Contingencies of Self-Worth

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For more than a century, self-esteem has captured the interest of psychologists and nonpsychologists alike. As a judgment of the value and worth of the self, self-esteem powerfully relates to emotional experience; people with high self-esteem feel happier and more satisfied with themselves and their lives than people with low self-esteem (Diener, 1984). In the 1960s, when researchers developed reliable measures of self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1965), research on self-esteem proliferated and documented positive associations between self-esteem and a host of desirable qualities (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). As these findings permeated public awareness, parents, educators, and policymakers ascribed increasing significance to boosting people's self-esteem. As one author put it, "Self-esteem has profound implications for every aspect of our existence. . . . I cannot think of a single psychological problem, from anxiety and depression to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation, that does not have its roots in low self-esteem" (Branden, 1994, pp. 5, 12). The desire for high self-esteem is pervasive; a recent study found that college students value self-esteem boosts more than they value their favorite food or favorite sex-ual activity, being with friends, or receiving a paycheck (Bushman, Moeller, & Crocker, in press).

Recently, however, researchers have begun to question the value and importance of high self-esteem. In a detailed review and critique of research, Baumeister and his colleagues (2003) concluded, "Overall, the benefits of high self-esteem fall into two categories: enhanced initiative and pleasant feelings. We have not found evidence that boosting self-esteem (by therapeutic interventions or school programs) causes benefits. Our findings do not support continued widespread efforts to boost self-esteem" (p. 1). Baumeister summarized his view as, "My bottom line is that self-esteem isn't really worth the effort" (Baumeister, quoted in the *New York Times*, October 1, 2002, p. D6). As a result of this influential review, self-esteem has fallen out of favor among many policymakers, and enthusiasm among researchers has waned.

Yet, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of self-esteem's demise are premature. Self-esteem has powerful consequences that go far beyond enhanced initiative and pleasant feelings. But the importance of self-esteem may lie not in whether people have it or not (i.e., whether trait self-esteem is high or low) but in what they believe they must be or do

to have worth and value as a person, and therefore to obtain boosts and avoid drops in self-esteem. Because boosts to self-esteem feel good, people want them; because drops in self-esteem are painful, people want to avoid them. Consequently, people are often driven by the pursuit of self-esteem.

In this chapter, we review research on when and how people pursue self-esteem, and the consequences of this pursuit. Our central proposition is that people seek to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem by attempting to obtain success and avoid failure in domains on which their self-worth has been staked. Paradoxically, people's desire to boost self-esteem and avoid drops in self-esteem can interfere with their pursuit of other goals that contribute to satisfaction of fundamental human needs, such as learning and developing supportive relationships. Thus, the pursuit of self-esteem often contributes to the dissatisfactions people experience with themselves and their lives. We consider alternative sources of motivation that might energize people as much as seeking self-esteem, and ultimately prove less costly and more satisfying.

Constructing Self-Esteem: Contingencies of Self-Worth

In his seminal discussion of self-esteem, William James (1890) made two points that have shaped contemporary thinking about self-esteem. First, James argued that *global self-esteem* (i.e., judgments of the worth and value of the entire self) is both a state and a trait. Specifically, he suggested that people tend to have average (i.e., trait) levels of self-esteem that are "direct and elementary endowments of our nature" (p. 43). This "average tone of self-feeling which each one of us carries about with him . . . is independent of the objective reasons we may have for satisfaction or discontent" (p. 43). In other words, trait self-esteem does not depend on how attractive, successful, popular, or virtuous people are. On the other hand, James believed that state self-esteem rises and falls as a function of achievements and setbacks; that is, "the normal *provocative* of self-feeling is one's actual success or failure, and the good or bad position one holds in the world" (James, 1890, p. 43, original empha-

sis). In summary, whereas trait self-esteem does not depend on objective circumstances or achievements, state changes around that trait level reflect changed circumstances, such as successes and failures.

Not all successes and failures have the same effect on self-esteem. James (1890) also argued that people select the domains on which they stake their self-worth. He concluded that "our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we *back* ourselves to be and do" (p. 45, original emphasis). In other words, people differ in the *contingencies* they must satisfy to attain high self-esteem. A *contingency* of self-worth is a domain or category of outcomes on which self-esteem is staked, so self-esteem depends on perceived successes, failures, or adherence to self-standards in that domain. For example, self-esteem may depend on being attractive, loved, competent, virtuous, powerful, or self-reliant. Taking James's two hypotheses together leads to an important but overlooked statement about the nature of self-esteem: *Global state self-esteem rises and falls around its typical (i.e., trait) level in response to achievements, setbacks, and altered circumstances related to one's contingencies of self-worth.*

Building on and extending James's (1890) insights, Crocker and Wolfe (2001; Wolfe & Crocker, 2003) developed a model of contingencies of self-worth and its relation to affect, motivation, and cognition. They proposed several testable hypotheses.

1. The impact of events and circumstances on self-esteem and affect depends on the relevance of those events to one's contingencies of self-worth; therefore, self-esteem and positive emotion increase more following success, and drop more following failure, when those successes and failures are relevant to contingencies of self-worth.
2. People are motivated to obtain boosts to self-esteem and will expend greater effort to succeed in domains of contingent self-worth than in unrelated domains.
3. People are motivated to avoid drops in self-esteem, so they avoid situations in which they might experience failures relevant to their contingencies of self-worth, or do things to deflect the failure away from the self.

4. Contingencies of self-worth influence the goals people have for important activities; in domains of contingency, people typically have the goal to prove themselves rather than the goal to learn, grow, or improve themselves.
5. Because people cannot always guarantee success or avoid failure in domains of contingency, contingencies of self-worth predict instability of self-esteem, which creates vulnerability to depression.

