SECURE VERSUS FRAGILE HIGH SELF-ESTEEM AND VERBAL DEFENSIVENESS

by

CHAD ERIC LAKEY

(Under the Direction of Michael H. Kernis)

ABSTRACT

In this research, I sought to examine defensiveness as a potential consequence of fragile, as opposed to secure, high self-esteem. Participants completed measures of Self-Esteem Level, Self-Esteem Stability, Contingent Self-Esteem, and Implicit Self-Esteem, all of which are purported markers of the secure versus fragile self-esteem distinction (Kernis, 2003). Participants then completed a structured interview in which responses to self-threatening questions were rated for verbal defensiveness along the dimensions of awareness and distortion (Feldman Barrett, 2002). I hypothesized that defensiveness would be markedly high among individuals with fragile high self-esteem, while especially low among individuals with secure high self-esteem. A series of hierarchical regression analyses reveled significant Level x Stability, Level x Contingent, and Level x Implicit self-esteem interactions. As hypothesized, among individuals possessing high self-esteem, unstable, contingent, and low implicit self-esteem was associated with especially high defensiveness, whereas stable, low contingent and high implicit self-esteem related to particularly low defensiveness.

INDEX WORDS: Secure, Fragile, Stable, Contingent, Implicit, Self-Esteem, Defensiveness

SECURE VERSUS FRAGILE HIGH SELF-ESTEEM AND VERBAL DEFENSIVENESS

by

CHAD ERIC LAKEY

BS, Western Carolina University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005

SECURE VERSUS FRAGILE HIGH SELF-ESTEEM AND VERBAL DEFENSIVENESS

by

CHAD ERIC LAKEY

Major Professor: Michael H. Kernis

Committee: W. Keith Campbell
                     Leonard L. Martin

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

SELF-ESTEEM

In this document, I present the results of a study in which I examined the relationship between self-esteem and verbal defensiveness. More specifically, I assessed the extent to which becoming verbally defensive is a process best characterized by those with fragile, as opposed to secure, high self-esteem. I begin with a discussion of self-esteem research, and move to distinguish between fragile and secure forms of high self-esteem. Then, I provide a brief summary of research on each of the markers of the fragile versus secure distinction. Before proceeding to the present research, I give a synopsis of defensive verbalizations, and discuss its proposed relation to fragile high self-esteem.

Historically, self-esteem has been viewed as a trait of high value, one that bestows both positive intrapsychic and interpersonal outcomes. Research has demonstrated that high versus low self-esteem related to less suicidal thoughts and depression (Harter, 1993), less negative affect in response to failure (Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989), and greater happiness and life satisfaction (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). More recently, however, researchers have begun to question the overall positive nature of high self-esteem. For example, it has been argued that individuals with high self-esteem are more likely than their low self-esteem counterparts to self-handicap successes (Tice, 1991) and aggress when a positive self-view is threatened (Baumeister, Bush, & Campbell, 2000; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). At the same time, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) report that high self-esteem does not predict academic performance or occupational success. Given these disparate findings about the positive nature of high self-esteem, the concern becomes how to best conceptualize self-esteem in a way that moves beyond merely looking at self-esteem level.

Schneider and Turkat (1975) conducted one of the earliest attempts to provide empirical evidence for multiple types of self-esteem. These authors argued that "genuine" high self-esteem reflects a combination of low social desirability and high self-esteem scores. Conversely, "defensive" high self-esteem indicated reports of high self-esteem that emanate from self-presentational concerns. While Schneider and Turkat (1975) showed that defensive high self-esteem related to greater self-enhancement following negative feedback, research using this paradigm has not flourished. More recently, Kernis (2003a) postulates that the reconciliation of whether high self-esteem is positive or negative is accomplished by distinguishing between whether one's self-esteem is secure or fragile. The distinction is substantial, as Kernis (2003a) draws on considerable research which indicates that fragile high self-esteem reflects feelings of self-worth wrought with instability, contingent upon meeting standards, and incongruent with implicit feelings of self-worth. Moreover, those with fragile self-self-esteem appear intent on garnering, maintaining, and bolstering their positive self-feelings. In contrast, secure high self-esteem reflects feelings of self-worth that are stable, well anchored, not in need of constant validation, and congruent with one's nonconscious feelings of self-worth. Secure high self-esteem individuals are not immune from performance outcomes; rather, progress, success, and positive feedback may result in positive feelings. However, this positive affect only serves to signify the progression towards one's goals that emanate from genuine interest. Among individuals with secure high self-esteem, then, specific positive or negative evaluative information generally does not affect their global feelings of self-worth (Kernis, 2003a, 2003b). Before proceeding to a description of the present research, I will explicate these distinct, yet interrelated, dimensions.

Self-esteem Stability

Self-esteem stability is akin to what Rosenberg (1986) called "barometric" fluctuations of self-esteem, and is best thought of as the dispositional tendency for one's immediate feelings of self-worth to fluctuate depending on an individual's situational context. The extent to which one experiences this variability across time is both empirically and theoretically distinct from one's global feelings of self-worth (i.e. self-esteem level). Self-esteem level generally is measured at a single time-point, and it reflects individuals' general or typical feelings of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Research has indicated that one's "baseline" (Rosenberg, 1986) self-esteem level changes very slowly, and generally remains relatively stable over one's life span (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Conversely, self-esteem stability is measured at multiple time-points (e.g. twice per day over the course of four to five days) with questions concerning how one feels about one's self "right now" or "at this moment" in a more natural context (i.e. not in a laboratory; Kernis, 2003a; Kernis, Granneman, & Barclay, 1989). Stability of self-esteem is calculated as the standard deviation of the individual's responses over these multiple time-points such that higher standard deviations reflect greater short-term, contextually based fluctuations in self-esteem (i.e. greater self-esteem instability).

