

Reaping the Benefits of Pursuing Self-Esteem Without the Costs? Reply to DuBois and Flay (2004), Sheldon (2004), and Pyszczynski and Cox (2004)

Jennifer Crocker and Lora E. Park
University of Michigan

The commentaries on J. Crocker and L. E. Park's (2004) review suggested that Crocker and Park exaggerated the costs of pursuing self-esteem (K. M. Sheldon, 2004), that it is impossible not to pursue self-esteem (T. Pyszczynski & C. Cox, 2004), and that it is possible to pursue self-esteem in healthy ways, reaping the benefits without the costs (D. L. DuBois & B. R. Flay, 2004). In addressing the comments, the authors first clarify (a) what it means to pursue self-esteem, (b) the connection between having and pursuing self-esteem, and (c) what it means to let go of the pursuit of self-esteem. They then highlight points of overall agreement and disagreement between their view and those expressed in the commentaries and, finally, end with a discussion of future research directions to address the areas of disagreement and to shed further light onto the costs and benefits of pursuing self-esteem.

The three thoughtful commentaries on our article, "The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem" (Crocker & Park, 2004), helped us to identify and clarify areas of confusion, points of agreement and disagreement with other theoretical perspectives, and topics for future research (DuBois & Flay, 2004; Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004; Sheldon, 2004). Although different in their particulars, there are common themes in the comments. The commentators argued that we overstated the costs and understated the benefits of pursuing self-esteem. In their view, having self-esteem is good; level of self-esteem is related to reduction of anxiety and other positive outcomes, and it may even be a fundamental human need. If having self-esteem is good, they reasoned, then pursuing self-esteem must also be good because there is a logical connection between having and pursuing self-esteem. Although there are unhealthy ways to pursue self-esteem, there are also healthy ways to do so—through positive actions; validation of intrinsic rather than extrinsic aspects of the self; and autonomous, or "sidelong," pursuit of self-esteem—without the costs identified in our review (Crocker & Park, 2004). Because it is extremely difficult and perhaps impossible to give up the pursuit of self-esteem, the commentators suggested that people should engage in healthy pursuit of self-esteem rather than abandoning this pursuit.

Points of Clarification

We think this line of reasoning is based on misconceptions about what it means to pursue self-esteem, the connection between having and pursuing self-esteem, what letting go of the pursuit of self-esteem entails, and our previous lack of clarity about why our review was focused on the costs.

What Does It Mean to Pursue Self-Esteem?

The authors of the commentaries assume that if a behavior results in a boost to self-esteem, it necessarily reflects the pursuit of self-esteem. For example, Pyszczynski and Cox (2004) suggested that acting out of concern for another's well-being is consistent with cultural standards of value and therefore has the effect of raising self-esteem. Consequently, the goal of helping others cannot be separated from the goal of raising self-esteem. They pointed to the longstanding debate about whether prosocial behavior can ever be truly altruistic as an example of the difficulty of disentangling benefits to others and benefits to the self. DuBois and Flay (2004) pointed to the beneficial effects on self-concept and self-esteem of the Positive Action program (Flay, Allred, & Ordway, 2001), which explicitly teaches children to pursue self-esteem through positive actions, with the implication that if self-esteem is increased, students must indeed have had the goal of raising self-esteem through positive actions.

We agree that when people act with the goal of benefiting others, they are likely to reap benefits to the self such as increased relatedness, competence, autonomy, and self-regulation—and perhaps even a boost to self-esteem. We do not agree, however, that obtaining a boost to self-esteem is, by definition, evidence that the person's goal was to boost self-esteem. The intention, not the result, is crucial to goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 1995). In our view, "people differ in what they believe they must be or do to be a worthy and valuable person" (Crocker & Park, 2004, p. 393). People "actively pursue self-esteem by attempting to validate or prove their abilities or qualities in the domains in which self-worth is invested" (Crocker & Park, 2004, p. 393). Thus, we define the *pursuit of self-esteem* as the intention to validate self-worth by

Jennifer Crocker, Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research, and Department of Psychology, University of Michigan; Lora E. Park, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Crocker, Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, or to Lora E. Park, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1109. E-mail: jcrocker@umich.edu or lepark@umich.edu

proving or demonstrating the qualities that the self does and does not have. In the case of prosocial behavior, the pursuit of self-esteem does not depend on whether one's attempt to help actually demonstrates helpfulness or boosts self-esteem but rather on whether one's intention in helping others is to raise self-esteem by demonstrating one's helpfulness.