Overall, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) argued that contingencies of self-worth represent a trade-off between increased motivation and increased emotional vulnerability.

Later, Crocker and Park (2004) proposed that the costs of contingencies of self-worth extend far beyond emotional vulnerability. Because they encourage people to focus on what boosts or protects their self-esteem in the moment rather than on more distal and less affect-laden goals that may ultimately be more important to well-being, contingencies of self-worth can undermine learning, self-regulation, and relationships. Their analysis suggested that people would be better off—happier and more satisfied with their lives—if they abandoned the pursuit of self-esteem. But is it possible to let go of contingencies of self-worth, and even if one could, what would motivate people without them? Crocker and Park suggested that instead of being motivated to obtain boosts to self-esteem, people could adopt the goal to learn rather than to prove themselves, or they could have goals to contribute to something larger than themselves. In the remaining sections of this chapter, we review the status of these hypotheses about the functioning and consequences of contingencies of self-worth.

Measuring Contingencies of Self-Worth

To test these ideas, Crocker and her colleagues developed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS), which measures seven common contingencies of self-worth in college students: appearance, others' approval, outdoing others in competition, academic competence, love and support from family, virtue, and God's love (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). Each subscale of the CSWS has high internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas range from 0.82 to 0.97),

high test–retest reliability (ranging from .63 to .89 over an 8.5-month interval), and is distinct from other constructs such as level of self-esteem, social desirability, and the Big Five dimensions of personality (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). The highest-loading item on each subscale of the measure is included in Table 15.1.
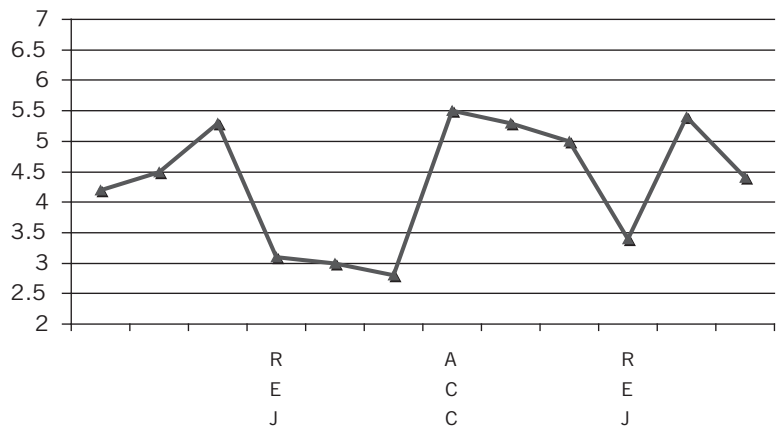
Contingencies of Self-Worth and the Impact of Events on Self-Esteem

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) proposed that self-esteem increases following success and decreases following failure in domains of contingent self-worth. This hypothesis may seem obvious, but previous efforts to demonstrate its validity yielded mixed or unsupportive results. As Marsh (1995, p. 1151) put it, "The intuitive appeal of this Jamesian perspective is so compelling that it has been widely accepted for over 100 years despite a dearth of supportive research." For example, the importance students place on domains of school achievement does not moderate the association between performance in those domains and global self-esteem (Marsh, 1995). Research has occasionally provided limited support for James's hypothesis. For example, Pelham and Swann (1989) reported that importance contributes to global self-esteem, but only among those who perceive that they have relatively few talents or have high self-esteem and are also highly certain of their positive self-views. These limitations

TABLE 15.1. Highest-Loading Item on Each Subscale of the CSWS

1. I feel worthwhile when I have God's love. (God's Love)
2. It is important to my self-worth to feel loved by my family. (Love and Support from Family)
3. Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect. (Competition)
4. My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethnical principles. (Virtue)
5. I don't care what other people think of me. (Others' Approval)
6. My sense of self-worth suffers whenever I think I don't look good. (Appearance)
7. I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing well academically (Academic Competence)

suggest that James's hypothesis that people selectively invest their self-esteem in some domains but not others is, at best, true of only a few people.

Because these studies assessed importance rather than contingencies of self-worth, and because they examined trait rather than state self-esteem, they do not really test James's formulation. Domains of school achievement can be important for many reasons unrelated to self-esteem contingencies (e.g., parents care about them, college admissions depend on them, or they are intrinsically interesting). Furthermore, James (1890) explicitly claimed that levels of trait self-esteem are "direct and elementary endowments of our nature . . . independent of the objective reasons we may have for satisfaction or discontent" (p. 43). Thus, previous tests of James' hypothesis may have missed the mark with regard to both the independent variable (importance vs. contingency) and the dependent variable (trait vs. state self-esteem).

College Seniors Applying to Graduate School

A study of college seniors applying to graduate school addressed these issues (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). We reasoned that the more students based their self-esteem on academic successes, the more their daily self-esteem should increase when they received admissions to graduate school, and the more it should decrease when they re-

ceived rejections. Participants first completed the CSWS. Then, for the next 2 months (from February 15 to April 15), they accessed a Web page twice a week (and any day they heard from a graduate school to which they had applied), completed a State (today) version of the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and a measure of positive and negative affect, and finally, reported on contacts from graduate programs. At the conclusion of the study, participants again completed the CSWS.

