FRAGILE SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-ENHANCEMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Michael H. Kernis)

ABSTRACT

I predicted that self-esteem level and stability, or self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency would predict self-enhancement in participants. By using a self-assessment method and a regression analysis of the differences between their estimated and actual scores, one of the markers of fragile self-esteem, self-esteem contingency, significantly predicted performance estimation in e-words. For persons with high self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the more likely they were to self-enhance. In contrast, for persons with low self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the less likely they were to self-enhance. Future directions include looking at additional measures of self-enhancement and its relationship to other psychological constructs.

INDEX WORDS: self-esteem level, self-esteem stability, contingent self-esteem, self-enhancement, performance overestimation

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INTRODUCTION

"Nothing builds self-esteem and self-confidence like accomplishment."
--Thomas Carlyle

"Whoever despises himself still esteems the despiser within himself."
--Friedrich Nietzsche

"I think high self-esteem is overrated. A little low self-esteem is actually quite good…Maybe you are not the best, so you should work a little harder."
--Jay Leno

This document presents findings of a project that examined whether self-enhancement differed as a function of whether individuals' self-esteem was fragile or secure... First, I introduce the distinction between fragile and secure self-esteem and its proposed relationship to self-enhancement. Next, I explain the methods and results of this project highlighting significant findings. Following this, I discuss these findings, the limitations of the study, and future directions for the research.

Self-Esteem: An Introduction

For a long time, discussions concerning self-esteem centered around whether individuals' self-esteem was either high or low. Until fairly recently, low self-esteem individuals were generally characterized as genuinely unhappy and dissatisfied with themselves. However, Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) suggested that rather than having an intense dislike for themselves, low self-esteem individuals are uncertain and confused, with feelings of self-worth that are predominantly neutral. This assertion was based on data from many studies suggesting that low self-esteem individuals typically give responses on self-esteem inventories that hover

around the midpoint of the scales (reflecting neutral self-feelings), contrary to the expected

endorsement of statements expressing clear dislike or dissatisfaction.

Typically, in direct contrast to low self-esteem, high self-esteem is characterized by

global feelings of self-liking, self-worth, respect, and acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965). Thinking

about self-esteem this way beneficially anchors self-esteem to feelings about the self as a whole.

Stated differently, self-esteem does not reflect evaluations of various characteristics or specific

qualities. However, individual differences exist in the extent to which people hold specific self-

evaluative dimensions to be important determinants of their global self-esteem (Crocker &

Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Research has noted the variations that exist in individuals

with high self-esteem, which has lead to the development of two contrasting frameworks on the

nature of high self-esteem. One framework suggests that high self-esteem is fragile whereas the

other framework suggests that high self-esteem is secure. In acknowledging that both fragile and

secure high self-esteem exist, the way by which to determine it becomes important. There are

several different ways to distinguish between secure and fragile high self-esteem (Kernis, 2003).

I will focus here only on those ways that I utilized in the current research.

Stability of Self-esteem

One way to distinguish between fragile and high self-esteem involves the extent to which

current feelings of self-worth fluctuate across time and situations. Situationally conditional

feelings of self-worth reflect the degree to which someone's self-esteem is unstable. When

looking at these changes across time and situations, greater fluctuations reflect more unstable

self-esteem and smaller fluctuations reflect more stable self-esteem. This characterization has

broad implications for the discussion of self-esteem level. For example, Kernis (2003) asserts

that individuals with unstable high self-esteem possess self-esteem that is fragile, whereas people

with stable high self-esteem possess self-esteem that is secure. Along these lines, research has found that persons with unstable high self-esteem are more prone to anger and hostility (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989), and report increased tendencies to "get even" in response to hypothetical partner transgressions (Kernis, 2003), compared to persons with stable high self-esteem.

Contingent Self-esteem

A second way to distinguish between fragile and secure high self-esteem is to determine the extent to which individuals' feelings of self-worth are dependent upon the attainment of certain outcomes. In other words, feelings of self-worth are not well anchored because the experience of self-worth is contingent upon internal and external influences. High self-esteem that is contingent is fragile because it remains high only as long as one is successful at satisfying relevant criteria. In the event these successes cease, the person's high self-esteem will likely become low self-esteem. In contrast to this fragile contingent self-esteem, true high self-esteem reflects well-anchored and secure feelings of self-worth that neither depends on the attainment of certain outcomes, nor requires continual validation (Kernis, 2003).

