ("self-generated accounts of what a person is doing or planning to do," p. 495) were to their core self-aspects. They defined integrity as "the extent to which participants appraise their personal projects as consistent with their values, commitments, and other important aspects of identity" (p. 496). The researchers expected that integrity would relate to psychological adjustment and the experience of meaning (as measured by such scales as the Purpose in Life Scale, Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Participants rated each of 10 personal projects on 35 dimensions, and through factor analysis, 4 dimensions appeared to assess integrity (How important to you is each project? How committed are you to the completion of each project? To what extent does each project feel distinctly "you"—like a personal trademark—as opposed to being quite alien to you? To what extent is each project consistent with the values that guide your life?). In three separate studies using a range of measures to assess meaning, the greater the integrity that participants reported with respect to their personal projects, the greater the meaning they reported experiencing more generally in their lives.

### Potential Controversies

The discussion of authenticity presented here focuses on the individual self, and it presumes the value of construing the individual self as somehow unified and transcultural rather than completely contextualized and multifaceted. It is important to note



that I am not presenting a view of the self that is monolithic and unchanging, and that is unresponsive to variations in situational and role requirements. Rather, I see authenticity as an ongoing process that occurs on several different levels and that promotes both greater differentiation and greater integration of the self (cf. Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Conversely, I am not proposing an extremely “postmodern” view of self that it is ever-changing, malleable, and without a core (Gergen, 1991). My view is that awareness of one’s needs, values, and core aspects provides the foundation for optimal growth and adaptation in an increasingly complex social and technological world. People now have unprecedented access to potentially self-relevant information on the Internet, and they can often “try” on different selves without the effects that accompany face-to-face interaction (e.g., by assuming identities in Internet chat rooms). In some ways, the issue of authenticity takes on greater importance in an information-based world in which there are fewer and fewer constraints. Portraying oneself contrary to one’s true self to cyberspace acquaintances who may be equally deceptive in their self-presentation can hardly be satisfying or authentic. In fact, research shows that people are particularly drawn to chat rooms where people share their actual interests and inclinations, particularly when the social undesirability of these interests and inclinations makes it difficult to form intimate relationships face-to-face. For example, McKenna and Bargh (1998) reported that participants of “marginalized” (i.e., subversive political beliefs, deviant sexual interest groups) newsgroups sought out such groups because no such equivalent groups exist in “real” life.

The crux of this controversy revolves around the relative adaptiveness of contextually based self-concept variability (for further discussion, see Kernis & Goldman, 2002). According to some (e.g., Gergen, 1991; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988; Snyder, 1987), the ability to call into play multiple and perhaps contradictory self-aspects reflects the complexities of social life and people’s ability to adjust to them. According to others (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996), self-concept variability and malleability are likely to reflect confusion and lack of internal self-coherence. Donahue, Robins, Roberts, and John (1993) created a Self-Concept Differentiation measure (SCD) based on the extent to which people believe that they enact different traits in their different social roles. Sheldon et al. (1997) developed a similar measure to tap into cross-role trait similarity profiles. In both studies, the more consistently people reported enacting the same traits across their social roles, the higher they scored on a variety of measures of psychological and physical adjustment. At the same time, considerable variability in trait enactment remained, indicating the optimal ad-

justment is not related to the rigid expression of one’s same exact traits across one’s social roles.

Paulhus and Martin’s (1988) distinction between “functional flexibility” and “situationalism” appears to be highly relevant to the issue of the adaptiveness of a somewhat contextualized self-concept, although it has not received much attention. Functional flexibility involves having confidence in one’s ability to call into play multiple, perhaps contradictory, self-aspects in dealing with life situations. One who is high in functional flexibility believes that he or she would experience little anxiety in calling forth these multiple selves because they are well defined and can be enacted with confidence. In contrast, situationality involves the belief that one is not very capable at calling forth well-defined multiple self-aspects; moreover, this belief is accompanied by the sense that one’s behaviors are called forth by situational contexts, which may require multiple conflicting self-actions. In Paulhus and Martin’s research, functional flexibility was tied to a high sense of agency and was positively related to other measures of adaptive psychological functioning. In contrast, situationality was marked by self-doubt and other indices of psychological problems. Thus, possessing a multifaceted self may be based in strong self-beliefs, self-confidence, self-acceptance, and agency, or, conversely, in self-doubts, confusion, and conflict that heighten the impact of situational factors on one’s actions and self-beliefs. I firmly believe that a resolution regarding the adaptiveness of self-concept malleability will benefit from incorporating Paulhus and Martin’s constructs of functional flexibility and situationality (for further discussion of the relative adaptiveness of self-consistency vs. malleability, see Kernis & Goldman, 2002).