As expected, the more students based their self-esteem on academic competence, the more their self-esteem increased on acceptance days, and decreased on rejection days, relative to baseline days on which they received no news from the graduate programs to which they had applied. Figure 15.1 shows the data from a student who was low in the academic contingency of self-worth, for this sample. Figure 15.2 shows the data from a student whose esteem was highly contingent on academics. Consistent with these two cases, among the most academically contingent students, drops in self-esteem on rejection days were much larger than increases on acceptance days, suggesting that people who stake their self-esteem on achievements risk feeling worthless when they experience important, unambiguous failures. Furthermore, only the school competency contingency, and none of the eight other contingencies assessed in this study (appearance,

FIGURE 15.1. Self-esteem of a student low in academic contingency on baseline days, and days the student received rejections (REJ) and acceptances (ACC) from graduate programs.

FIGURE 15.2. Self-esteem of a student high in academic contingency on baseline days, and days the student received rejections (REJ) and acceptances (ACC) from graduate programs.

others' approval, love of friends and family, power, self-reliance, virtue, and God's love), moderated the impact of both acceptance and rejection on change in self-esteem. Such findings suggest that fluctuations in self-esteem are not due to a general characteristic of contingent self-esteem, but rather to the specific match of life events with a particular contingency of self-worth. This study thus supports the central hypothesis that successes and failures lead to increases and decreases in state self-esteem around a person's typical level, to the degree that self-esteem is contingent on that domain.

Because college seniors applying to graduate programs represent a highly selected sample, and acceptances and rejections from graduate programs are rare, important, and unambiguous successes or failures, the results of this study do not tell us much about whether contingencies of self-worth have consequences in daily life for most people. Do contingencies of self-worth predict ups and downs of self-esteem in response to more ordinary events? And do some situations increase this vulnerability of self-esteem?

Male and Female Psychology and Engineering Majors

A subsequent study addressed these questions by examining whether contingencies of self-worth predict how the grades that college students receive on their course work affect their daily self-esteem (Crocker, Karpinski,

Quinn, & Chase, 2003). Although grades can provide helpful information about a student's performance and areas for improvement, for highly academically contingent students, grades may signal their value or worth as a human being. Students who base self-worth on their academic performance may be highly vulnerable to fluctuations in self-esteem when they receive grades that are better or worse than they expected. Furthermore, students who feel marginalized in their academic major because their gender or ethnicity is underrepresented may be particularly vulnerable (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). For example, women are typically underrepresented in traditionally masculine fields, such as math and engineering. For women in such fields, basing self-worth on academic competence may lead to greater fluctuations in self-esteem than those for men in these fields, or women in psychology. To test these ideas, 122 students (male and female engineering or psychology majors) participated in an online daily report study of self-esteem and grades. They accessed a Web page and reported their grades on exams or papers on a given day, and completed a measure of daily self-esteem, in addition to other measures.

Not surprisingly, self-esteem increased on "good grade" days and dropped on "bad grade" days for the typical student; that is, the more students based their self-worth on academic competence, the more their self-esteem dropped on bad grade days, espe-

cially for women majoring in engineering. Interestingly, female engineering majors who based their self-worth on academic competence did not experience a big boost to self-esteem on good grade days, whereas academically contingent students who were in a gender-congruent major (e.g., female psychology majors, male engineering majors) experienced the biggest boosts to self-esteem on good grade days. Because women experience social backlash for displaying competence in masculine domains (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), succeeding in gender-incongruent fields may dampen potential boosts to self-esteem.

Together, these studies show that basing self-esteem on academics creates vulnerability to contingency-relevant events—big events, such as being accepted or rejected from graduate programs, and more ordinary events, such as receiving better- or worse-than-expected grades. Underrepresented students, such as women in engineering, are particularly vulnerable to drops in self-esteem due to bad grades. Indeed, for both women in engineering and men in psychology, staking self-worth on academic competence creates more risk than opportunity, as far as self-esteem is concerned.

Reactions to Social Rejection

These studies focused on the academic contingency of self-worth, leaving open the question of whether other contingencies also create self-esteem vulnerability to contingency-relevant events. One question concerns whether people who base their self-esteem on others' approval have stronger fluctuations of self-esteem in response to interpersonal events. A Jamesian perspective would suggest that the more people base their self-worth on others' regard or approval, the more their self-esteem will increase when they are accepted by others and decrease when they are rejected. Other scholars have argued that the need to belong (i.e., to feel accepted and not rejected) is so strong that social disapproval affects everyone's self-esteem, even those who report being unaffected by others' evaluations (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Indeed, Leary and colleagues (2003) showed that students' beliefs about the vulnerability of their self-esteem to social approval did not interact

with manipulated approval or disapproval to predict state self-esteem. However, several aspects of Leary and colleagues' study might account for their results: They used an ad hoc measure of basing self-esteem on others' approval, did not include a control condition, and participants did not actually interact with each other.

These issues were addressed in an experiment (Park & Crocker, 2008) in which participants completed the CSWS (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003), interacted with another participant, received negative feedback or no feedback about their likability (ostensibly provided by their interaction partner), then reported their state self-esteem. The higher students scored on the Others' Approval subscale of the CSWS, the lower was their state self-esteem following negative interpersonal feedback; the CSWS did not predict state self-esteem in the no-feedback condition. Thus, basing self-worth on others' approval predicts decreased self-esteem following negative interpersonal feedback.

Implications for Goals

Contingencies of self-worth shape the quality of the goals people have as they go about their lives. Achievement goal researchers have distinguished between learning goals, focused on self-improvement, and ability-validation goals focused on proving that one has the ability in question (Grant & Dweck, 2003). Our first indication that contingencies of self-worth might influence whether people have learning or proving goals came from the study of college seniors applying to graduate school (Crocker et al., 2002). In that study, we included an open-ended question in the first survey, asking students to write about what getting into graduate school would mean for them or about them. When we read what students wrote, a striking pattern emerged (Wolfe & Crocker, 2003). Students high in academic contingency, all of whom scored 6 or higher on a 1–7 scale (and well above the mean of 5.45), wrote things such as:

> "Getting into graduate school would mean that I am still a part of the academic elite. . . . Getting into a grad school (especially a really good one) would show me that I am one of the best students of an even more select group of students."