Another misinterpretation of what we mean by the pursuit of self-esteem is evident in Sheldon's (2004) discussion of self-esteem striving. He suggested that goal pursuits that mention self-esteem, such as "think positively about myself" or "work on my self-esteem," may be rated as enjoyable (Sheldon, 2004, p. 422). However, these types of self-esteem goals are different from our definition of the pursuit of self-esteem in that they do not articulate something the individual must be or do to feel worthy and valuable. The pursuit of self-esteem, as we define it, would be revealed in goal pursuits such as "get good grades so I can think positively about myself" or "work on my self-esteem by becoming more popular." These goals are likely to be associated with feelings of pressure and tension rather than enjoyment or identification, but even if they are enjoyable, they may have costs.

The Connection Between Having and Pursuing Self-Esteem

The connection between having and pursuing self-esteem also bears clarification. Many of the objections raised in the comments assume that self-esteem striving is equivalent or logically connected to having self-esteem. For example, DuBois and Flay (2004) discussed the correlates of high self-esteem under the heading, "Benefits of Achieving a High Level of Self-Esteem" (p. 415), implying that high trait self-esteem is achieved through the pursuit of self-esteem. Pyszczynski and Cox (2004) responded to our suggestion that people let go of pursuing self-esteem by asking whether people really can do without having self-esteem, again implying that having and pursuing self-esteem are equivalent. Sheldon (2004) made this assumption explicit when he suggested "it may be impossible to cleanly separate self-esteem striving and the state of self-esteem, as they seem to be logically connected to each other" (p. 422). Yet, as our discussion of intention illustrates, behavior does not always have the intended consequences, and pursuing self-esteem as we define it does not guarantee higher self-esteem. In fact, the available research shows that both contingencies of self-worth and self-validation goals tend to be negatively correlated or uncorrelated with trait self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Park & Crocker, 2003). When one succeeds at the pursuit of self-esteem, state self-esteem increases, but the magnitude of the boost to self-esteem is smaller than the drop in self-esteem when one fails (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). In other words, the pursuit of self-esteem may actually lower self-esteem on average. In sum, we do not think that pursuing self-esteem is logically or empirically related to having high self-esteem.

What Do We Mean by "Letting Go" of the Pursuit of Self-Esteem?

The commentators suggested that it is difficult or impossible to stop pursuing self-esteem (e.g., Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004). In our

view, the pursuit of self-esteem is a well-established habit; it is the default response when people encounter difficulty or threat in a domain in which their self-esteem is invested. Because the pursuit of self-esteem is habitual, we do not think that letting go of the pursuit of self-esteem is as simple as just deciding to stop pursuing it. We consider letting go of the pursuit of self-esteem to be similar to breaking habits, such as cigarette smoking. Just as the smoker trying to quit must redecide not to smoke each time the impulse to smoke arises, letting go of the pursuit of self-esteem requires consciously deciding, each time the urge to maintain, protect, or enhance self-esteem arises, whether one's intention is to validate the self or to adopt a goal larger than the self. In the absence of such a conscious choice, by habit people pursue self-esteem. As with breaking any habit, initial attempts might fail, but one can learn from experience and become more successful with practice.

Why Focus on the Costs?