The importance of self-esteem stability to both psychological and interpersonal functioning over and above one's self-esteem level is now well established. Greater instability relates to greater emotional reactivity to positive and negative feedback (Kernis et al., 1993), excuse making (Kernis, Granneman, & Barclay, 1992), and greater proneness to anger and hostility (Kernis et al., 1989). Unstable self-esteem is also related to higher depression scores (Kernis, Granneman, & Mathis, 1991) and greater reactivity to both positive and negative events, especially those that concern self-esteem and social rejection (Greenier et al., 1999). Moreover,

Kernis et al. (2000) show that those with unstable self-esteem possess less self-concept clarity and engage in goal-related behaviors for less self-determined reasons than do individuals with stable self-esteem. Taken together, Kernis (2003a, 2003b) suggests that individuals with unstable self-esteem possess feelings of self-worth that are malleable and more reactive to self-relevant events than do individuals whose self-esteem is stable. As Kernis et al. (1997) state, "unstable self-esteem reflects fragile and vulnerable feelings of immediate self-worth that are subject to the vicissitudes of externally provided and internally generated positive and negative experiences" (p. 846).

Contingent Self-esteem

Kernis and colleagues (Kernis et al., 2000; Kernis & Wachsull, 1995) note how individuals with unstable self-esteem interpret benign contextual information and events as self-esteem relevant. Furthermore, these individuals engage in behaviors (i.e. seeking approval) to garner validation of their positive, yet fragile self-views. In such instances, efforts to gain others' approval often reflect feelings of self-worth linked to external standards. Deci and Ryan (1995) argue that feelings of self-worth, which are linked invariably to meeting specific outcomes or standards, reflect "*contingent*" (versus "*true*") self-esteem. In Deci and Ryan's view, contingent self-esteem is unstable and fragile in that "high" self-esteem only remains that way so long as one meets these standards or outcomes. Stated differently, because these feelings of self-worth are not well anchored, they require continual validation. As these contingencies are intimately associated with one's sense of personal value, information that threatens or contradicts them acts as the catalyst for decrements (i.e. fluctuations) in one's global feelings of self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Moreover, this process of

self-esteem protection and maintenance only serves to undermine self-determined behavior, intrinsic motivation, mastery, and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Kernis, 2003; Dweck, 2000).

Research has detailed the degree to which there exist certain domains in which many people base their feelings of self-worth. When these domains are threatened, negative intrapsychic and interpersonal consequences may result. For example, Crocker, Sommers, and Luhtanen (2002) describe how college seniors who score high in academic contingency report drops in their global feelings of self-worth when they learn of rejection by graduate schools. Park and Crocker (2005) demonstrate how individuals with contingencies of self-worth in academic performance domains become less likeable after they receive negative academic performance feedback (i.e. their self-esteem is threatened). Additionally, Crocker and Park (2004) report how individuals scoring high in contingent self-worth based on others approval seek excessive relational reassurance from their partner and interpret benign information as rejecting, both of which serve to undermine the relationship.

It is evident that this within-persons approach has its utility. However, another approach is to argue that individual differences exist in the overall extent to which one's feelings of self-esteem are contingent (Kernis, 2003). With this in mind, Kernis and Paradise (1999) created a measure to assess the dispositional tendency to link feelings of self-worth to outcomes or standards. Using this measure, Neighbors, Larimer, Markman Geisner, and Knee (2004) demonstrated that contingent self-esteem mediates the relationship between external environmental pressures and drinking behaviors. They show that individuals with more contingent self-esteem fall prey to external pressures to consume alcohol, drink more frequently, and report greater drinking problems. More recently, Kernis and Goldman (in press, a)

summarize research showing that individuals with highly contingent self-esteem become especially angry and hostile in response to evaluative threat. Taken together, this research highlights how individuals with contingent self-esteem are highly invested in self-esteem maintenance. As such, they seek the positive emotions accompanying self-esteem validation and become defensive in response to self-esteem threat (Kernis, 2003a; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Crocker & Park, 2004).

Implicit Self-esteem

The idea that certain psychological forces exist outside of conscious awareness (i.e. implicit) is not new (Hetts & Pelham, 2001). Epstein (in press; 1990; Epstein & Morling, 1995) provides a general framework for both explicit and implicit self-systems, and writes of two distinct but interwoven psychological structures that "…operate in parallel and are interactive. Behavior is determined by their combined influence." (in press, p. 1). In Epstein's view, the explicit self-system is cognitive and based on rational, conscious logic. On the other hand, the implicit self-system is experiential, and based on nonconscious, affective experience (for a similar theory concerning dual attitudes in general, see Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). In this vein, explicit self-esteem represents feelings of self-worth that are within conscious awareness and that are "introspectively accessible" (Spalding & Hardin, 1999, p. 535) for conscious and verbal evaluation. Conversely, implicit self-esteem is the automatic, overlearned, and nonconscious "affective associations about the self" (Pelham, Koole, & Hardin, 2005, p. 85) established through repeated exposure to self-relevant feedback from the environment, culture, and personal experiences (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988; Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999; Spalding & Hardin, 1999; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, and Hetts (2002) argue that as a type of unconscious self-enhancement strategy, "people's positive associations about themselves spill over into their evaluations of objects associated with the self" (p. 170). Stated differently, the assignment of positive attitudes toward those objects that are central to the self represents an implicit process by which one garners and maintains self-esteem. As one window into measuring implicit self-esteem, researchers have used the "Name Letter Effect" (NLE; Nuttin, 1987), which is built on the theory that mere ownership of an object increases one's preference for it. As such, individuals with higher implicit self-esteem rate their own initials higher than either the normative rating for those letters or the other letters of the alphabet. The NLE recently has been shown to be both reliable and valid (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Bosson et al., 2000), cross-cultural (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997), and not simply a function of mere-exposure (Jones et al., 2002).