"Getting into graduate school would mean that I am truly a scholar. It would mean I'm intelligent, hard working, and a logical thinker. It would mean I can now be respected for being a good thinker."

"It means that my hard work payed [*sic*] off, and would mean that at least one grad school recognized that I am a brilliant and motivated student. In other words, it would reaffirm what I already know."

These academically contingent students view their success or failure at getting into graduate school as a reflection of their academic abilities, reputation, and belonging. In other words, acceptance would validate their academic abilities. In contrast, students low in academic contingency for this sample, who scored 5 or lower (and well below the mean for this sample) wrote:

"It means that I have been granted an opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills I need to be a competent and successful researcher. I will also be able to experience a different area of the country and make a fresh start somewhere else."

"Getting into graduate school is a formality. It is a mere reminder of potential, rather than a reflection of hard work. It signifies a long, arduous road ahead in academia."

"It really would not reflect on me as a person, but it would just be an accomplishment for me to be able to move on to the next step toward a career."

These students seem less focused on proving or validating their abilities, and more focused on the opportunity for improving and growing in graduate school. Indeed, academic contingency of self-worth was found to be strongly correlated with ability-validation goals and uncorrelated with mastery (i.e., learning and improvement) goals (Niiya & Crocker, 2009).

Implications for Affect

Because events related to contingencies of self-worth implicate the self and influence self-esteem, people are more ego-involved in such events. Consequently, people may experience more intense affective or emotional responses the more relevant certain events are to their contingencies of self-worth. The

study of seniors applying to graduate school, described previously, provided an opportunity to test this hypothesis. In addition to completing daily self-reports of self-esteem, participants completed a measure of positive and negative affect. As expected, within-person analyses of acceptances and rejections from graduate programs indicated that affect and self-esteem rose and fell together; positive affect, as well as self-esteem, rose in response to acceptances from graduate schools and fell in response to rejections. Furthermore, the more participants staked their self-worth on academic competence, the stronger their affective reactions to acceptances and rejections.

Similarly, Park and Crocker (2008) found that participants who highly based self-worth on others' approval reported lower self-esteem, more negative affect, and less positive affect after receiving negative interpersonal feedback. Thus, both changes in self-esteem and changes in positive affect in response to successes and failures are more intense the more self-worth is contingent on the domain. Together, these findings support the idea that boosts to self-esteem are emotionally pleasant, whereas drops in self-esteem are unpleasant.

This does not mean, however, that state self-esteem and positive affect are identical. Positive affect and self-esteem should be more strongly linked in domains in which self-esteem is contingent because positive events will lead to both happiness and high self-esteem. In contrast, in noncontingent domains, positive events may lead to happiness without self-esteem increases. Consistent with this idea, the study of graduate school applicants found that self-esteem and positive affect were more strongly linked the more students based their self-esteem on doing well in school (Crocker et al., 2002). Thus, for academically contingent students, gaining admission to graduate school raised their self-esteem and affect together, whereas rejection tended to lower them. For students whose self-worth was not staked on academic competence, acceptances led to positive affect without raising self-esteem, and rejections led to negative affect without lowering self-esteem. Thus, it seems that self-esteem and affect function independently in response to events that are irrelevant to one's contingencies of self-worth.

Implications for Motivation

Because increases in self-esteem are pleasant and drops in self-esteem are unpleasant, contingencies of self-worth may have motivational implications: People generally try to avoid the drops in self-esteem that follow from failing in domains on which self-worth has been staked, and they seek the increases in self-esteem that follow from succeeding in domains of contingency. Such motivation may be manifested in how people allocate their time and energy, including the groups they belong to and the amount of time they spend on various activities.

Selecting Situations

People may choose situations, settings, and circumstances in which their contingencies of self-worth are widely shared and valued. Doing so provides opportunities to satisfy one's contingencies and reassurance that the domains on which one has staked self-worth determine who is worthy and who is not. Consistent with this view, a longitudinal study of college freshmen found that students who based self-worth on having God's love were more likely to join religious organizations, and college women who based self-worth on their appearance were more likely to join sororities (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003).

Although selecting situations in which others share one's contingencies of self-worth may provide validation of one's contingencies and opportunities to succeed in those domains, these situations may also provide opportunities for failure. For example, a person who bases self-esteem on being smart and seeks out situations in which this contingency is widely shared may find him- or herself surrounded by other people who also want to be smart. The resulting struggle to be the smartest (or not the dumbest) affords many opportunities for both increases and decreases in self-esteem.

Once people select situations based on their contingencies of self-worth, these situations in turn influence behavior, and ultimately, contingencies of self-worth. For example, college freshmen (particularly European American women) who based self-esteem on their appearance were more likely to join sororities. Even after controlling for their contingencies of self-worth, women who joined sororities spent more time partying, used more drugs and alcohol, and showed more symptoms of disordered eating than women who did not join sororities (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). Thus, by shaping the situations people choose for themselves, contingencies of self-worth may indirectly shape what people do and inadvertently create or reinforce contingencies of self-worth.

Choosing How to Spend One's Time

With only 24 hours in a day, everyone makes choices each day about how to use their time. Contingencies of self-worth are likely to shape those choices. After the end of both their first and second semesters of college, students reported how much time they spent in a variety of activities (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003). Controlling for differences associated with students' gender, race, and socioeconomic status, researchers found that contingencies of self-worth prior to entering college significantly predicted how much time students spent in each of these activities. Furthermore, specific contingencies predicted specific activities. For example, students who based their self-esteem on academic competence spent more time studying; students who based self-esteem on virtue spent more time volunteering and less time partying; students who based self-esteem on God's love spent more time in religious activities and less time partying; students who based self-esteem on love and support from family spent more time with or talking to their family; and students who based self-esteem on their appearance spent more time grooming, exercising, shopping for clothes, socializing, and partying.