Another potential controversy surrounding the conceptualization of authenticity I am offering is whether exaggerating one’s positive qualities may be more adaptive than to strive for accuracy in one’s self-knowledge. In recent times, Taylor and Brown (1988) sounded the charge for positivity when they “proposed that positive illusions promote psychological well-being” plus “higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance, and ultimately, greater success (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 199)” (Robins & Beer, 2001, p. 340). Their review set off a flurry of counterattacks mainly by Colvin, Block, Paulhus, Robins, and their colleagues (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Robins & John, 1997). Robins and John (1997) reported that individuals with inflated self-views were rated by a team of psychologists as narcissistic and as less well-adjusted overall compared with individuals with more accurate self-views. Likewise, “Colvin, Block, and Funder (1995) found that self-enhancing individuals were described by their peers in narcissistic terms (e.g., hostile, defensive, condescending), whereas indi-

viduals who did not have self-enhancing beliefs were described as cheerful and considerate” (Colvin & Beer, 2001, p. 341). Rather than characterizing self-enhancing tendencies as uniformly maladaptive, a more nuanced perspective was offered by Paulhus (1998), who showed that self-enhancing individuals initially were viewed positively by their peers, but after sustained interactions, were viewed quite negatively. Robins and Beer (2001) pursued this possibility that self-enhancement may confer benefits in the short run, but may be detrimental in the longer run. These investigators assessed college students’ self-enhancing illusions about their academic abilities upon entering college and then followed these individuals throughout their undergraduate careers. Initially, self-enhancing illusions were related to such things as narcissism, ego-involvement, and positive effect. However, over time, “self-enhancement was associated with decreasing levels of self-esteem and well-being as well as increasing disengagement from the academic context” (p. 340). This view that self-enhancement may initially confer benefits in the short but not the long run is consistent with the views of Crocker and Park (2002) and myself (Kernis, this issue).

The research and theory reviewed in this chapter suggest that self-enhancement (and self-protection) strategies may be linked to the possession of fragile as opposed to secure high self-esteem. Does this mean that trying to protect and enhance one’s self-esteem is necessarily maladaptive and negatively related to psychological functioning and well-being? I agree with Robins and Beer (2001), Crocker and Park (2002), and Paulhus (1998; cf. Tennen & Affleck, 1993), who argue that whereas such strategies may be adaptive in the short run by helping to alleviate distress, they are likely to be maladaptive over time by interfering with learning and creativity, undermining relationships with others, and promoting unhealthy behaviors. Moreover, they are likely to reflect the lack of (and even interfere with) satisfaction of one’s basic needs for competence, self-determination, and relatedness, and to undermine one’s feelings of authenticity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis, 2000).

As just noted, some researchers view defensive and self-promoting strategies as markers of healthy psychological functioning (Taylor & Brown, 1988; but see Tennen & Affleck, 1993). At first blush, then, research showing that fragile high self-esteem is associated with heightened use of such strategies may seem to contradict research that links unstable high self-esteem to less than optimal psychological adjustment (e.g., Paradise & Kernis, 2002). This apparent contradiction can be resolved by viewing heightened use of defensive and self-promoting strategies as compensatory reactions to fundamental need thwarting. In other words, rather than viewing defensive and self-promotion strategies as reflecting normal, healthy functioning, an

understanding of fragile self-esteem and its relation to substitute needs and compensatory activities suggests another, more compelling, interpretation. Namely, Deci and Ryan (2000) identified heightened use of these strategies as stemming from the insecurity, fragility, and suboptimal functioning that emerge when satisfaction of one’s fundamental needs for competence, self-determination, and relatedness is thwarted. I would add that they are more likely to be prevalent when individuals are acting inauthentically. I am not suggesting that something is wrong when people want to feel good about themselves. Rather, I am suggesting that when feeling good about oneself becomes a prime directive, excessive defensive and self-promotion are likely to follow and the resultant self-esteem is likely to be fragile rather than secure.