We have been accused of overstating the costs of pursuing self-esteem (DuBois & Flay, 2004; Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004; Sheldon, 2004). We choose to focus attention on the costs because previous research has focused mainly on the benefits. We believe that people are much more aware of the emotional benefits of satisfying their contingencies of self-worth and have surprisingly little awareness of the wide range of costs that pursuing self-esteem has in their lives and the lives of those around them. The emotional benefits of successful pursuit of self-esteem are so intense and immediate that they may obscure the longer term costs, especially the costs to others. Recognizing the costs of pursuing self-esteem can threaten self-esteem, so people may avoid the self-reflection required to fully appreciate those costs. Our goal is not to deny the benefits of pursuing self-esteem but rather to not shy away from considering the costs. When people are unaware of the costs of their pursuit of self-esteem, they may be caught in a misery of their own making yet unable to see that they have the power to avoid these costs by shifting to different goals.

Points of Agreement

Having clarified these issues, we now identify several points on which we are in agreement with the commentators.

High Self-Esteem Is Not Necessarily Bad

First, we agree with the commentators that boosting self-esteem temporarily increases positive affect and decreases negative affect including anxiety (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). High trait self-esteem is associated with lower anxiety and depression and higher life satisfaction and positive affect; however, evidence that trait self-esteem causes these effects remains equivocal, with contradictory findings (Baumeister et al., 2003; Pyszczynski et al., 2004). In addition, high self-esteem may be adaptive in some situations but not in others. For example, having high self-esteem is beneficial when asking the boss for a raise but not helpful when one wants to understand where improvement is needed when the raise is not forthcoming (Argyris, 1982). High self-esteem people are more likely to persist in the face of failure, but this creates problems when failure is unavoidable (Heatheron & Ambady,

1993). In sum, we agree that having high self-esteem has benefits, although there are circumstances in which it is not helpful.

Some Forms of Pursuing Self-Esteem Are Healthier Than Others

All of the commentators agreed that pursuing self-esteem through validation of intrinsic aspects of the self, relatively autonomous goals, or prosocial behavior is healthier than pursuing self-esteem through extrinsic aspects of the self, less autonomous goals, or antisocial behavior. We agree that some means of pursuing self-esteem are healthier than others. Our suggestion that pursuing self-esteem has fewer costs when one attempts to satisfy relatively internal contingencies of self-worth rather than external contingencies is consistent with the suggestions of the commentaries.

It Is Difficult to Let Go of Pursuing Self-Esteem

Because American culture emphasizes pursuing self-esteem and because self-esteem boosts positive affect and reduces anxiety (Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004), we agree that it is difficult to let go of pursuing self-esteem, just as it is difficult to quit any bad habit.

Points of Disagreement

Self-Esteem Is a Fundamental Human Need

We disagree with the commentators' assumption that self-esteem is a fundamental human need (see Crocker & Nuer, 2004, for a discussion). Sheldon (2004) argued that self-esteem is a fundamental human need because the impact of events on self-esteem predicts satisfaction with those events, and events that raise self-esteem also increase positive affect. In our view, whether an event feels satisfying or increases positive affect are inadequate criteria for whether it is considered a fundamental human need. Consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1995), we think that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fundamental needs necessary for human thriving, whereas pursuing self-esteem is often a goal but not a need. Returning to our analogy, smoking is satisfying (and foregoing a cigarette is unsatisfying) to smokers, but this does not make smoking a fundamental human need. Pursuing self-esteem may be an acquired habit or addiction just as smoking cigarettes is an acquired habit or addiction (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). Although we are not persuaded that having high self-esteem is a demonstrated fundamental human need, we also note that this issue is irrelevant to our argument that pursuing self-esteem has costs, because having and pursuing self-esteem are independent of one another.