Consistent with Epstein and Morling (1995), research is starting to accumulate concerning the predictive utility of implicit self-esteem for one's physical, intrapsychic, and interpersonal well-being. For example, implicit self-esteem predicts some explicit markers of self-evaluation uniquely, such as persistence in the face of failure (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002) and positive mood (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000). Spalding and Hardin (1999) report that explicit self-esteem predicts self-reports of anxiety whereas implicit self-esteem predicts nonverbal markers of anxiety. In other research, Shimizu and Pelham (2004) showed that positive life events could actually have deleterious effects for those with low implicit self-esteem. These researchers reported that individuals with high implicit self-esteem became healthier (i.e. less physical illnesses) when they experienced positive life events, whereas those with low implicit self-esteem reported greater physical illnesses when they experienced positive

life events. Shimizu and Pelham contend that positive events threaten the nonconscious expectancies of those with low implicit self-esteem, which can result in a greater number of physical ailments.

Additionally, individuals may have either a high or a low degree of concordance between their explicit and implicit self-esteem. Epstein and Morling (1995) argue that the lack of congruence between implicit and explicit self-esteem sets the stage for defensive processes. These authors suggest that individuals with incongruent feelings of self-worth will be easily threatened by negative self-relevant information, whereas individuals with congruent implicit and explicit self-esteem possess feelings of self-worth that are not easily challenged. As such, individuals with congruent high implicit and explicit self-esteem will generally not engage in defensive processes. In this vein, Bosson et al. (2003) found that, compared to individuals with congruent high explicit and high implicit self-esteem, individuals with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem displayed greater self-enhancement following unflattering feedback, greater unrealistic optimism for the future, and greater stated concordance between their actual and ideal selves. Jordan et al. (2003) reported that the possession of discrepant high explicit and low implicit self-esteem significantly related to higher narcissism scores, greater display of in-group biases, and greater dissonance reduction following choice, all processes related to defensiveness. Most recently, Kernis et al. (2005) found that after priming positive or negative implicit self-esteem, those whose primed self-esteem was discordant with their trait self-esteem level self-promoted more and exhibited greater out-group derogation. Taken together, this theory and research indicates that discrepant explicit and implicit self-esteem relate to greater defensiveness than does congruent explicit and implicit self-esteem.

Self-esteem and Defensiveness

It is inevitable that individuals will encounter from time to time situations that cause conflict with one's self-concept. The perception of threat, whether real or imagined, can lead to defensive posturing in an effort to maintain one's positive self-feelings and perceptions. However, differences exist in the degree to which individuals draw upon defense mechanisms in the face of psychological threat. Feldman Barrett, Williams, and Fong (2002) argue that events and information that threatens one's self-image can be limited in terms of integration into one's conscious awareness and or distorted to mitigate their psychological bearing. Although theories abound regarding multiple types of defense mechanisms, only recently has a valid measure existed to gauge general defensiveness as a type of self-protective process.

Feldman Barrett et al. (2002) specifically created The Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment (DVBA) as a means of assessing the habitual tendency of attempting to keep from conscious awareness negative (i.e. threatening) self-relevant information. Using the DVBA, self-protective defensiveness is gauged through a recorded personal interview regarding experiences in which one's behaviors were incongruent with a positive self-view. When these moments are brought into conscious awareness, individuals can either verbally express acceptance of the negative information or distort the representation of the information to buffer its negative psychological impact. Stated differently, the amount of awareness, or distortion, conveyed through the recollection and verbal articulation of the event represents the means by which defensiveness is measured. Awareness is defined as the conscious understanding and acceptance of one's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in the face of threat. Distortion is characterized as the reinterpretation of events through rationalization or justification to fit one's preexisting positive self-concept. Therefore, one can respond in a way that is non-defensive (i.e.

one conveys acceptance in a manner that is informative in nature), mildly defensive (i.e. moderate awareness with mild distortion), moderately defensive (i.e. limited awareness and moderate distortion), or highly defensive (i.e. highly unaware and high distortion of information). To determine one's level of defensiveness using the DVBA does not require clinical training. As such, this measure provides the means to assess empirically verbal defensiveness relatively easily.

At its core, defensiveness reflects reactivity to ego threat and stands as a marker of fragile, high self-esteem (Kernis, 2003a). Indeed, the theme that runs through the discussion of types of high self-esteem is that fragile high self-esteem individuals focus on defending, bolstering, and maintaining their positive, however tenuous, feelings of self-worth. Given their chronically heightened ego investment in self-relevant outcomes and their desire to maintain positive feelings of self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Greenier et al., 1999), defensive processes seem very likely to manifest among these individuals. Conversely, those with secure high self-esteem should be especially non-defensive, given that research has shown that they are able to draw on psychological resources to deal with self-threatening information and situations effectively so that specific instances of threat do not generalize to their global feelings of self-worth (Kernis, 2003a, 2003b). With this in mind, it is important to examine the various fragility markers together with a behavioral assessment that assesses one's desire to protect against negative self-relevant information. I predicted that among those with high self-esteem, those whose self-esteem is stable, non-contingent, and congruent with high implicit self-esteem would be able to verbalize negative information about the self in a non-defensive manner (i.e. highly aware and without distortion).

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

One-hundred and fourteen undergraduate students participated in this study for partial fulfillment of their course requirements. Following past research, 7 participants were dropped because they completed less than six stability assessments. Six additional participants did not complete the interview portion of the study. This left 101 total participants who completed all phases and whose data were used in all analyses. Of these, 89 were female and 12 were male. Eighty-five reported as being White or European American, 4 as Asian American, 10 as Black or African American, 1 as Hispanic or Latino, and 1 did not report an ethnic background. These demographics generally represent the composition of the at-large student population. All participants were native English speakers.

