

© Kernis, Michael H., Apr 15, 2013, Self-Esteem Issues and Answers : A Sourcebook of Current Perspectives
Taylor and Francis, Florence, ISBN: 9781134952700

Self-Esteem Issues and Answers

A Sourcebook of
Current Perspectives

Edited by Michael H. Kernis

Self-Esteem Issues and Answers

Published in 2006
by Psychology Press
270 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
www.psypress.com

Published in Great Britain
by Psychology Press
27 Church Road
Hove, East Sussex BN3 2FA
www.psypress.co.uk

Copyright © 2006 by Psychology Press

Psychology Press is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Typeset by Macmillan India Ltd, Bangalore, India

Printed and bound in the USA by Sheridan Books, Inc., MI, on acid-free paper

Cover design by Design Deluxe

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Self-esteem issues and answers : a sourcebook of current perspectives / edited by Michael H. Kernis.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84169-420-7 (hardback : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-84169-420-7 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Self-esteem. I. Kernis, Michael

Howard, 1955–

BF697.5.S46S47 2006

155.2–dc22

2006005409

ISBN13: 978-1-84169-420-7

ISBN10: 1-84169-420-7

To the memory of Mary Anne Lahey, for the courage she displayed and the inspiration she provided to others.

Question 12

Are striving for and possessing high self-esteem always positive or healthy? What are the costs and benefits of directly orienting one's daily behaviors toward seeking high self-esteem?

The essays in this section address the costs and benefits of possessing and striving for high self-esteem.

Crocker begins her essay by describing some costs and benefits of possessing high trait self-esteem. As she notes, the clearest benefits of high trait self-esteem are experiencing positive emotions and possessing positive and certain self-concepts. Costs to possessing high trait self-esteem are most apparent following ego-threat. She then turns to her own work that focuses on the costs and benefits of pursuing self-esteem. This work demonstrates that although pursuing self-esteem may have some short-term emotional and motivational benefits, they are overshadowed by costs to individuals' autonomy, learning, interpersonal relationships, and mental and physical health.

Rhodewalt also elaborates some of the costs of pursuing high self-esteem. He first distinguishes secure (true, authentic, and stable) from insecure (contingent, inauthentic, and unstable) high self-esteem and asserts that the latter is unhealthy and problematic precisely because it involves constant self-esteem striving. Rhodewalt provides a self-regulatory framework to characterize fragile high self-esteem individuals' attempts to validate positive self-evaluations about which they are insecure. He suggests that, ironically, these strivings may only serve to perpetuate individuals' insecurity and uncertainty.

Wood, Anthony, and Foddis take a different tack and focus on the specific question of whether individuals with low trait self-esteem benefit from striving for high self-esteem. They distinguish between "self-evaluative" and "non-self-evaluative" methods and describe mechanisms by which self-evaluative methods may be ineffective or detrimental. Self-evaluative methods include positive self-statements and success experiences. The authors propose that whereas these methods may backfire for a variety of reasons, non-self-evaluative methods may sometimes be helpful precisely because they avoid these detrimental self-evaluative processes.

37

Possessing and Striving for High Self-Esteem

FREDERICK RHODEWALT

In a classic comedy routine, Professor Irwin Corey was asked why did he wear sneakers. The self-proclaimed world's foremost authority on everything said that it was really two questions. He then launched into a lengthy monologue about "Why?" being the essential question that has occupied philosophers for centuries. In response to the second question, Professor Corey replied, "Do I wear sneakers? Yes!" In my view, in order to attempt an answer to the focal question of this essay, "Are striving for and possessing high self-esteem always healthy?," one must answer at least two questions. The first asks, is all high self-esteem the same? This is a very complex question, however, I am not alone in arguing that the answer is no. That being the case, the answer to the question of the healthiness of possessing and striving for high self-esteem is easy; it depends on the type of high self-esteem one possesses.