People Can Have the Benefits of Pursuing Self-Esteem Without the Costs

Each of the commentaries suggested strategies to obtain the benefits of pursuing self-esteem without incurring costs by pursuing self-esteem autonomously (Sheldon, 2004), through validation of the intrinsic self (Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004), or by engaging in positive actions that are valued and adaptive in daily life and the cultural context (DuBois & Flay, 2004). Sheldon (2004) also recommended sidelong pursuit of self-esteem, in which the self-esteem goal is outside of focal awareness. We generally agree that

the strategies suggested represent an improvement over pursuing self-esteem through extrinsic goals, for extrinsic reasons, or through actions that are devalued in daily life and the cultural context. Indeed, we do not question that people could reduce the costs of pursuing self-esteem by adopting these healthier strategies for pursuing self-esteem. However, we do not believe that the costs of pursuing self-esteem can be completely eliminated through these recommended strategies because when the intention is to raise self-esteem, people often abandon goals that are larger than the self in favor of goals that are ego focused.

Each of these strategies, we think, can be reduced to adopting mixed goals or intentions: both "do the right thing" (i.e., the morally virtuous, socially valued, or intrinsically important thing) and "feel good about myself." These mixed intentions may work well when doing the right thing and feeling good about oneself are clearly aligned. But sometimes the task is challenging, there is the risk of failure, or doing the right thing requires experiencing something negative, even something negative about the self. For example, inviting an unpopular child to a birthday party would be a positive action toward the unpopular child but could result in rejection or ridicule from other children, which could lower self-esteem. Giving a graduate student honest feedback about weaknesses may have long-term benefits for the student but could make the student angry, hurt, or defensive, leading the advisor to feel bad in the short term. In these cases in which doing the right thing and boosting self-esteem conflict, we suspect that the habit of pursuing self-esteem would lead people to choose the solution that makes them feel good, sacrificing doing good in favor of feeling good. If the superordinate goal is self-esteem (i.e., if one is doing good to feel good), then when these goals come into conflict one will always choose feeling good because that is the underlying intention. To do the right thing in these circumstances, one must have the conscious intention to do the right thing and be willing to risk feeling bad about oneself. In other words, one must be willing to let go of the benefits of pursuing self-esteem.

DuBois and Flay (2004) specifically suggested two conditions for the healthy pursuit of self-esteem: (a) cultivation of competencies and positive relationships that fit the norms and adaptive demands of daily life and the larger culture and (b) use of self-protective or self-deceptive strategies that do not conflict with the norms and demands of the person's surrounding environment. Although this recommendation seems close to suggesting that the pursuit of self-esteem is adaptive when it is adaptive, one can imagine specific competencies and relationships that are consistent with the norms and adaptive demands of daily life and the larger culture; for example, do well in school, be attractive, or be popular would seem to fit those demands. We are wholeheartedly in favor of doing well in school and being attractive and popular. However, research shows that basing self-esteem on these things creates costs, including stress, depression, alcohol use, disordered eating, and so on (Crocker, 2002). It is precisely for this reason that we suggest that people do the "right" thing because it is good for others and the self rather than because it boosts self-esteem.

Pursuing Self-Esteem Is Essential for Reducing Anxiety and Learning

We agree with Pyszczynski and Cox (2004) that anxiety interferes with learning and performance and that boosting self-esteem

decreases anxiety. However, we argue that although having self-esteem or experiencing boosts to self-esteem decreases anxiety, pursuing self-esteem generally increases anxiety (Dykman, 1998). Only when the pursuit is successful, and then only for a brief time, is anxiety reduced by the pursuit of self-esteem.

Pyszczynski and Cox (2004) argued that “saying ‘So what’ to fear is likely to require that people develop some means of minimizing the distress and disruption that fear typically produces” (p. 426). In our view, adopting a learning orientation more effectively reduces anxiety than does pursuing self-esteem. When people fail in domains of contingency, having a learning orientation buffers their self-esteem and attenuates anxiety. For example, Niiya, Crocker, and Bartmess (in press) found that priming an incremental self-theory (i.e., the belief that intelligence can be improved) attenuated the effects of failure on an academic test on self-esteem and anxiety, especially for students whose self-esteem was highly contingent on academic success. Indeed, Dweck (2000) has argued that when people adopt learning goals, failure provides a valuable opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and identify areas in need of improvement.