Procedure and Measures

This study took place in three phases. Phase 1 consisted of participants completing a basic demographic questionnaire, study guidelines and procedures, and measures of self-esteem level (SELevel), contingent self-esteem (CSE), and implicit self-esteem (ISE) in small group settings of no more than 15 individuals. In Phase 2, participants' self-esteem stability (StabSE) was assessed over the next week as participants completed multiple assessments of their current (i.e. contextually based) self-esteem. Participants then returned to the lab individually for Phase 3, which consisted of a structured "life experiences interview." Once the interviews were complete, each participant was fully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Phase 1

Self-esteem Level. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This measure is both a reliable and valid measure of one's overall global feelings of self-worth (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Responses to questions (e.g. *I feel like I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.*) are made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree) and summed so that higher scores reflect higher global self-esteem (M = 40.61, SD = 5.49, α = .86).

Contingent Self-esteem. Participants completed a 15-item measure assessing the extent to which their feelings of self-worth are dependent upon meeting outcomes or standards (e.g., *When my actions do not live up to my expectations, it makes me feel dissatisfied with myself.*). Kernis and Goldman (in press) report adequate reliability for this measure. Responses are made using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all like me, 5 = very much like me) and summed so that higher scores reflect greater contingent self-esteem (M = 49.94, SD = 8.14, α = .83).

Implicit Self-esteem. Participants completed the Name-Letter Task (Nuttin, 1985). Using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = not at all beautiful, 9 = extremely beautiful), participants rated the extent to which they found each letter of the alphabet aesthetically pleasing. The letters were arranged in three columns, each in 12-point, Times New Roman font. Implicit self-esteem scores were calculated by taking the composite score of the individual's first and last initials and subtracting the sample mean rating for those letters so that higher scores reflect higher implicit self-esteem (M = -.43, SD = 4.67).

Phase 2

Stability of Self-Esteem. The following Monday, participants returned to the lab to receive a packet of StabSE scales, which are modified Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scales. To assess their

current feelings of self-worth, the instructions on each questionnaire read *at this moment* instead

of *typically or generally*. In addition, instead of providing a 5-point Likert scale, 10 dots with the

anchors *Strongly Disagree* and *Strongly Agree* separated the responses to the different questions.

Each measure required the participants to circle the dot that best reflects how they feel *at this*

moment, and to note the time and date of completion. I instructed participants to complete one

measure at 10:00 PM that night, at 10:00 AM and PM on Tuesday, and again at 10:00 AM on

Wednesday. On Wednesday afternoon, participants returned these measures and were given

another packet to complete using a similar schedule through Friday morning. Participants

returned these on Friday afternoon. Following past research, I included in analyses only

participants who completed at least six of eight possible stability assessments. I computed

StabSE as the standard deviation of each individual's total scores across the multiple assessments

to assess the variability of their responses (M = 5.47, SD = 3.51).

Phase 3

Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment. Participants returned individually over the next

four weeks to complete a digitally recorded structured interview administered by one of three

trained undergraduates. This "life experiences interview" is designed to assess defensive

verbalizations using the complementary dimensions of awareness and distortion (Feldman

Barrett et al., 2002). In total, participants responded to 25 questions. However, the first and last

five questions are non-threatening in nature. In other words, the first are neutral (e.g. *How*

accepted did you feel growing up?) while the last five are considered gradually restoring (e.g.

Tell me about your most enjoyable experience.). As such, these questions were not coded or used

in any analysis. The remaining 15 questions are considered mildly to moderately unpleasant, and

are used in all analyses. These questions are designed to elicit into conscious thought specific instances in which one has not acted in a way that is congruent with a positive self-view (e.g. *Tell me about a time when you have acted in a self-destructive way., Describe a time when you have felt less sexually desirable than a friend., Tell me about a time when you've broken the rules.*).

Following the procedures put forth by Feldman Barrett, Cleveland, Conner, and Williams' (2000) and Feldman Barrett et al. (2002), each interview was structured in a manner whereby the interviewer would pose the question to the participant. Interviewers then prompted a specific instance when the event had occurred (e.g. *Can you tell me about a specific time that happened?*). If the response was vague, interviewers asked for more information concerning the event (e.g. *Tell me a little bit more about that.*). Once a specific event was recounted in detail, interviewers assessed the emotional response of the participant (e.g. *How did that make you feel?*). If the response conveyed discrepant information (e.g. "*I was mad, but I don't really care.*"), interviewers questioned the individual concerning these verbal inconsistencies (e.g. *I hear you say you were mad and that you don't care. Can you tell me how you experienced both of these?*). Each interviewer trained extensively and conducted practice interview sessions that were appraised for homogeneity.

I then transferred these interviews from a digital recorder to compact disc. Two different trained undergraduates coded the interviews. Again, these judges underwent extensive training to ensure coding uniformity. Each participant could receive up to fifteen possible scores (ranging from 0-3) which were then averaged for a mean level of total defensiveness. To obtain an indication of the degree of interrater reliability, both raters coded 29 of the 101 interviews. To calculate the defensiveness scores for these 29 individuals, I calculated the average

defensiveness rating of the two coders. Following the procedure used by Feldman Barrett et al.

(2002) that included nonscorable responses (coded as 9), the coders achieved adequate reliability

(Intra Class Correlation = .91; M = 1.51, SD = .48).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

As can be seen in Table 1, there was a significant correlation among all predictor

variables and DVBA scores (all p's < .01). All of the fragility markers and SELevel also

significantly correlated (all p's < .05). Moreover, to our knowledge, this is the first study to test

concurrently and show significant correlations among all three of the fragility variables (all p's <

.01). However, building on Kernis' (2003) suggestion, I anticipated that each fragility marker

would moderate the effect of self-esteem level. As such, to test for the impact of the various

fragility markers on verbal defensiveness, I conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses

involving self-esteem level and each respective marker. To test for the interactive effect of each

marker and self-esteem level, I centered each variable and entered them as main effects and as

part of a product term, the latter to reflect their interaction (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken,

2003). I tested the interaction between each marker and self-esteem level in separate regression

equations.