POSSESSING HIGH SELF-ESTEEM: HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY?

What constitutes high self-esteem is an essential question that has occupied personality and social psychologists for decades. Global self-esteem is comprised of feelings of self-worth, self-liking, and acceptance (Brown, 1986; Kernis, 2003; Rosenberg, 1965). Low self-esteem then, reflects negative, neutral, or mildly positive global feelings about the self and high self-esteem indicates positive feelings of self-worth, self-liking, and acceptance. However, the current consensus is that self-esteem falls along a continuum from true or optimal to unauthentic or contingent (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). Kernis (2003) suggests the broad categories of secure and fragile self-esteem to describe this dichotomy. With regard to the question of possessing and striving for high self-esteem, it is evident that possessing secure self-esteem is preferable to fragile self-esteem. In fact, one might argue that possessing secure self-esteem by its very nature does not require striving for it. In contrast, possessing fragile

self-esteem requires constant striving for the purposes of maintaining and protecting these positive but fragile self-feelings.

But what does it mean to have fragile self-esteem? One answer is that fragile self-esteem is self-esteem that is based upon meeting standards or contingencies of worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Possessing self-esteem becomes the goal and striving to meet imposed contingencies the mechanism (Crocker & Nuer, 2003). The contingencies can be those imposed by others, for example, the child's belief that she will not be loved unless she excels in school or introjected, as in the child's belief that he is worthwhile only if he excels in school. Possessing high self-esteem that is contingent in this way is as unhealthy because failing to meet these standards leads to self-esteem devaluation (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), instability (Kernis, 2003), and defensive and often hostile attempts to protect and repair positive but fragile self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996).

There is a second way to construe self-esteem that, I believe, lends itself to examining the costs of possessing and striving for high self-esteem. Self-esteem is also a central element in self-regulation (Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2003). In this view, self-esteem is both an input and an outcome of goal-directed, *self-involved* activity. However, it is a more salient input and output for those with fragile self-esteem than it is for those with secure self-esteem. Our self-regulatory model of self-esteem broaches the issue of contingency from a different angle than that taken by other researchers in the field. If self-regulation involves a continuous assessment of how we are doing compared to some standard, then all self-esteem is contingent because it involves feelings of worth that come from effectively meeting standards, demonstrating competence, and achieving social acceptance. It is the on-line affective and self-evaluative reactions to these comparisons that is the basis of the experience of self-esteem.

A second element of our self-regulatory model of self-esteem is that it emphasizes the linkages between global self-esteem and the specific self-evaluations that undergird it. The model embraces William James' (1890) position that self-esteem arises in large part from a tally of our standings on specific self-evaluations weighted for how important the specific dimensions are to self-definition (Campbell, 1990; Pehlman, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989). Consistent with this view, Pelham (1995) has shown that a measure of differential importance of an individual's self-evaluations significantly predicts his or her global self-esteem. The linkage between global self-esteem and self-evaluations is further illustrated in Tafariodi and Swann's (1995) finding that global self-esteem is composed of the somewhat independent dimensions of self-liking and self-competency. I contend that self-evaluations of competency and acceptance are the pathways by which global self-esteem is linked to the social context in which the individual is functioning. Global self-esteem is seldom directly on the line while self-evaluations of competency and acceptance often are, especially for those with fragile self-esteem.

From our self-regulatory perspective, people who possess high but fragile self-esteem have the goal of clarifying and validating important self-evaluations. This general goal is intensified by specific situational demands. That is, if people are unsure about their competencies or insecure about their acceptance by others, then situations that require displays of competency or tests of the strength of their

acceptance pose threats to their self-evaluations and, consequently, to their self-esteem. It is in such circumstances that self-esteem regulation is fully engaged and the costs of the pursuit of self-esteem may be assessed. I will illustrate this point with the example of competency but mention that the same analysis applies to self-evaluations of acceptance (Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005).