Is Self-enhancement Psychologically Healthy or Unhealthy?

Traditionally, it is believed that psychologically well-adjusted people are able to accurately perceive the impact and ramifications of their social behaviors and process information about the self (e.g., Jahoda, 1958; Allport, 1937). However, some researchers suggest that this may not be the case, and assert that people are motivated to elevate the positivity of their self-conceptions as a means for achieving a high level of self-esteem (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). In this view, self-enhancement is a positively skewed and inaccurate comparison of an individual's subjective self-description with objective external

criteria. Given that self-enhancing individuals are unable or unwilling to accurately perceive information about themselves or their performances, I assert that self-enhancement is psychologically unhealthy and that it stands as a marker of individuals with fragile feelings of self-worth.

The view that self-enhancement is psychologically unhealthy is in accord with other researchers. For example, research has found that individuals who self-enhance experience long term negative interpersonal and psychological consequences (Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995), and manifest behaviors detrimental to social interaction (Colvin, et al 1995). They also experience short-term affective benefits, but long term declines in self-esteem and task disengagement, as disconfirmation of inflated self-assessments became evident (Robbins & Beer, 2001). Interestingly enough, high self-esteem individuals overall are more likely to exhibit self-enhancing tendencies than are low self-esteem individuals. Most importantly, self-enhancing behaviors are consistent with other findings pertaining to fragile rather than secure high self-esteem. Researchers have found that discrepant implicit and explicit self-esteem (one manifestation of fragile self-esteem)(Bosson, 2003) predicts greater bias in descriptions of self and others (Kreuger, 1998) and self-ideal discrepancies (Assor & Tzelgov, 1987), compared to congruent implicit and explicit self-esteem (a manifestation of secure self-esteem (Kernis, 2003). This use of self-enhancement strategies is thought to be critical to the development and maintenance of fragile, but not secure, high self-esteem.

Although researchers have suggested that fragile high self-esteem is associated with excessive utilization of self-enhancement strategies, direct evidence is sparse. Therefore, I set out to examine whether fragile high self-esteem relates to greater self-enhancement when a criteria for accurate self-assessments actually exists. Toward this end, forty-eight

undergraduates completed measures of global self-esteem, self-esteem stability, self-esteem

contingency, and a self-assessment activity to gauge self-enhancement. I predicted that

participants with fragile high (i.e. unstable, contingent) self-esteem would be more likely to self-

enhance, meaning they would have greater overestimation of performance when compared to

those participants with secure (i.e. stable, true) self-esteem.

METHOD

<u>Participants</u>

Fifty- three undergraduate students volunteered to participate in exchange for course credit. We removed five participants from analyses because they were extreme outliers (more then 3 standard deviations below means) on dependent measures.

<u>Procedure</u>

In a group setting, participants gave informed consent, and completed (along with other questionnaires not relevant to this study) measures of self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency. Over the course of the following week, we assessed participants' self-esteem stability. Assessment of self-enhancement took place during the following five weeks. Specifically, participants completed an objective computer-based task and then assessed their performance on the task using a self-assessment questionnaire.

<u>Measures</u>

Self-esteem Level. Participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-esteem Scale, with instructions to complete the scale according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses to 10 items were made on 5-point Likert scales (1= strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree; $M = 38.81$, $SD = 5.84$).

Contingent Self-esteem. Participants completed Paradise and Kernis' (1999) Contingent Self-esteem Scale, which consists of 15 items, each of which is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not at all like me, 5=very much like me, $M = 57.56$, $SD = 7.92$). Sample items include*: (1) An important measure of my worth is how competently I perform; (2) My overall feelings about*

myself are heavily influenced by how much other people like and accept me; and (3) My feelings of self-worth are basically unaffected when other people treat me badly (reverse scored). The scale is internally consistent (alpha = .85) and shows considerable test-retest reliability r=.77 (Kernis & Goldman, in press).