SELevel Moderated by StabSE. First, I regressed the DVBA score onto the centered

SELevel and StabSE variables. A main effect for StabSE emerged, $t(98) = 6.94$, $p < .001$ ($\beta =$

.63), which indicates that higher defensiveness scores were related to greater self-esteem

instability. However, this main effect was qualified by a marginally significant SELevel X

StabSE interaction $t(97) = 1.92$, $p = .058$ ($\beta = .15$). To assess the nature of this interaction, I

plotted values one standard deviation above and below the means of both SELevel and StabSE to

determine predicted values. As predicted, and as can be seen in Figure 1, the most defensive

individuals were respondents with unstable high self-esteem (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.98).

Conversely, participants with stable high self-esteem scored the lowest on the DVBA (Predicted

DVBA Value = 1.17). The scores of individuals with stable (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.28) or unstable (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.76) low SELevel fell between these two extremes. These results support the hypothesis that among individuals with high self-esteem, the more unstable individuals' self-esteem, the more verbally defensive they are.

SELevel Moderated by CSE. Following the same procedure, I regressed the DVBA score onto the centered SELevel and CSE variables. As before, only a main effect for CSE emerged, $t(98) = 2.23$, $p < .03$ ($\beta = .25$). Thus, the more an individual's self-esteem is dependent on achieving outcomes and meeting standards, the more they convey verbal defensiveness. However, the SELevel X CSE interaction was significant, $t(97) = 2.99$, $p < .01$ ($\beta = .29$). Using the same procedure, and as can be seen in Figure 2, at high self-esteem, those with contingent self-esteem were especially defensive (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.66) whereas those with non-contingent self-esteem were markedly non-defensive (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.28). The scores of individuals with low SELevel and high CSE fell between these two scores (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.62), while individuals with both low SELevel and CSE conveyed the greatest verbal defensiveness (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.71). These results support the hypothesis that among individuals with high self-esteem, the more contingent individuals' self-esteem, the more verbally defensive they are.

(*Explicit) SELevel Moderated by ISE.* As in the first two analyses, only a significant main effect emerged for ISE, $t(98) = -6.25$, $p < .001$ ($\beta = -.53$), which indicates that individuals with lower ISE are more verbally defensive than individuals with high ISE. However, again this was qualified by a significant SELevel X ISE interaction, $t(97) = -2.13$, $p = .35$ ($\beta = -.18$). As can be seen in Figure 3, at high explicit SELevel, those with high ISE were the least verbally defensive (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.14), while those with low ISE were the most defensive

(Predicted DVBA Value = 1.79). At low explicit SELevel, the scores of individuals with high (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.75) or low (Predicted DVBA Value = 1.44) ISE fell between these two extremes. These results support the hypothesis that among individuals with high explicit self-esteem, the less congruent individuals' implicit self-esteem, the more verbally defensive they are.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

In this research, I sought to examine defensiveness and its relation to secure, as opposed to fragile, high self-esteem. I administered measures of self-esteem level, self-esteem stability, contingent self-esteem, and implicit self-esteem prior to a structured "life experiences" interview. In this interview, participants discussed instances in which they had engaged in behaviors that are inconsistent with a positive self-view, and subsequently, trained raters judged their responses for defensiveness along the dimensions of awareness and distortion. In support of the hypothesis, each of the markers of fragile self-esteem moderated the relationship between self-esteem level and verbal defensiveness. Stated differently, at high self-esteem, individuals with unstable, contingent, and incongruent low implicit self-esteem were especially defensive. On the other hand, individuals with high and stable, non-contingent, and congruent implicit self-esteem were markedly non-defensive, and considerably less so than individuals with low self-esteem.

This pattern of findings is consistent with the one found by Kernis et al. (1989). These researchers examined individuals' self-esteem level and self-esteem stability along with measures of anger and hostility, both of which reflect defensive processes. Kernis et al. reported that among individuals with high self-esteem, those whose self-esteem was unstable were especially prone to experience anger and hostility, whereas individuals with stable self-esteem scored the lowest on these measures. The scores of individuals with stable or unstable low self-esteem fell between these two extremes. The present research extends Kernis et al. in two ways. First, this study demonstrated convergence across Kernis' (2003a) three purported fragility markers, with each marker predicting heightened defensiveness in a congruent manner. More

specifically, at high self-esteem, individuals' defensiveness increased to the extent that their feelings of self-worth were unstable, contingent, and incongruent with their implicit self-esteem. Second, all three fragility markers displayed significant intercorrelations. The correlations between self-esteem stability and contingent self-esteem were greater than their correlations with implicit self-esteem. This pattern was expected, given that both contingent self-esteem and self-esteem instability reflect greater vulnerability and responsiveness to specific evaluative information. On the other hand, negative implicit self-esteem involves a nonconscious discrepancy from explicit self-esteem. While these data imply the possibility of a latent self-esteem fragility construct comprised of self-esteem stability, contingent self-esteem, and incongruent implicit self-esteem, it is worth noting that their correlations are not so high as to suggest that each fragility marker does not have its own unique predictive utility as a moderator of self-esteem level.