Because competency presumes the capacity to produce desired outcomes, success and failure performance feedback implies something about the degree to which one possesses the competency in question. Therefore, performance outcomes become linked to one's self-worth via the diagnostic information such outcomes provide about competency. Herein lies a potential critical difference between secure and fragile self-esteem. Secure self-esteem is supported by outcome contingent, self-evaluations of competency, and acceptance. That is, a secure individual's pride in her athletic ability is based on a performance history in which successes were clearly and unambiguously linked to the individual's actions. Fragile high self-esteem we contend is associated with self-appraisals of competency and related feelings of self-esteem that are based on personal histories which include ambiguous and inconsistent experiences (Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2003; see also Jones & Berglas, 1978 for a similar argument). Although they may believe that they possess desired competencies, they are not confident in these assessments.

To summarize, possessing high but fragile self-esteem is not "healthy" because fragile self-esteem is "high maintenance" self-esteem. One of the costs of possessing fragile self-esteem is that it requires its chronic pursuit, a topic addressed in the following section.

PURSuing HIGH SELF-ESTEEM: HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY?

What are the consequences of having high self-esteem built upon positive but uncertain self-evaluations of competency and acceptance? Two lines of research from my laboratory speak to this question and illustrate the utility of the self-regulation approach to the study of fragile self-esteem. Research on self-handicapping behavior (Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2002) and our self-regulatory processing model of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003) illustrate the relations among self-esteem, self-regulation, and social interactions. The generic model is that individuals who possess positive but uncertain self-evaluations rely on their social interactions for validation and maintenance of these positive self-images. They are proactive in that they employ a collection of intra- and interpersonal strategies that distort the meaning of self-relevant feedback. Self-esteem regulation is intra-personally based to the extent that it arises and proceeds primarily within the head of the person and involves interpretations and distortions of meaning. The purpose of these tactics is to allow interpretations of self and situation that preserve desired self-evaluations. Self-esteem regulation is interpersonally based to the extent that the person uses other people to bolster feelings and thoughts about the self. These strategies allow people to modify their thoughts or feelings about others, alter

perceived relationship closeness, or constrain and channel others' responses so that the desired self-image is confirmed.

Intra-Personal Self-Esteem Regulation

People in general are quite adroit at interpreting social feedback in a self-enhancing way. For example, people persistently offer internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure (Miller & Ross, 1975; Weary, 1978). However, individuals with fragile, uncertain self-esteem—narcissists (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998, see also Kernis, 2001) and self-handicappers (Harris & Snyder, 1986; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1992)—appear to be more excessive in the self-aggrandizing attributions they offer for their outcomes. We observe this most clearly in studies that provide participants with response noncontingent success feedback. Narcissists persistently attribute such feedback to superior ability or competency. Our studies reveal that narcissists make self-aggrandizing attributional claims that they cannot meet (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Finnerty, 2003). Thus, one cost of this strategy is that uncertainty is perpetuated and failure or the threat of failure is more frequent and threatening.

In sum, evidence suggests that fragile, high self-esteem individuals engage in intra-personal esteem regulation in order to protect or enhance self-esteem. However, they do so at a cost because the biased interpretations of social feedback sustain the underlying uncertainty and thus necessitate future defensive regulation.

Interpersonal Self-Esteem Regulation

Self-esteem regulation is also achieved through interpersonal means. High, fragile self-esteem is tied closely to public behaviors, social interactions, or interpersonal relationships. Rhodewalt (2005; Rhodewalt et al., 1998) reports a series of daily diary studies in which narcissists display high but unstable self-esteem that is more closely entrained to the quality of their social interactions than is the self-esteem of less narcissistic individuals. Given that their self-esteem is so closely derived from their interactions with others, it is not surprising that they attempt to manipulate their relationships strategically in order to protect the self.