     Stability of Self-esteem. We assessed participants' stability of self-esteem by asking them to complete a modified version of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale at 10:00 p.m. Monday, 10:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, and 10:00 a.m. Friday. For each item, anchor points of strongly agree and strongly disagree were separated by 10 dots. We instructed participants to circle the dot that best reflects how they feel at the time they complete the form (i.e. current self-esteem) and to record the time of completion. This response scale format distinguished, from the participant's perspective, the multiple assessments from the SE Level assessment. On Monday, participants received enough forms to last until Wednesday, when they returned their completed forms and received enough new forms to last until Friday. The standard deviation of total scores across the multiple assessment served as the index of self-esteem stability, with higher standard deviations indicating more unstable self-esteem (M = 5.06 , SD = 2.63). As in previous research, we only included in analyses participants who completed at least six of the eight assessments.

     Objective Task Performance. We measured performance with the Online Self-Reference Experiment that appears on the Psychology Experiments Website (available at http://psychexps.olemiss. edu). This experiment is essentially a replication of Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker's study (1977) that involves two tasks. On the first task, participants saw a word and then answered two yes or no questions, specifically "Does the word have an e in it? (e-word)" or "Does the word describe you? (Self-word)" On each trial, the computer displayed a single word

for one second, and then prompted the participant for a response. There were 20 trials in task one. Prior to beginning task two, the experimenter instructed participants to draw a picture, which served as a distracter task. In the second task, participants saw a combination of new words and words they saw during task one. The objective in this task was to indicate which of the words they saw earlier, and which ones were new. The computer program calculated the percentage of words correctly identified by word type, and I used the percentage of correctly identified e-words and self-words as measures of participants' actual performance. The main purpose of the self-reference experiment was to examine whether the different task one questions influence a person's ability to remember the words in task two. Previous research on self-referencing has shown that people have more success in remembering the words processed in terms of them (self-words) compared to words processed according to more superficial or structural qualities (e-words). The experiment examines whether this effect will appear using a recognition task.

Performance estimation. I developed a Self-assessment Questionnaire to gauge participants' perceptions about their performance. Of the seven items on the questionnaire, I used two to gauge self-enhancement: "What percentage of e-words did you correctly identify?" and "What percentage of "describes you words" did you correctly identify?" We instructed the participants to write in the percentage of words that they believed they correctly identified.

RESULTS

I compared participants' performance estimations given on the Self Assessment Questionnaire with the objective performance assessment provided by the computer-based program. Objective performance refers to the percentage of self-words and e-words that participants correctly identified when they were asked if they had seen this word before or not. I computed a difference score separately for self-words and e-words by subtracting each participant's actual score from his or her estimated score. Here, positive difference scores indicated performance overestimation or self-enhancement.

Table 1 presents the correlations between the difference scores for self-words and e-words, and self-esteem level, self-esteem stability, and self-esteem contingency.

Table 1: Correlations between Self-enhancement and Self-esteem Measures

	E - Words	Self-Words	SE Contingency	SE Level	SE Stability
E-Words	1				
Self-Words	.46**	1			
SE Contingency	.13	-.00	1		
SE Level	-.16	-.06	-.64**	1	
SE Stability	.14	-.13	.11	-.25[a]	1

Note: E-words = difference score for e-words; self-words = difference score for self-words; SE Contingency = score on Contingent Self-Esteem Scale; SE Level = score on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale; SE Stability = standard deviation acquired from stability measure. **p=<.001, [a]p=<.10.

I conducted hierarchical regression analyses to examine the extent to which either (1) self-esteem level and self-esteem stability, or (2) self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency predicted self-enhancement. Predictors were mean-centered prior to analyses, so that the mean for each predictor was zero. In Step one, I entered self-esteem level and either self-esteem stability or contingency simultaneously to examine their main effect contributions. In Step two, I

added the two-way product terms of Level x Stability or Level x Contingency. I conducted

separate analyses for both word types. I generated predicted values when significant interactions

emerged, using values one standard deviation above and below the mean to reflect high and low

scores on the self-esteem measures.