Thus, people spend more time on activities that enable them to satisfy their contingencies. But does the motivation that people derive from their contingencies result in increased success at achieving their goals? Both laboratory experiments and a longitudinal study of college freshmen suggest that, at least in the domain of academic competence, the answer is "no." In two experiments, academic contingency of self-worth negatively predicted test performance, unless students were induced to have a learning rather than a performance achievement goal (Lawrence & Crocker, 2009). The longitudi-

nal study found that the more students based self-worth on academic competence, the more hours per week they reported studying (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Although students who studied more had higher grade point averages (GPAs), the association between academic contingency of self-worth and GPA was nonexistent ($r = .00$) after researchers controlled for other contingencies and personality variables.

Thus, the extra time students spend studying because their self-esteem is at stake may not help them to improve their performance or increase their GPA. Indeed, the finding that contingencies predict poor performance when students have ego-involved performance goals (but not learning goals) suggests that academically contingent students may be trying to prove rather than improve their intelligence.

In fact, academic contingency of self-worth at the start of college predicted a host of problems at the end of the first year (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Specifically, academically contingent students reported having more academic difficulties (e.g., lower-than-expected grades, struggling to meet their own and others' academic standards, conflicts with professors and teaching assistants).

Overall, these findings suggest that the motivation people derive from investing their self-esteem in academics does not improve their performance, and paradoxically contributes to their academic dissatisfaction over time.

Costs of Pursuing Self-Esteem

If contingencies of self-worth increase motivation but create self-esteem vulnerability, many people might be willing to accept that trade-off. But what if the costs of contingent self-worth extend far beyond occasional pain and suffering from drops in self-esteem? What if, as the findings on academic problems and dissatisfactions suggest, the things that people do to obtain boosts to self-esteem and avoid drops actually interfere with achieving their most cherished goals, undermine the success they strive for, damage their relationships, and ultimately take a toll on their mental health? In that case, people might prefer a source of motivation that is stimulating, but without these costs.

Self-Esteem as the "Prime Directive"

Contingencies of self-worth, and the pursuit of self-esteem they inspire, can be costly because they co-opt, or take over, other goals. As noted previously, research shows that boosts to self-esteem feel good and drops in self-esteem feel painful. The "high" associated with success related to contingencies of self-worth may even become addictive (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001), leading people to seek ever greater success to obtain the same emotional high. On the flip side, the pain associated with failing at contingencies of self-worth can be excruciating; failure in these domains means not simply that one failed, but that one is a failure as a person, with no worth or value. People with low self-esteem believe they have little value to others and therefore feel at risk of exclusion from relationships and social groups (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Indeed, Albert Ellis observed that self-esteem is "the worst sickness known to man or woman, because it says, 'I did well, therefore I am good,' which means that when I do badly—back to shithood for me" (quoted in Green, 2003).

Consequently, for people with contingent self-esteem, seeking success and avoiding failure in domains of contingency can become a "prime directive" (Kernis, 2003). Goals such as learning, achieving in school, forming close relationships, or contributing to the well-being of others, which all have inherent value because they lead to satisfaction of fundamental needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), become means to an end—high self-esteem. Ultimately, pursuing self-esteem as a prime directive has costs for self-regulation and goal attainment, learning, relationships, and mental health.

Self-Regulation

People with contingent self-esteem often prioritize protecting self-esteem, even if doing so interferes with achieving other goals (Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006). For example, people who base their self-worth on being in a relationship are likely to experience emotional distress and obsessively pursue their ex-partners (Park, Sanchez, & Brynildsen, 2011), which may interfere with the pursuit of other goals. As

another example, when students base their self-esteem on academic achievement and receive lower-than-expected grades, they may protect self-esteem by disparaging the exam or the instructor, deciding the course is not interesting or important, or even disengaging from their major or from school entirely (Crocker, Karpinski, et al., 2003).

When people are uncertain that they can succeed at a task, they may sometimes sabotage their own performance, which decreases the probability of success but provides a plausible excuse for failure that does not indicate lack of ability. For example, reduced effort, practice, or persistence (e.g., Tice & Baumeister, 1990); procrastination (e.g., Ferrari & Tice, 2000); drinking alcohol before important meetings (e.g., Jones & Berglas, 1978); and listening to distracting music while studying or performing a difficult task (e.g., Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986) all provide excuses for failure without undermining perceptions of one's competence. If people are concerned with protecting their self-esteem, then they may be especially motivated to engage in such self-handicapping strategies.

Three experiments supported this hypothesis (Niiya, Brook, & Crocker, 2010). Specifically, academically contingent students who believed that intelligence can improve with effort (i.e., those with incremental theories of intelligence) chose to listen to performance-impairing music or avoided practicing before a difficult task, but not before an easy task (Studies 1 and 2). In addition, academically contingent students who endorsed an incremental theory of intelligence and were required to practice before a test (and therefore could not self-handicap) attributed their poor performance to a lack of ability and had lower self-esteem following failure (Study 3).

In contrast, academically contingent students who believed that intelligence is fixed (i.e., those with entity theories of intelligence) did not self-handicap more before a difficult versus easy task, presumably because they did not believe they would be able to improve with effort, so withholding practice would not protect their self-esteem. Together, these studies show that contingencies of self-worth can undermine self-regulation by leading students to self-handicap prior to difficult tasks when they believe that it

is possible to improve through effort. Thus, some people would rather self-sabotage and increase their risk of failure, but with a good excuse, than risk a drop in self-esteem.