Not only do narcissists use others for self-esteem bolstering and protection, they often do so in way that harms the very relationships upon which they are dependent for self-esteem support. This point is illustrated in a study by Morf and Rhodewalt (1993), which examined narcissistic interpersonal relations in the context of self-evaluation maintenance process (SEM; Tesser, 1988). SEM behaviors involve thinking about and relating to close others in ways that enhance or protect one's self-esteem. For example, when a person is outperformed by a friend in a domain that is important to the person's self-evaluation, one response is to derogate the friend on other dimensions. Morf and Rhodewalt (1993) demonstrated that compared to less narcissistic individuals, narcissists experiencing comparison threat were more likely to derogate the threatening partner in a face to face interaction. Narcissists engage in interpersonal self-esteem maintenance in ways that potentially disrupt or harm the relationship.

CONCLUSION

Is possessing and striving for self-esteem always healthy? In this essay, I have attempted to argue that possessing secure self-esteem is healthy because under normal circumstances possessing it does not require striving for it. Rather, it is fragile, high self-esteem that is problematic because it is based on positive self-evaluations about which the individual is uncertain and insecure. Thus, these individuals are chronically self-involved in their activities and chronically striving for evidence that validates their positive self-evaluations. They do so via intra- and interpersonal strategies that may be effective in the short term but accrue intra- and interpersonal costs as well.

I point to lack of clarity regarding competence and acceptance as the toxic element in unhealthy high self-esteem because uncertainty shapes interaction goals (see Campbell, 1990; Kernis, 1993; and Swann & Schroeder, 1995 for similar propositions). For example, Swann (1983, 1985) has emphasized the importance of self-concept confidence or clarity in self-verification processes. According to Swann, people orchestrate their social worlds in an attempt to verify confidently held self-views because consensus about the self bolsters the predictability and controllability of the social environment. What about important, but uncertain self-views? Swann, Griffin, Predmore, and Gaines (1987) found that for less confidently held self-conceptions people sought self-enhancement. Thus, for individuals who are unsure of themselves, their self-presentational behavior involves “wishful thinking” in that they hope to acquire evidence that they are who they would like to be.

Rhodewalt and Tragakis (2002) have coined the term *self-solicitation* to refer to the interaction goal and strategic behaviors involved in seeking social feedback that enables one to maintain or protect desired or “hoped for” self-image. Self-solicitation then encompasses a set of interaction strategies that constrain others so that they provide feedback which supports the precarious self-view. As evidenced by research reviewed earlier, such strategies do accomplish this goal. However, this attributional manipulation can cause other interpretive ambiguities for the self-solicitor. Foremost is the possible awareness that the feedback was not unsolicited. At some level, self-solicitors have to be concerned about the hand their strategic interpersonal behaviors played in eliciting and shaping the feedback they receive. It is ironic that the strategies employed by uncertain individuals to maintain and protect and desired self-conceptions are often the implements that sustain their uncertainty. Self-solicitors become caught in an unending cycle of interpersonal self-evaluation and self-esteem regulation (cf. Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Perhaps then, striving for self-esteem among these individuals is unhealthy because their strivings impede the goal they seek, secure self-esteem.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Michael Kernis for asking important questions and providing provocative answers.

REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., & Boden, J. M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review*, 103, 5–33.
- Brown, J. D. (1986). Evaluations of self and others: Self-enhancement biases in social judgment. *Social Cognition*, 4, 353–376.
- Campbell, J. (1990). Self-esteem and clarity of the self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 538–549.
- Crocker, J., & Nuer, N. (2003). The insatiable quest for self-worth. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 31–34.
- Crocker, J., & Wolfe, C. T. (2001). Contingencies of self-worth. *Psychological Review*, 108, 593–623.
- Harris, R. N., & Snyder, C. R. (1986). The role of uncertain self-esteem in self-handicapping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 451–458.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*, Vol. 1. New York: Holt.
- Jones, E. E., & Berglas, S. (1978). Control of attributions about the self through self-handicapping strategies: The appeal of alcohol and the role of underachievement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4, 200–206.
- Kernis, M. H. (1993). The roles of stability and level of self-esteem in psychological functioning. In R. Baumeister (Ed.), *Self-esteem: The puzzle of low self-regard* (pp. 167–182). New York: Plenum Press.
- Kernis, M. H. (2001). Following the trail from narcissism to fragile self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 12, 223–225.
- Kernis, M. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 1–26.
- Kernis, M. H., Grannemann, B. D., & Barclay, L. C. (1992). Stability of self-esteem: Assessment, correlates, and excuse making. *Journal of Personality*, 60, 621–644.
- Miller, D. T., & Ross, M. (1975). Self-serving biases in the attribution of causality: Fact or fiction? *Psychological Bulletin*, 82, 213–225.
- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (1993). Narcissism and self-evaluation maintenance: Explorations in object relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 668–676.
- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (2001). Unraveling the paradoxes of narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model. *Psychological Inquiry*, 12, 177–196.
- Pelham, B. W. (1995). Self-investment and self-esteem: Evidence for a Jamesian model of self-worth. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 1141–1150.
- Pelham, B. W., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (1989). From self-conceptions to self-worth: On the sources and structure of global self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 672–680.
- Rhodewalt, F. (2005). Social motivation and object relations: Narcissism and interpersonal self-esteem regulation. In J. Forgas, K. Williams, & W. Von Hippel (Eds.), *Social motivation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rhodewalt, F. (2001). The social mind of the narcissist: Cognitive and motivational aspects of interpersonal self-construction. In J. P. Forgas, K. Williams, & L. Wheeler (Eds.), *The social mind: Cognitive and motivational aspects of interpersonal behavior* (pp. 177–198). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rhodewalt, F., Madrian, J., & Cheney, S. (1998). Narcissism and self-esteem instability: The effects of self-knowledge organization and daily social interaction on self-esteem and affect. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24, 75–87.

- Rhodewalt, F., & Morf, C. C. (1998). On self-aggrandizement and anger: A temporal analysis of narcissism and affective reactions to success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 672–685.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Sorrow, D. (2003). Interpersonal self-regulation: Lessons from the study of narcissism. In M. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Tragakis, M. (2002). Self-handicapping and the social self: The costs and rewards of interpersonal self-construction. In J. Forgas & K. Williams (Eds.), *The social self: Cognitive, interpersonal, and intergroup perspectives* (pp. 121–143). Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Tragakis, M. (2003). Self-esteem and self-regulation: Toward optimal studies of self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 66–70.
- Rhodewalt, F., Tragakis, M., & Finnerty, J. (2003). *Narcissism and self-handicapping: Linking self-aggrandizement to behavior*. University of Utah. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Vohs, K. D. (2005). Defensive strategies, motivation, and the self: A self-regulatory process view. In A. Elliot & C. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Conceiving the self*. New York: Basic Books.
- Swann, W. B. (1983). Self-verification: Bringing social reality into harmony with the self. In J. Suls & A. Greenwald (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 2, pp. 33–66). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Swann, W. B. (1985). The self as architect of social reality. In B. Schlenker (Ed.), *The self and social life* (pp. 100–125). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Swann, W. B., Griffin, J. J., Predmore, S. C., & Gaines, B. (1987). The cognitive-affective crossfire: When self-consistency confronts self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 881–889.
- Swann, W. B., & Schroeder, D. G. (1995). The search for beauty and truth: A framework for understanding reactions to evaluations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 1307–1318.
- Tafarodi, R. W., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (1995). Self-liking and self-competence as dimensions of global self-esteem: Initial validation of a measure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 65, 322–342.
- Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 21, pp. 181–227). New York: Academic Press.
- Weary, G. B. (1978). Self-serving biases in the attribution process: A re-examination of the fact or fiction question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 56–71.