Self-Words

Analyses involving level and stability of self-esteem: No significant effects emerged**,** *p*s

>.43

Analyses involving level and contingency of self-esteem: No significant effects emerged,

*p*s>.36

E-Words

Analyses involving level and stability of self-esteem: No significant effects emerged, *p*s

>.41

Analyses involving level and contingency of self-esteem: Here, a marginally significant

main effect was found for self-esteem level, B=-.561, t=-1.841, p <.08, but not for self-esteem

contingency, B=-.120, t=-.591, p <.5. In addition, a significant SE Level x SE Contingency

interaction emerged for e-words, B=.081, t=2.891, p <.01. Predicted values for this interaction
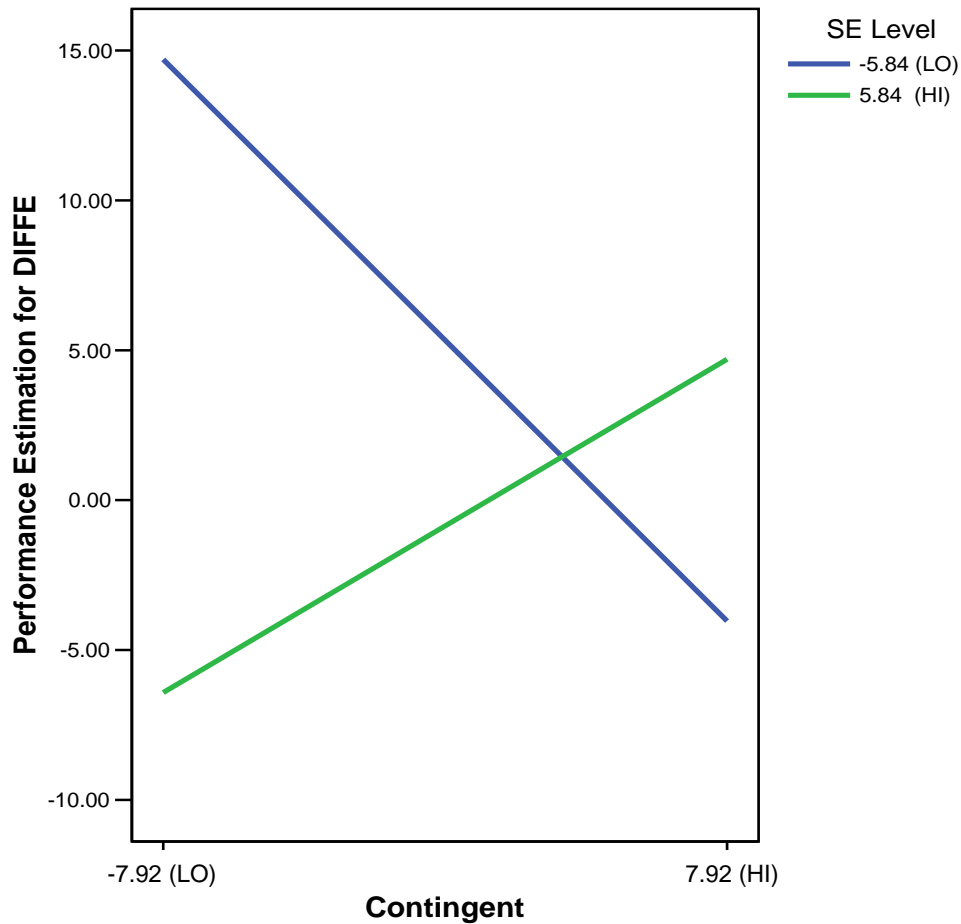
are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Predicted Values for Level x Contingency Interaction for E-Words Difference Scores (DIFFE)

As seen in Figure 1, predicted values indicate that whereas for persons with high self-esteem, as they increase in contingency, the more they overestimate their performance, for persons with low self-esteem, as they increase in contingency, the more they underestimate their performance. The overall product model was significant [$F_{(4, 44)} = 3.264$, $p = <.05$], accounting for about 18% of the overall variance ($R^2 = .182$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine whether self-enhancement differed as a function of whether self-esteem is secure or fragile, as assessed by participants' level, stability, and contingency of self-esteem. No significant relationships emerged in analyses examining the roles of self-esteem level and stability either for self-words or for e-words. However, a Level x Contingency interaction did significantly predict performance estimation for the e-words. As predicted, for the individuals with high self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the more they overestimated their performance. In contrast, for persons with low self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the more they underestimated their performance.

It is important to note here that again, self-esteem contingency is moderating self-esteem level. Neither self-esteem level nor self-esteem contingency alone were able to significantly predict performance estimation. However, they did interact, such that contingency had opposite effects depending upon individuals' self-esteem level. Specifically, among individuals with high self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the more they self-enhanced, whereas among individuals with low self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the less they self-enhanced. This underestimation was unexpected, and possibly the result of psychological constructs like social desirability. This construct is implicated because although persons with low self-esteem are not characterized as having an intense dislike for themselves (Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton, 1989), because of their low self-worth they may believe it is socially desirable to be exceptionally accurate.