Taken together, the results of this study support Kernis' (2003) contention that self-esteem should be viewed as a multifaceted construct. Without considering the various markers of the fragile versus secure distinction, one gains an incomplete understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and verbal defensiveness. Specifically, if only self-esteem level were measured, one would conclude that verbal defensiveness is most characteristic of individuals with low self-esteem. Rather, low self-esteem individuals are consistently less defensive than individuals with fragile high self-esteem. These data reveal that a marker of fragile high self-esteem is the distortion of negative self-relevant information to maintain positive self-feelings. Consistent with previous theory and research (e.g. Kernis 2003a; Kernis, 2003b; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2000), it stands that self-esteem maintenance is an overarching goal of those whose high self-esteem is tenuously held. Verbal defensiveness reflects a heightened reactivity

to negative self-relevant information that threatens these individuals' positive, yet tenuous, sense of self-worth. As such, the rationalization of their own behaviors as "not my fault" is a psychologically viable means of self-esteem maintenance for individuals with fragile high self-esteem. Moreover, becoming verbally defensive is an indicator that one is favoring one's immediate inclinations or impulses. This implies a short-term focus on maintaining positive self-feelings that is potentially detrimental to long-term psychological well-being. Conversely, having a secure and positive sense of one's own self-worth is a key component to accepting responsibility for one's behaviors and taking a less self-deceptive (i.e. less verbally defensive) stance when queried about negative life experiences.

At a broader level, inherent in the encoding stage of perception are subjective, and sometimes adulterated, representations of events or information (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002). As such, the psychological impact of any situation is determined through an individual's situationaly subjective perception. While this is a natural human phenomenon, this research reveals that to the extent that this subjective filtering is engaged in a manner that is self-deceptive, it is psychologically, and most likely, interpersonally unhealthy. Recent research and theory on both authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, in press, b; Kernis, 2003a, 2003b) and mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003a, 2003b) as dispositional characteristics details the positive psychological impact of accurate self-knowledge acquired through processing self-relevant information in an unbiased manner. Kernis and Goldman (in press, b) summarize research that reveals authenticity is not only correlated with mindfulness, but is directly related to greater self-compassion, greater psychological and subjective well-being, more adaptive coping styles in response to life's stressors, and more autonomous (i.e. self-determined) regulation. Moreover, Kernis and Goldman report direct links between authenticity and secure high self-esteem. Stated

differently, efforts to maintain and protect feelings of self-worth among individuals with fragile high self-esteem precludes awareness and objective self-understanding, which are both core features of authentic functioning. Thus, processing self-relevant information in an open and unbiased manner, even when this information is threatening to one's positive self-view, confers a number of benefits to individuals.

The present research establishes that defensiveness is markedly high among individuals with fragile high self-esteem, while especially low among individuals whose positive feelings of self-worth are stable, low contingent, and congruent with implicit feelings of self-worth. What is more, individuals with fragile high self-esteem consistently convey greater verbal defensiveness than individuals with low self-esteem. These results highlight how individuals with fragile high self-esteem possess feelings of self-worth that are more reactive to self-relevant information than do individuals whose self-esteem is secure. Stated differently, prompting verbal articulation of specific instances of behaviors incongruent with a positive self-view are not threatening to the well anchored self-feelings of the individual with secure high self-esteem, and therefore do not generalize to their global feelings of self-worth. Given this link, future research should examine the interpersonal implications of verbal defensiveness, such as whether verbal defensiveness also relates to heightened aggression in response to threat among individuals with fragile high self-esteem.

REFERENCES

Baumeister, R.F., Bushman, B.J., & Campbell, W.K. (2000). Self-esteem, narcissism, and

   aggression: Does violence result from low self-esteem or from threatened egotism?

   Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9, 141-156.

Baumeister, R.F., Campbell, J.D., Krueger, J.I., & Vohs, K.D. (2003). Does high self-esteem

   cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles?

   Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 4, 1-44.

Baumeister, R.F., Smart, L., & Boden, J.M. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence

   and aggression: The dark side of high self-esteem. *Psychological Review, 103,* 5-33.

Blascovich, J., & Tomaka, J. (1991). Measures of self-esteem. In J.P. Robinson, P.R.

   Shaver, & L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social*

   psychological attitudes (pp. 115-160). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Bosson, J.K., Brown, R.P., Zeigler-Hill, V., Swann, W.B. (2003). Self-enhancement

   tendencies among people with high explicit self-esteem: The moderating role of

   implicit self-esteem. *Self and Identity, 2,* 169-187.

Bosson, J.K., Swann, W.B., & Pennebaker, J.W. (2000). Stalking the perfect measure of

   implicit self-esteem: The blind men and the elephant revisited. *Journal of*

   Personality and Social Psychology, 79, 631-643.

Brown, K.W., & Ryan, R.M. (2003a). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in

   psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84,* 822-848.

Brown, K.W., & Ryan, R.M. (2003b). Why we don't need self-esteem: On fundamental needs,

   contingent love, and mindfulness. *Psychological Inquiry, 14,* 71-76.

Cohen, J., Cohen, P., West, S.G., & Aiken, L.S. (2003). *Applied multiple regression/correlation analysis for the behavioral sciences: Third edition*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Crocker, J., Karpinski, A., Quinn, D.M., & Chase, S.K. (2003). When grades determine self-worth: Consequences of contingent self-worth for male and female engineering and psychology majors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85,* 507-516.

Crocker, J., & Park, L.E. (2004). The costly pursuit of self-esteem. *Psychological Bulletin, 130,* 392-414.

Crocker, J., Sommers, S.R., & Luhtanen, R.K. (2002). Hopes dashed and dreams fulfilled: Contingencies of self-worth and admissions to graduate school. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28,* 1275-1286.

Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1995). Human agency: The basis for true self-esteem. In M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 31-50). New York: Plenum.

Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11,* 227-268.

Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Lucas, R.E. (2003). Personality, culture, and subjective well-being: Emotional and cognitive evaluations of life. *Annual Review of Psychology, 54,* 403-425.