Learning

Crocker and Park (2004) proposed that contingent self-worth undermines learning because people seek to validate their desired images in these domains, prioritizing the demonstration of their competence over acquiring competence. As noted previously, students who based their self-worth on academic competence sought to achieve success and avoid failure in this domain to validate their academic ability, and hence their self-worth (Niiya & Crocker, 2009). Ability-validation goals, in turn, lead people to approach tasks with an ego-involved focus on their performance, how it compares to others, and what this means about them, creating vulnerability to failure (Grant & Dweck, 2003; Nicholls, 1984). Ability-validation goals also predict negative outcomes, such as low ability attributions, rumination, and loss of self-worth following real or hypothetical failure or setbacks (Grant & Dweck, 2003).

Recent research suggests that the problem with contingencies of self-worth is not that they undermine the motivation to learn, but that they lead to an ego-involved approach to learning. In other words, learning can become another way to demonstrate ability or prove something about oneself. In fact, academic contingency of self-worth does not correlate negatively with mastery or learning goals, as one might expect if basing self-esteem on academics directly interfered with the goal to learn. Rather, research suggests that students whose self-worth is staked on academics are sometimes high in mastery goals and learning orientations (Niiya & Crocker, 2009). These contingent, learning-oriented students want to validate their ability, which can increase the vulnerability of their self-esteem to failure (Niiya & Crocker, 2009).

Although some achievement goals researchers view learning goals as an antidote to ego-involved performance goals (Dweck, 2000; Grant & Dweck, 2003), people with academic contingencies of self-worth may view learning as a means to performance that boosts their self-worth. The problem

with this approach is that it seems incompatible with a deeper commitment to personal growth and change, and with viewing failure as an important learning opportunity rather than a threat to the self (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003).

Relationships

Crocker and Park (2004) also suggested that contingencies of self-worth, and the pursuit of self-esteem they trigger, have costs for relationships. When self-esteem is at stake, people become preoccupied with what events mean relative to them, particularly their worth or value as a person. They want to validate their positive qualities to themselves, and they want to make sure that other people "get" their positive qualities, to affirm their self-worth. This self-involvement may undermine relationships by decreasing supportiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Canevello & Crocker, 2010).

An experiment tested this hypothesis by having pairs of previously unacquainted students interact (Park & Crocker, 2005). First, participants (targets) high or low in self-esteem and academic contingency of self-worth received failure feedback on an academic test, or no evaluative feedback. Next, targets interacted with another participant (partners) who disclosed a personal problem; afterward, both targets and partners completed questionnaires assessing targets' supportiveness and liking. As expected, targets who highly based self-worth on academics reported being less supportive and liked their partners less when they had previously experienced academic failure. However, this pattern was observed only among high-self-esteem participants. Partners of high-self-esteem, academically contingent participants in turn rated these targets as less supportive and less likable. Low-self-esteem, academically contingent targets showed the reverse pattern, although these findings did not reach statistical significance.

The finding that high-self-esteem but not low-self-esteem targets became less supportive and less likable following failure in a domain of contingent self-worth is consistent with other research showing that high-self-esteem people become defensive and even arrogant when confronted with self-

threats, whereas low-self-esteem people respond more indirectly to self-esteem threats (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). For example, whereas high-self-esteem, academically contingent people refute self-threats by seeking to prove their abilities following failure, low-self-esteem, academically contingent people disengage from this goal and are quicker to associate themselves with failure than with success (Park, Crocker, & Kiefer, 2007).

Indeed, although both high- and low-self-esteem people feel threatened by failure in domains of contingency, they have different strategies for responding to these threats (Park & Crocker, 2005; 2008). For example, high-self-esteem people who highly base self-worth on their appearance and receive a threat to this domain report greater desire to connect with close others, whereas low-self-esteem, appearance-contingent people report less desire to interact with others and greater desire to improve their physical attractiveness (Park & Maner, 2009).

Mental Health

Contingencies of self-worth may increase vulnerability to certain mental health problems, particularly anxiety and depression. People who are prone to depression have self-esteem that is vulnerable, or contingent, in certain domains (Beck, 1983; Bibring, 1953; Blatt & Shichman, 1983; Higgins, 1987). Cognitive theories of depression and anxiety emphasize how irrational beliefs and dysfunctional attitudes can contribute to feelings of worthlessness (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Some of the dysfunctional attitudes related to vulnerability to depression and anxiety reflect stringent contingencies of self-worth (Kuiper & Olinger, 1986; Roberts & Monroe, 1994). For example, "I am nothing if a person I love doesn't love me," indicates that self-worth is completely dependent on the affection of a single person.

Not all contingencies of self-worth pose the same risk for depression, however. Contingencies of self-worth related to external events, such as others' approval, academic success, appearance, and winning competitions, predict increased symptoms of depression over the first semester of college, but contingencies related to more internal events

(religious faith in God's love, or being virtuous) do not predict increases in depressive symptoms (Sargent & Crocker, 2006).

Internal and external contingencies differ in two ways that might account for the stronger association of external than internal contingencies with depressive symptoms. First, positive and negative events relevant to external contingencies, such as social approval or disapproval, praise or criticism, may simply occur more frequently than positive or negative events relevant to internal contingencies, creating more fluctuations in self-esteem that depends on external contingencies. Instability in self-esteem, in turn, takes a toll on mental health. Several studies have demonstrated that fragile or unstable self-esteem predicts increased depressive symptoms over time (Gable & Nezlek, 1998; Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995). The association between unstable self-esteem and symptoms of depression is particularly strong in people with low self-esteem or a tendency toward depression (Crocker, Karpinski, et al., 2003).