When looking for self-enhancement tendencies, researchers generally try to make the tasks involved self-relevant. However, in the present study, self-esteem variables predicted self-enhancement only when the task was low in self-relevance (i.e. the e-word task). We believe this occurred because the high objective performance on the self-task left little room for self-enhancement.

Limitations

There are two primary limitations of this study. The first is that participants' objective performance scores were quite high on both the e and self-relevant tasks. Specifically, the mean performance for e words 92.5 was and for self-relevant words were 98.4. These very high performance scores leave little room for self-enhancing performance estimations. Therefore, it is vital to reduce participants' actual scores to leave more room for self-enhancement. One way to do this may be to add cognitive load to the first part of the self-referencing experiment, for example, by telling participants to recite aloud a seven-digit number while deciding whether the word had an e in it or if it describes them. Preliminary analyses on pilot data indicate that these measures will ensure the desired impact; when averaging the difference scores for each word types, there was some average overestimation found for the e-words.

Another concern was with the questionnaire used to assess performance estimation. In the present study, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate to the nearest 5 percent what percentage of words they correctly identified. Although I am not sure why, the wording led some participants to write 5 instead of 95 or 100. After careful consideration, I removed participants who had scores (both subjective and objective) three standard deviations below the mean. Additionally, the questionnaire had unnecessary questions. In future research, the plan is to reduce it from seven questions to four, keeping the two questions of interest. I will also more

explicitly instruct participants to indicate on a scale from zero to one hundred percent the percent of words they *correctly* identified.

Little research has examined the roles of self-esteem level, stability, and contingency in minority individuals and the current study is no exception. Although we are not criticizing the convenience sample of Caucasian undergraduate students participating for course credit, we acknowledge that this was not a diverse sample. Our interest is in the relationship between the theoretical variables self-esteem and self-enhancement, and we assert that it is important to examine the applicability of this conceptual model to minority samples.

<u>Future Directions</u>

Future research would do well to incorporate additional measures of self-enhancement. Weinstein's (1980) Unrealistic Optimism Scale (UOS), and a modified version of Pelham & Swann's (1989) self-attributes scale are two scales of particular interest. Bosson et al. (2003) also used a series of personality profiles that ranged from very unflattering to flattering to gauge self-enhancement among people with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem. These researchers reported that individuals who possessed high explicit but low implicit self-esteem were more likely to rate the flattering profiles as more accurate and the unflattering profiles as less accurate, compared to individuals with high explicit and high implicit self-esteem. I believe that a similar pattern will emerge, but with self-esteem stability and self-esteem contingency predicting self-enhancement. More specifically, among individuals with high self-esteem, the more unstable or contingent their self-esteem, the more likely they would be to rate the flattering profiles as more accurate and the unflattering profiles as less accurate.

I suspect that self-presentational processes may have played some role in the dramatic performance overestimation that we observed among some individuals with low self-esteem.

For this reason, it would be interesting to add a condition to the study to examine if self-presentation is responsible to for the effects. One way to do this would be to manipulate the privacy of people's performance estimations. If self-presentation processes are operative, circumstances where individual's performance and estimations are public would magnify them.

Other ideas include investigating daily experiences of self-enhancement to see if it fluctuates across time and situations, and examining other individual difference variables that may serve as predictors of self-enhancement tendencies. One such variable would be authenticity. Kernis (2003) describes authenticity as reflecting one's true or core self in daily enterprise. I suspect that there would be a negative relationship between authenticity and self-enhancement behaviors because recent research (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) links authenticity to greater psychological health, and I assert that self-enhancement tendencies are related to negative psychological health.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I predicted that self-esteem level and stability, or self-esteem level and self-esteem contingency would predict self-enhancement in participants. By using a self-assessment method and a regression analysis of the differences between their estimated and actual scores, one of the markers of fragile self-esteem, self-esteem contingency, significantly predicted performance estimation in e-words. For persons with high self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the more likely they were to self-enhance. In contrast, for persons with low self-esteem, the more contingent their self-esteem, the less likely they were to self-enhance. Future directions include looking at additional measures of self-enhancement and its relationship to other psychological constructs.

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