The perspective of authenticity offered here emphasizes the value of self-understanding in psychological adjustment and well-being. As such, our main emphasis is admittedly individualistic in nature (cf. Gaertner, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Gramzow, Gaertner, & Sedikides, 2001; Sedikides & Gaertner, 2001a, 2001b). At the same time, Goldman and I (Kernis & Goldman, 2002) explicitly recognize a relational component to authenticity, which stresses the value of authenticity in the context of one’s close relationships. Thus, our framework is consistent with recent conceptualizations of selfhood and identity that acknowledge multiple aspects of self-construals. Specifically, Sedikides and Brewer (2001) noted that the individual self coexists with both the relational self (“those aspects of the self-concept that are shared with relationship partners and define the person’s role or position within significant relationships,” p. 1) and the collective self (“those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate in-group members from members of relevant out-groups,” p. 2). We agree, although to date we have addressed only the individual and relational self. With respect to the relational self, authenticity may be particularly valued within the context of one’s intimate relationships, as partners become more deeply involved with one another’s lives. Authenticity within the collective self may become particularly salient among people who place substantial importance on their membership in racial, ethnic, religious, and national groups. This is an issue that we would like to pursue in our future research and theory development.

#### **Interrelations Among Various Forms of Fragile and Secure Self-Esteem**

Some readers may have hoped for an all-encompassing perspective that linked the various forms of fragile and secure self-esteem to each other and to au-

thenticity through a set of common processes. Unfortunately, given our present state of knowledge, that is easier said than done. I hope that bringing the various forms of fragile high self-esteem into sharper relief and linking secure (optimal) self-esteem to authenticity will be generative, prompting additional scholars to tackle these and other important issues. Toward that end, I will now focus on potential interrelations among the various forms of fragile high self-esteem.

In some ways I see defensive high self-esteem as the “odd” construct out. Although I think that defensive high self-esteem exists, I believe that the processes that underlie it potentially make it less relevant for other forms of fragile high self-esteem. Specifically, the high social desirability scores that characterize defensive high self-esteem individuals pertain to a general reluctance to admit publicly to negative self-characteristics or behaviors. This information is likely to vary from individual to individual, and, sometimes, its direct relevance to self-esteem may be limited. This is not to negate the value of the research that has supported the distinction between defensive and genuine self-esteem (e.g., Schneider & Turkat, 1975). On the other hand, given the ease of assessment and the clarity of the conceptualization, it is curious that a larger literature has yet to develop around this distinction. In part, this may be because a key assessment component (social desirability scores) may not always have direct self-esteem relevance for all individuals.

Aside from these considerations, I see defensive high self-esteem as antithetical to the construct of stability of self-esteem and to a lesser extent contingent and possibly high explicit or negative implicit self-esteem. In brief, defensive high self-esteem by definition remains rigidly unchanging, whereas unstable high self-esteem involves substantial short-term fluctuations in feelings of self-worth. Therefore, conceiving of individuals who possess self-esteem that is both defensive and unstable is difficult. In fact, in our early work (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989), we found that scores on the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (SD scores) were uncorrelated with self-esteem instability. Moreover, when we substituted SD scores for self-esteem instability to predict anger and hostility proneness, a coherent set of effects did not emerge. Finally, when we controlled for SD scores in analyses involving stability and level of self-esteem as predictors, the Stability  $\times$  Level of self-esteem interactions remained unchanged. In short, we found no empirical overlap between defensive high self-esteem and unstable high self-esteem. I believe that a similar lack of overlap may exist with contingent self-esteem, which focuses on those factors that may contribute to fluctuations, not rigidity, in self-esteem. Finally, without relevant data, no way exists to determine whether defensive self-esteem may be the conscious “tip” of negative implicit self-feelings. This is a question that should be addressed in future research.

Although there seems to be considerable overlap between contingent and unstable self-esteem, this overlap is far from complete. The two constructs have been empirically linked. Paradise (2001) reported a correlation of .24 ( $p < .05$ ) between scores on the Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (Paradise & Kernis, 1999) and stability of self-esteem. Also, Crocker, Sommers, and Luhtanen (2002) found that self-esteem fluctuations were greater among medical school applicants whose self-esteem was highly contingent on school competence than among applicants whose self-esteem was not so contingent.