Second, internal contingencies of self-worth, such as religious faith or virtue, may motivate prosocial, constructive behaviors, creating more supportive relationships and counteracting the negative effects of contingent self-worth. For example, students who base their self-worth on virtue do more volunteering than students who score low in this contingency (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2003); their social contributions may ultimately benefit their mental health (Crocker, Canevello, Breines, & Flynn, 2010).

In summary, contingencies of self-worth incur costs to self-regulation, learning, relationships, and mental health. If people seek self-esteem because they think it will bring them love, respect, accomplishment, and happiness, then the pursuit of self-esteem is ironic because, ultimately, it creates exactly what people do not want—loneliness, isolation, alienation, and illusory but not real competence.

Genuine or Defensive Self-Esteem?

Genuine self-esteem refers to a true sense of self-worth, self-respect, and acceptance of one's strengths and weaknesses (Rosenberg, 1979). The research reviewed here suggests that people are typically defensive and unwilling to acknowledge their flaws and shortcomings realistically. The notion that people differ in their contingencies of self-worth provides an alternative way to think about the issue of defensive versus genuine self-esteem. According to this view, it is the potential loss of self-esteem in the face of self-threatening information that spurs defensiveness. Rather than focus on whether self-esteem is true or genuine, it may be more useful to focus on what self-esteem is based on and whether that contingency of self-worth is vulnerable to, or currently subject to, attack.

Self-esteem is relatively impervious to attack in domains in which it is noncontingent; that is, when confronted with negative information about the self, it may be easier to acknowledge one's mistakes and failures nondefensively and to take responsibility for them in noncontingent domains—domains in which self-worth is not on the line. Thus, people are likely to avoid self-threats preemptively and react defensively to self-threats in domains in which their self-esteem is contingent. This is not the same as arguing that defensive self-esteem is not genuine, untrue, or self-deceptive. The problem is not that this self-esteem is false, hiding inner feelings of worthlessness, but that it is fragile, and consequently needs to be defended (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

Overall Contingency, or Specific Domains of Contingency?

Whereas this discussion focuses on the domains on which people stake their self-esteem, other approaches focus on differences between people in whether self-esteem is contingent versus noncontingent. For example, Rogers (1951) emphasized the role of unconditional positive regard from others in producing people with noncontingent self-esteem. Deci and Ryan (1995) suggested that self-esteem can be either contingent or "true," with true self-esteem developing naturally from autonomous, efficacious action in the context of supportive, authentic relationships. Kernis and Waschull (1995) emphasized differences between people whose self-esteem is stable versus unstable.

Whereas these perspectives emphasize individual differences in the overall quality of contingent self-esteem, our approach emphasizes within-person differences, with

each person's self-esteem contingent on some domains more than others. Focus on the specific domains on which people base their self-esteem is supported by studies showing that different contingencies can lead to different behaviors, vulnerabilities, and outcomes. For example, research shows that people with different attachment styles (e.g., secure, preoccupied, dismissing, fearful) are likely to base their self-esteem differentially on certain domains more than others (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). Research that simply distinguishes between people with contingent versus noncontingent self-esteem may thus obscure these important differences to the point that the distinction seems irrelevant.

Another reason to focus on the domains in which people stake their self-worth rather than on whether a person has contingent or noncontingent self-esteem has to do with one's taste and assumptions about human nature as much as scientific merit. Discussions of individual differences in contingent self-esteem lead to judgments about the "good" or "right" way to be, and self-esteem can become contingent on it! Everyone *should* have noncontingent self-esteem, and those who do must be superior to and more worthy than those whose self-worth is contingent.

But perhaps contingencies of self-worth are part of the human condition. People with different cultural, social, and personal experiences draw different conclusions about what they must be or do to have worth and value, but we all learn that our worth, and therefore our safety and social acceptance, depend on *something.* From this perspective, none of us has reason to feel judgmental of or superior to others; we are all in the same boat, trying to stay afloat on a sea of self-worth contingencies, trying to avoid being swamped by feelings of worthlessness. This vision of shared fallibility may do more to prompt understanding and compassion than a vision in which some people—those who think they have noncontingent self-esteem—stand above and pass judgment on those with contingent self-esteem.

Does Level of Self-Esteem Matter?

Although the present analysis focuses on contingencies of self-worth, level of self-esteem may still play an important role in these pro-

cesses. People high in trait self-esteem show a variety of defensive responses to threatening information, including dismissing the accuracy and validity of the feedback (Brockner, 1984; Brockner, Derr, & Laing, 1987; Shrauger, 1975), derogating the source of the feedback, derogating other people (e.g., Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; see Wills, 1981, for a review), dismissing the importance of the domain in which they did poorly (Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001), and attributing the negative outcome to external or temporary causes (for discussions, see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Bradley, 1978; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

Because people with high self-esteem generally think more positively about themselves and have clearer and more certain self-concepts (Campbell & Lavalee, 1993), they may find it easier to disbelieve or discredit negative information about themselves (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). Presumably, all of these defensive responses occur more when contingencies of self-worth are threatened (e.g., Park & Crocker, 2005). High-self-esteem people also face potentially greater losses of self-esteem in the face of failure in contingent domains and may therefore be more motivated to avoid drops in self-esteem by discrediting self-threats in contingent domains.

Transcending Contingent Self-Esteem

What can people do to escape the costs associated with contingencies of self-worth? Is there an alternative to seeking self-esteem? Researchers have suggested several potential avenues for avoiding the costs of contingent self-esteem: developing noncontingent self-esteem, practicing self-compassion, becoming learning-oriented, affirming the self, and shifting to self-transcendent, other-oriented goals.