Dweck, C.S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development.* Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

Epstein, S. (1990). Cognitive-experiential self-theory. In L. Pervin, (Ed.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 165-192). New York: Guilford Press.

Epstein, S. (in press). Conscious and unconscious self-esteem from the perspective of cognitive-experiential self-theory. To appear in M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Self-esteem issues and answers: A sourcebook of current perspectives.* New York: Psychology Press.

Epstien, S., & Morling, B. (1995). Is the self motivated to do more than enhance and/or
verify itself? In M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Efficacy, agency, and self-esteem* (pp. 9-29).
New York: Plenum.

Feldman Barrett, L., Cleveland, J., Conner, T., Williams, N.L. (2000). *Manual for the Defensive
Verbal Ratings Scale (Version 3.0).* Unpublished manuscript.

Feldman Barrett, L., Williams, N.L., & Fong, G.T. (2002). Defensive verbal behavior
assessment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28,* 776-788.

Greenier, K.D., Kernis, M.H., McNamara, C.W., Waschull, S.B., Berry, A.J., Herlocker, & C.E.,
Abend, T.A. (1999). Individual differences in reactivity to daily events: Examining the
roles of stability and level of self-esteem. *Journal of Personality, 67,* 185-208.

Greenwald, A.G., & Banaji, M.R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-
esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological Review, 102,* 4-27.

Greenwald, A.G., Bellezza, F.S., & Banaji, M.R. (1988). Is self-esteem a central
ingredient of the self-concept? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 14,*
34-45.

Hetts, J.J., & Pelham, B.W. (2001). A case for the nonconscious self-concept. In G.B.
Moskowitz (Ed.), *Cognitive Social Psychology: The Princeton symposium on the
legacy and future of social cognition* (pp. 105-123). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hetts, J.J., Sakuma, M., & Pelham, B.W. (1999). Two roads to positive regard: Implicit
and explicit self-evaluation and culture. *Journal of Experimental Social
Psychology, 35,* 512-559.

Jones, J.T., Pelham, B.W., Mirenberg, M.C., & Hetts, J.J. (2002). Name letter preferences are not merely mere exposure: Implicit egotism as self-regulation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 38,* 170-177.

Jordan, C.H., Spencer, S.J., & Zanna, M.P. (2002). "I love me … I love me not": Implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, and defensiveness. In S.J. Spencer, S. Fein, M.P. Zanna, & J.M. Olson (Eds.), *The Ontario symposium; Vol. 9: Motivated social perception* (pp. 117-145). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Jordan, C.H., Spencer, S.J., & Zanna, M.P., Hoshino-Browne, E., & Correll, J. (2003). Secure and defensive high self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85,* 969-978.

Kernis, M.H. (2000). Substitute needs and fragile self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry, 11,* 298-300.

Kernis, M.H. (2003a). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry, 14,* 1-26.

Kernis, M.H. (2003b). Optimal self-esteem and authenticity: Separating fantasy from reality. *Psychological Inquiry, 14,* 83-89.

Kernis, M.H., Abend, T.A., Goldman, B.M., Shrira, I., Paradise, A.N., & Hampton, C. (2005). Self-serving responses arising form discrepancies between explicit and implicit self-esteem. *Self and Identity, 4,* 311-330.

Kernis, M.H., Brockner, J., & Frankel, B.S. (1989). Self-esteem and reactions to failure: The mediating role of overgeneralization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57,* 707-714.

Kernis, M.H., Cornell, D.P., Sun, C., Berry, A., & Harlow, T. (1993). There's more to self-esteem than whether it is high or low: The importance of stability of self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65,* 1190-1204.

Kernis, M.H., & Goldman, B.G. (in press, a). Assessing stability of self-esteem and contingent self-esteem. To appear in M.H. Kernis (Ed.), *Self-esteem issues and answers: A sourcebook of current perspectives.* New York: Psychology Press.

Kernis, M.H., & Goldman, B.G. (in press, b). A multi-component conceptualization of authenticity: Theory and research. To appear in M.P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 38). New York: Academic Press.

Kernis, M.H., Granneman, B.D., & Barclay, L.C. (1989). Stability and level of self-esteem as predictors of anger arousal and hostility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56,* 1013-1023.

Kernis, M.H., Granneman, B.D., & Barclay, L.C. (1992). Stability of self-esteem: Assessment, correlates, and excuse making. *Journal of Personality, 60,* 621-644.

Kernis, M.H., Granneman, B.D., & Mathis, L.C. (1991). Stability of self-esteem as a moderator of the relation between level of self-esteem and depression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61,* 80-84.

Kernis, M.H., Greenier, K.D., Herlocker, C.E., Whisenhunt, C.R., & Abend, T.A. (1997). Self-perceptions of reactions to doing well or poorly: The roles of stability and level of self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences, 22,* 845-854.

Kernis, M.H., Paradise, A.W., Whitaker, D.J., Wheatman, S.R., & Goldman, B.N. (2000). Master of one's psychological domain? Not likely if one's self-esteem is unstable. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26,* 1297-1305.

Kernis, M.H., & Waschull, S.B. (1995). The interactive roles of stability and level of self-esteem: Research and theory. In M.P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 27, pp. 93-141). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Kitayama, S., & Karasawa, M. (1997). Implicit self-esteem in Japan: Name letters and birthday numbers. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 23,* 736-742.

Koole, S.L., Dijksterhuis, A., & van Knippenberg, A. (2001). What's in a name: Implicit self-esteem and the automatic self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80,* 669-685.

Neighbors, C., Larimer, M.E., Markman Giesner, I., & Knee, C.R. (2004). Feeling controlled and drinking motives among college students: Contingent self-esteem as a mediator. *Self and Identity, 3,* 207-224.