Where the two constructs differ most is conceptual. Stability of self-esteem is understood as a between-persons construct that reflects individual differences in the extent to which current feelings of self-worth exhibit short-term fluctuations. Among researchers who focus on contingent self-esteem, however, a difference of opinion exists regarding the relative utility of a between-persons approach (i.e., people vary in the extent to which they possess contingent vs. true self-esteem) versus a within-persons approach (i.e., everyone has contingent self-esteem; where they differ is in their specific domains of contingencies; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Deci and Ryan (1995) and Kernis and Paradise (2003) espouse the between-persons approach, whereas Crocker and her colleagues (Crocker & Park, 2002; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) espouse the within-persons approach. Both approaches are likely to have their utility, but they may be more appropriate for particular kinds of questions. For example, a within-persons approach may be particularly valuable if one is interested in predicting reactions to specific contingencies, whereas a between-persons approach may be particularly valuable if one is interested in predicting more global levels of defensiveness and psychological functioning.

Some years ago, Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) made a similar point regarding the usefulness of attitudes as predictors of behaviors. Although I believe that a within-persons approach is valuable, I also believe that theorists and researchers must be careful not to be overly specific in characterizing domains of contingencies. As I see it, the potential risks of taking such an approach are twofold. First, the more specific the contingencies to be examined, the more transparent their linkages to specific reactions and outcomes may become. Second, an exclusive within-persons focus is unlikely to attend sufficiently to the factors that promote high self-esteem that is true (secure) and not dependent upon the occurrence of specific outcomes. In essence, if one adopts an exclusively within-persons focus, one may lose sight of a conceptualization of high self-esteem that is not dependent upon specific and tangible outcomes and that is not fraught with defensiveness. I would argue that this is a significant loss indeed, particularly if we want to go beyond prediction

and control to fully understand the processes associated with self-esteem and psychological adjustment.

Other differences also exist between our conceptualization of unstable self-esteem and both Crocker's (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and Deci and Ryan's (1995) conceptualizations of contingent self-esteem. This issue is discussed in detail in Kernis and Paradise (2002); for the sake of completeness, we discuss it here as well. First, whereas we explicitly distinguished between typical and current feelings of self-worth, Crocker and Deci and Ryan did not. We believe that it is important to maintain this distinction on both conceptual and empirical grounds. Most empirically minded contemporary self theorists (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986; Rosenberg, 1986; Swann & Hill, 1983) have held that transitory shifts in self-appraisals (self-evaluations, self-images, self-esteem) coexist along with self-appraisals and other self aspects that are highly resistant to change. Furthermore, stable and unstable aspects of self-appraisals have been shown to relate in different ways to individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Kernis & Johnson, 1990; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Kernis, Jadrach, Stoner, and Sun (1996) suggested that the stable component is reflected in individuals' "typical self-appraisals" (How do you generally, or typically, feel about yourself?), whereas the unstable component is reflected in individuals' "current self-appraisals" (p. 432, How do you feel about yourself right now?). Importantly, the processes involved in the formation of current and typical appraisals differ. Typical appraisals reflect "evaluative judgments of personal qualities that are abstracted from numerous experiences whose self-relevant implications have been stored in memory" (Kernis & Johnson, 1990, p. 243). In contrast, current appraisals "reflect individuals' contextually-based self-appraisals that are affected by a variety of factors, including self-evaluative thoughts, externally provided feedback, social comparisons, and task performance" (Kernis et al., 1996, p. 432). (For further discussion and supportive evidence regarding the distinction between current and typical self-appraisals, see Kernis & Johnson, 1990; Kernis et al., 1996.)

A second difference between our conceptualization and those of Deci and Ryan and of Crocker and her colleagues is that whereas by definition unstable self-esteem fluctuates, contingent self-esteem can be stable as long as standards or expectations are continually met. In Deci and Ryan's (1995) words

A man who feels like a good and worthy person (i.e., has high self-esteem) only when he has just accomplished a profitable business transaction would have contingent self-esteem. If he were very successful, frequently negotiating such deals, he would have a continuing high level of self-esteem; yet that high level would be tenuous, always requiring that he continue to

pass the tests of life, always requiring that he match some controlling standard. (p. 32)

Our view is that positive events (either internally generated or externally provided) will trigger short-term increases in unstable high self-esteem individuals' current feelings of self-worth. As discussed earlier, the self-feelings of unstable high self-esteem individuals are more highly affected by everyday positive events than are the self-feelings of stable high self-esteem individuals (Greenier et al., 1999).