Noncontingent Self-Esteem

As one alternative, people might avoid the costs of contingencies of self-worth by developing what Deci and Ryan (2000) call "true" self-esteem. True self-esteem is noncontingent because it is not vulnerable to threat and therefore does not need to be de-

fended. Although noncontingent self-esteem may be an aspirational goal, it may not be realistically achievable. Few people seem to have noncontingent self-esteem; in a study of college freshmen, only 4% of students scored 3 or lower (on a 1- to 7-point scale) on all seven contingencies of self-worth assessed, and these 4% may well have contingencies of self-worth that were not captured by the CSWS (Crocker, 2002). Although the pursuit of self-esteem may be particularly apparent in North American culture, which emphasizes the importance of self-esteem and the relative worth of one person over another based on specific accomplishments or qualities, preliminary research found no differences between Japanese and U.S. students in levels or functioning of contingencies of self-worth, with one exception: Japanese students base their self-esteem more on harmony with others than do U.S. students (Uchida & Crocker, 2005).

It may be possible to arrive at a spiritual or philosophical understanding that all people have worth, and this understanding might form the basis of noncontingent self-esteem. This would likely be a desirable state, if one could achieve and sustain it. Yet giving up one's contingencies may be as difficult as it is relieving because contingencies tend to be learned at a young age and are reinforced over a lifetime of social experience.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion may provide another alternative to seeking self-esteem via satisfaction of contingencies of self-worth. Based on Buddhist thought, self-compassion entails three components: self-kindness (rather than self-evaluation or self-judgment), mindfulness (rather than overidentification or ego involvement), and a sense that one's weaknesses and failures stem from one's humanity, and therefore provide common ground with others (rather than creating feelings of isolation or separation from others) (Neff, 2003).

Self-compassion and self-esteem both involve positive views of the self and are highly associated with each other (Neff, 2003). However, self-compassion appears to provide a healthier means of achieving positive self-feelings. Controlling for level of self-esteem, self-compassion is associated with less self-worth contingency (especially exter-

nal contingencies such as others' approval, performance, and appearance) and greater stability of self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Therefore, self-compassion may provide a means of reducing contingencies of self-worth and avoiding their costs.

Supporting the idea that self-compassion provides a more constructive approach to the self, Leary and his colleagues (2007) investigated the cognitive and emotional processes by which self-compassionate people deal with unpleasant life events. In contrast to contingencies of self-worth, which lead to stronger negative self-feelings following negative events, self-compassion buffered people against negative self-feelings when imagining distressing social events, and moderated negative emotions following ambivalent feedback. When a self-compassionate perspective was experimentally induced, participants more readily acknowledged their role in negative events without feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions. These studies suggest that self-compassion attenuates people's reactions to negative events, in contrast to contingencies of self-worth, which exaggerate reactions to negative events.

Self-Affirmation

Self-affirmation may provides yet another alternative to reduce the costs of contingent self-esteem. Steele (1988) proposed that people can cope with a threat to the self by affirming themselves in another domain to maintain a phenomenal experience of the self as adaptively and morally adequate (see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation has been operationalized in a variety of ways—for example, by reminding people of their most central values or by having people complete a self-esteem scale, which presumably reminds high-self-esteem people of their positive attributes. In theory, self-affirmation restores a sense of self-integrity, boosts self-esteem, and consequently reduces the need to defend against self-threat.

Empirical research suggests that self-affirmation, particularly writing about important values, reduces defensive responses to a wide range of self-threats (for reviews, see McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). In particular, people are more accepting of self-threatening information when they have the opportunity to write about their most important value.

Thus, writing about important values may reduce the costs of contingencies of self-worth.

Although studies have demonstrated that writing about important values reduces defensiveness, research has not identified the mechanism for this effect. Most attempts to identify a mechanism have focused on how people feel or think about themselves. However, research to date has provided little evidence that self-affirmation works by boosting self-esteem, self-images, or positive affect (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Rather, reflecting and writing about important values might enable people to transcend concerns about self-image or self-worth. Writing essays about important values reminds people of what they care about beyond themselves and induces positive, *other*-directed feelings, such as love (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008). Consistent with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), love may elevate and inspire people to improve, opening them to potentially threatening information (Haidt, 2003).

Overall, research suggests that people can avoid the costs of contingencies of self-worth by finding ways to transcend the self or, more specifically, to transcend concerns about their own self-worth. By focusing on being self-compassionate or on things they care about beyond themselves that inspire feelings of love and connection, people can reduce the negative emotional experiences and defensiveness that typically accompany threats to contingencies of self-worth.

Conclusion

The pursuit of self-esteem has become a central preoccupation in North American society (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Schools have devoted aspects of their curriculum to raising children's self-esteem (Dawes, 1994; Seligman, 1998), and many people organize much of their lives around activities, situations, and people that help to protect, maintain, and enhance their self-esteem. The idea that our worth is contingent—that it depends on our accomplishments, appearance, and deeds—is pervasive in our culture (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). In this chapter, we have tried to articulate how these contingencies

of self-worth operate in our daily lives. We have noted the high costs of pursuing self-esteem for mutually caring relationships with others, learning from experiences, and mental and physical health.

In closing, we want to emphasize again that the problem is not in *having* high or low self-esteem. Rather, the problem is in *seeking* self-esteem—in all the things we do, big and small, that have as their primary goal maintaining and protecting self-worth. Instead of seeking self-esteem, pursuing goals that connect oneself with others and with the world in caring and compassionate ways may not only avoid the costs of seeking self-esteem, but also facilitate the development of authentic relationships that, in the end, may be more sustaining than self-esteem.

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