Nuttin, J.M. (1987). Affective consequences of mere ownership: the name letter effect in twelve European languages. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 17,* 381-402.

Paradise, A.W., & Kernis, M.H. (1999). [Development of the Contingent Self-esteem Scale]. Unpublished data, University of Georgia.

Pelham, B.W., Koole, S.L., & Hardin, C.D. (2005). Gender moderates the relation between implicit and explicit self-esteem. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 41,* 84-89.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rosenberg, M. (1986). Self-concept from middle childhood through adolescence. In J. Suls & A.G. Greenwald (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 3). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ryan, R.M., & Deci, E.L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of

   intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist,*

   55, 68-78.

Shimizu, M., & Pelham, B.W. (2004). The unconscious cost of good fortune: Implicit and

   explicit self-esteem, positive life events, and health. *Health Psychology, 23,* 101-

   105.

Spalding, L.R., & Hardin, C.D. (1999). Unconscious unease and self-handicapping:

   Behavioral consequences of individual differences in implicit and explicit self-

   esteem. *Psychological Science, 10,* 535-539.

Tice, D.M. (1991). Esteem protection or enhancement? Self-handicapping motives differ by trait

   self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60,* 711-725.

Trzesniewski, K.H., Donnellan, M.B., & Robins, R.W. (2003). Stability of self-esteem across the

   life span. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84,* 205-220.

Wilson, T.W., Lindsey, S., & Schooler, T.Y. (2000). A model of dual attitudes.

   Psychological Review, 107, 101-126.

Table 1: Correlations among Variables.

===

	SELevel	StabSE	CSE	ISE	DVBA
SELevel	---				
StabSE	-.46**	---			
CSE	-.51**	.44**	---		
ISE	.26*	-.46**	-.29**	---	
DVBA	-.26**	.61**	.32**	-.56**	---

===

NOTE: SELevel = Self-esteem Level; StabSE = Stability of Self-

esteem; CSE = Contingent Self-esteem; ISE = Implicit Self-esteem;

DVBA = Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment.

 *p < .05. **p < .01.

Figure 1: Predicted Values for Defensiveness as a function of Self-esteem Level and Stability of
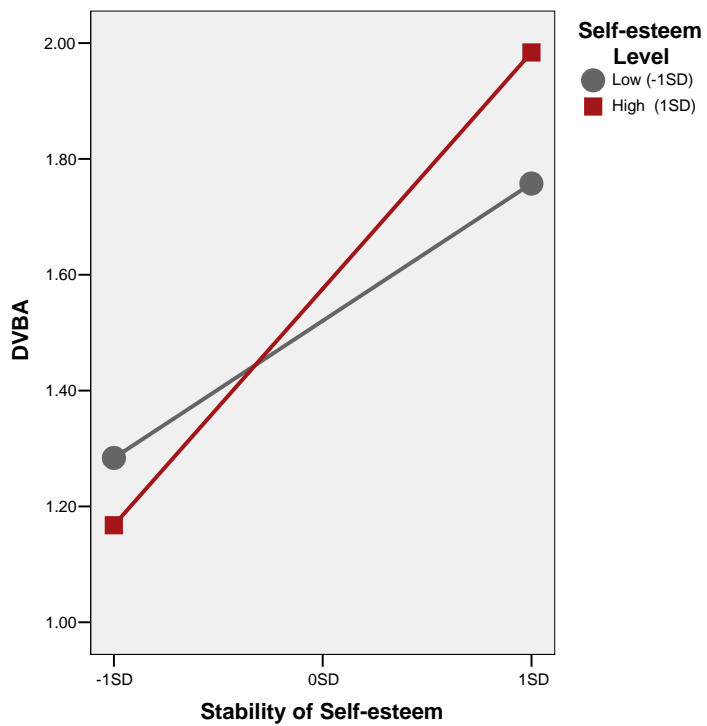
Self-esteem.

Figure 2: Predicted Values for Defensiveness as a function of Self-esteem Level and Contingent Self-esteem.
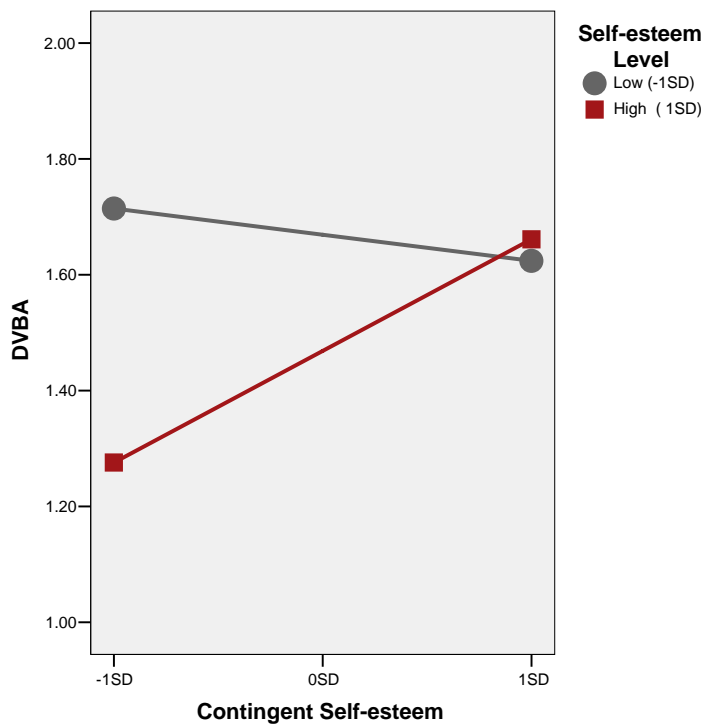
Figure 3: Predicted Values for Defensiveness as a function of (Explicit) Self-esteem Level and Implicit Self-esteem.