A third difference is that whereas we focus on the association of impoverished self-concepts (i.e., low self-concept clarity) to unstable self-esteem, the role of impoverished self-concepts in contingent self-esteem is not addressed. A fourth difference is that whereas the assessment of contingent self-esteem seems to require individuals' awareness that their self-esteem may be dependent upon certain outcomes or self-evaluations (as measured by Crocker et al., 2001; Paradise & Kernis, 1999), our research has shown that people are not very good at knowing just how unstable their self-esteem is (Kernis et al., 1992). This discussion is not meant to take anything away from the important conceptualizations offered by Deci and Ryan and by Crocker and her colleagues, nor should it overshadow the significant implications that these frameworks have for our understanding of self-esteem processes. For the time being, though, it does support the usefulness of maintaining the distinction between unstable and contingent (and between stable and true) self-esteem.

With the recent development of measures designed to assess contingent self-esteem, future research should include direct comparisons of the two sets of constructs. Contingent self-esteem may be particularly important in determining which events serve as triggers of unstable self-esteem for different people. Individuals' self-esteem may fluctuate in response to achievement-oriented events, variations in degree of social acceptance, or fluctuations in self-perceived attractiveness, particularly if the individuals view these dimensions as important to their self-esteem. In fact, Kernis et al. (1993) obtained data supportive of these contentions. Conversely, unstable self-esteem may serve as a stressor (Gable & Nezlek, 1998) that prompts people to achieve a better understanding of the contingencies to which they are responsive. Thus, I see the potential for reciprocal influences between contingent and unstable high self-esteem. Nonetheless, for reasons already discussed, I do not think that they are one and the same.

Finally, implicit self-esteem is likely to have implications for both stability of self-esteem and self-esteem contingencies, and vice versa. For example, unfavorable implicit self-esteem may prompt people to adopt self-esteem contingencies as a way of dealing

with their fragile high explicit self-esteem. In such instances, people may adopt the mistaken belief that if they can shore up their conscious self-feelings, their insecurities will disappear. I believe that these individuals will appear driven and never be satisfied for reasons of which they are unaware, because in fact they are not dealing with the basic underlying deficit in implicit self-esteem. Likewise, high explicit/unfavorable implicit self-esteem may promote unstable self-esteem in cases in which the negative undercurrent of nonconscious negative feelings instigates an outward focus for self-validation. Attempts to bring to awareness nonconscious negative self-feelings have their price, and people may avoid such attempts if they can adequately seek validation through others and through achievements. Again, I believe that these efforts are somewhat misguided, as they do not address the existing nonconscious negativity.

Conversely, people who possess highly unstable or contingent self-esteem may be more susceptible to the situational manipulations that are thought to activate positive and negative implicit self-esteem. Lacking a firm foundation on which to base their feelings of self-worth, these individuals may be especially prone to exhibit self-protective and self-aggrandizing strategies when unfavorable feelings are primed. I recognize the speculative nature of these assertions. However, I think that they are representative of the types of questions and issues that need to be addressed before a comprehensive framework of optimal versus suboptimal self-esteem will be fully developed and accepted.

### **Implications for Other Phenomena**

The distinction between fragile and secure forms of high self-esteem has implications for the construct of narcissism, models of defensive processing, and conceptualizations of cultural differences in self-esteem processes.

### **Narcissism**

Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) presented an important model of the self-regulatory processes associated with narcissism. Among other things, they argued that narcissists are constantly attempting to validate their positive self-feelings through such strategies as self-promotion, attributional-reframing, and derogation of others. In essence, Morf and Rhodewalt argued that narcissistic individuals' self-esteem is fragile and that much of their behavior is directed toward self-esteem promotion and protection. As I described in this article, their position is very similar to the one that my colleagues and I have taken with respect to

fragile forms of high self-esteem (for an extended discussion, see Kernis, this issue). Here, I briefly present my view on the relation between narcissism and the various forms of fragile high self-esteem discussed in this article.