Furthermore, Argyris (1982) distinguished between two types of learning—single-loop learning, in which people solve problems but do not use their experience to change their approach to problems, versus double-loop learning, in which the process of solving problems changes how one approaches problems. We propose that a double-loop learning goal in which people have the intention to use the results of their efforts to identify what worked, what did not work, and what they want to do differently next time provides an alternative, preferable means for minimizing the distress and disruption that fear produces. Thus, rather than boosting self-esteem, we recommend adopting a learning orientation to reduce anxiety and the vulnerability of self-esteem.

Where Research Is Needed

The commentaries (DuBois & Flay, 2004; Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004; Sheldon, 2004) raise many questions that could be addressed through empirical research. First, as we noted (Crocker & Park, 2004), little research directly tests the idea that pursuing self-esteem has costs; thus, the first goal of research should be to examine the costs and benefits of pursuing self-esteem and the conditions under which they are most and least likely to occur. Second, research should investigate whether alternative goals, such as goals that are larger than the self and double-loop learning goals, attenuate or eliminate those costs. Third, research should investigate potentially healthy ways to pursue self-esteem and whether, in fact, one can secure the benefits of pursuing self-esteem without the costs.

We are intrigued by the suggestion that one can pursue self-esteem autonomously (Sheldon, 2004) or by validating intrinsic aspects of the self (Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004). In our reading of the literature, the pursuit of self-esteem is the prototype of introjection, a nonautonomous source of motivation. As Deci and Ryan (2000) put it,

Whereas with external regulation the control of behavior comes from contingent consequences that are administered by others, with introjected regulation the contingent consequences are administered by the individuals to themselves. The prototype examples are contingent

self-worth (pride) or threats of guilt and shame. Introjection is often manifested as ego-involvements. (p. 236)

Theoretically, then, the pursuit of self-esteem, as we have defined it, reflects controlled rather than autonomous motivation. Nonetheless, further empirical research is needed to investigate whether people can, indeed, pursue self-esteem for autonomous reasons.

DuBois and Flay (2004) discussed intervention programs, such as the Positive Action program, as evidence that the pursuit of self-esteem can be healthy. It is important to establish empirically the mediators of the effects of this intervention, which has many components; children are instructed to feel good about themselves by doing positive actions, but they are also instructed in health behaviors, social skills, goal setting, problem solving, and so on. Thus, although evaluations of this program demonstrate positive effects, they do not establish that the effects are mediated by the pursuit of self-esteem through positive behaviors; any of the components could account for its positive effects (Flay & Allred, 2003; Flay et al., 2001).

Although some ways of pursuing self-esteem are healthier than others, a critical test of the divergent viewpoints expressed here would be a comparison of the effects of pursuing mixed goals in which people do good to feel good versus having the intention to do good while letting go of the goal to raise self-esteem.

Conclusion

Although it is appealing to think that the benefits of pursuing self-esteem can be obtained without incurring the costs, we think this reflects wishful thinking. We believe it is difficult but possible to break the habit of pursuing self-esteem, especially when approached with a learning orientation in which successes and failures are viewed as learning opportunities. Paradoxically, it is only when people are willing to let go of the benefits of pursuing self-esteem and pursue goals that are larger than the self, without regard to whether self-esteem will increase as a result, that they unleash their potential and dare to create what they truly want in their lives. As British philosopher and business writer Charles Handy (1998) suggested,

I cannot live without others, but my life starts with me. I call it Proper Selfishness, the search for ourselves that, paradoxically, we often pursue best through our involvement with others. To be Properly Selfish is to accept a responsibility for making the most of oneself by, ultimately, finding a purpose beyond and bigger than oneself. It is the paradox of Epicureanism, that we best satisfy ourselves when we look beyond ourselves. (pp. xviii–xix)

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