I view narcissism and unstable high self-esteem as two partially independent types of fragile self-esteem. As suggested by the findings reviewed in this article, considerable overlap between the two constructs appears to exist at the behavioral or response level. Both involve a preoccupation with promoting and protecting the self, and both appear to reflect less suboptimal psychological functioning. However, the nature of the self-esteem involved may be quite different. For instance, whereas the self-esteem of narcissists is inflated and closely associated with feelings of superiority and entitlement, unstable high self-esteem is not necessarily inflated, nor entwined with feelings of entitlement or superiority. Instead, it is poorly anchored and, therefore, susceptible to the influence of internally generated and externally provided events of potential self-esteem relevance.

Likewise, some overlap may exist between narcissism and high explicit/negative implicit self-esteem. Morf and Rhodewalt (2001) argued that hovering beneath the grandiose veneer of narcissistic individuals lie deeply felt (but presumably nonconscious) insecurities. Researchers interested in tapping into the "insecurities" of narcissists might therefore profit from looking at whether subliminal priming manipulations of the type used by Kernis et al. (2003) heighten the self-serving or defensive posturing of narcissists. If narcissists nonconsciously harbor negative self-feelings, priming the negative implicit system may heighten the activation of these feelings, thereby promoting greater self-serving responses. More generally, research on the implicit aspects of self-esteem may shed considerable light on the affective and motivational properties associated with the insecurity aspect of narcissism.

Furthermore, as Morf and Rhodewalt noted, narcissists are likely to have self-esteem that is highly contingent (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). A question that can be raised, then, is whether narcissists' self-esteem is generally contingent across a variety of domains, or specific to a few particular domains. If some domains are more important than others, do they include attractiveness, intelligence, and power over others? If so, are narcissists particularly likely to be angered when those more important domains have been threatened? How do narcissists deal with threats in domains that are of little importance to them? What are the consequences of dealing with these threats for the nature and quality of narcissists' intimate and instrumental interpersonal relationships? These are but a few of the questions that can be raised about the interplay between contingent self-esteem and narcissism.

In closing, although various forms of fragile self-esteem tap into an aspect of the “narcissistic experience,” I do not believe that singularly, or in combination, they are the same as narcissism. Nonetheless, I think that a great deal can be learned by focusing on potential areas of convergence and divergence among these constructs, and I look forward to participating in these endeavors.

### **Defensive Processing Models**

Some important social psychological theories hold that in response to threats, people engage in a variety of self-protective, defensive maneuvers designed to reduce or counteract their adverse effects. Foremost among these models are Tesser’s (1988) Self-Evaluation Maintenance Theory (SEM) and Steele’s (1988) Self-Affirmation Theory. According to SEM theory, people are threatened when they are outperformed by a close other in domains of high self-importance. To counteract this threat, people may psychologically distance themselves from the close other, undermine the other’s future performances, or reassess the domain’s importance. In Steele’s model, threats to the integrity of the self are dealt with by affirming a valued self-aspect, even if this valued self-aspect is unrelated to the threat. Spencer, Josephs, and Steele (1993) reviewed data showing that high self-esteem individuals are more adept at self-affirmation than are low self-esteem individuals because they have more positive aspects and resources to draw upon when threatened. More recently, Tesser, Martin, and Cornell (1996) showed the substitutability of SEM and self-affirmation strategies in dealing with threats. This research suggests that various defensive strategies serve the same general function (i.e., maintenance of the self) although they differ in their specifics.

The perspectives of Tesser (1988; Tesser et al., 1996) and Steele (1988) generated a great deal of support and, quite rightfully, are highly influential. The framework offered in this target article suggests that it would be fruitful to examine how individual differences in fragile and secure high self-esteem relate to the operation of SEM and self-affirmation processes. To the extent that secure high self-esteem individuals are less easily threatened than are fragile high self-esteem individuals, we would expect that they are less prone to engage in the defensive processes specified by these models. For example, being outperformed by a close other in a self-important domain should be less threatening to an individual whose high self-esteem is secure rather than fragile. Likewise, threats to self-integrity should not lead secure high self-esteem individuals to exaggerate the positivity of self-characteristics unrelated to the threat, even though they presumably possess these positive as-

pects and resources at least to the same extent as fragile high self-esteem individuals.

In short, the present framework suggests that models of defensive processing may characterize fragile high self-esteem individuals more than they characterize secure high self-esteem individuals. To the extent that this is true, developing models that best represent how secure high self-esteem individuals cope with potentially threatening events and information is an important agenda for the future.

### **Culture Differences in Need for Positive Regard**

Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) argued that the need for positive regard is not universal but that it is present primarily in Western, but not Eastern, cultures. As one source of support of this assertion, these researchers reported several studies in which they showed that self-serving biases that presumably emerge routinely in Westernized samples are absent in Asian samples. However, as reviewed in this article, self-serving biases and the like are more prevalent among individuals with fragile, as opposed to secure, high self-esteem. Thus, it may be the case that the absence of these biases among Asians means that they do not routinely experience self-esteem that is high and fragile. As I noted earlier, when feeling good about oneself becomes a “prime directive” motivating one’s interpersonal and achievement behaviors, one’s self-esteem is likely to be fragile rather than secure. Furthermore, it may be the case that the need for self-esteem is not a fundamental psychological need in the same sense as needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead, the need for self-esteem may be a secondary, or derivative, need that surfaces when one’s basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are thwarted (Kernis, 2000). Secure high self-esteem emerges naturally out of one’s authenticity and the satisfaction of one’s basic needs. As such, it is largely immune to the type of self-serving biases described by Heine and his colleagues. These considerations suggest that rather than using manifestations of fragile high self-esteem as the benchmark to compare across cultures, using manifestations of secure or optimal self-esteem would be better. Such efforts, I believe, will facilitate a deeper understanding of cultural similarities and differences in the factors that contribute positively to psychological adjustment and well-being.

### **Summary**

I argue in this article that self-esteem has multiple components and that to understand fully its place in

psychological functioning, we must go beyond whether it is high or low. One of my major goals was to describe these components and to show their value in distinguishing among various forms of fragile and secure high self-esteem. In one form of fragile high self-esteem (i.e., defensive high self-esteem), a person may deliberately misrepresent self-feelings as positive when in reality they are negative, but the person is unwilling to admit to them. The secure counterpart to this form (i.e., genuine high self-esteem) involves a person accurately depicting self-feelings of worth as positive, as evidenced by a willingness to admit to negative characteristics in other domains. A second form of fragile high self-esteem (high explicit or low implicit self-esteem) occurs when a person consciously holds positive feelings of self-worth but nonconsciously holds negative feelings. The secure counterpart to this form (high explicit or high implicit) involves possessing positive conscious and nonconscious feelings of self-worth. Although research concerned with these forms is scarce, available findings are supportive of the current conceptualization.

A third form of fragile high self-esteem (contingent high self-esteem) occurs when a person bases positive feelings of self-worth on specific attainments or evaluations. The secure counterpart to this form (true self-esteem) involves feelings of self-worth that do not require continual validation. The recent development of measurement scales to assess the degree of contingent self-esteem is likely to produce a surge of research in the coming years. A fourth form of fragile high self-esteem (unstable high self-esteem) involves instances in which a person reports typically holding positive feelings of worth, yet the person's current, contextually based feelings of self-worth exhibit considerable short-term fluctuations. The secure counterpart to this form (stable high self-esteem) involves contextually based feelings of self-worth that remain basically unchanged across time and contexts.

Although differences exist between these various conceptualizations, they all are based on the conviction that high self-esteem is not a unidimensional construct. I believe that it is critical that they be taken into account for self-esteem research and theory to continue to progress. I argue that optimal self-esteem can be characterized in terms of possessing the qualities associated with each of the aforementioned forms of secure high self-esteem. One question of importance, then, is the extent to which these various forms of fragile or secure high self-esteem covary within individuals. Other important questions pertain to the extent to which they share similar etiologies and have similar consequences for psychological health and well-being.

Finally, I offered a conceptualization of authenticity that I hope will be useful in advancing our understanding of optimal, or secure high, self-esteem. Empirical efforts are now underway to develop a mea-

sure of individual differences in authenticity and to examine its implications for self-esteem processes and psychological well-being. Initial data involving this measure are highly encouraging.

## Notes

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