# Self-Esteem:

# It's Not What You Think

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Self-esteem figures prominently in many psychological models of human behavior; it is also of great concern to the general population. Nevertheless, it is not well-understood. In this paper, we discuss the nature and functions of self-esteem. We argue (a) that self-esteem is a global, affective disposition that does not derive from how people assess their more specific qualities; (b) that it functions to regulate a class of affective states we call feelings of self-worth (e.g., pride vs humiliation); and (c) that it is the (anticipated) affective value of different outcomes that underlies self-esteem differences in behavior. We conclude by comparing our approach with other models.

Browse any bookstore in America and you will probably notice two things: Dozens of books have been written to help you lose weight and dozens more have been written to help you gain self-esteem. It's easy to understand all of the books on weight loss. After all, one can't be too thin in America. But why all this interest in having high self-esteem? What's it good for? Surprisingly, there is little agreement on the matter within the academic community. While some argue that high self-esteem is essential to human functioning and imbues life with meaning (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), others argue that it is of little value and may actually be a liability (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Between these two extremes lie various positions of an intermediary nature.

In this paper, we address these issues by outlining our beliefs about the nature and functions of self-esteem. We will argue that self-esteem is fundamentally an affective disposition and functions to regulate a specific class of emotional states we call "feelings of self-worth." We will also show that self-esteem is most apt to influence behavior in situations that involve the potential for failure and disappointment.

We need to make three points before we begin. First, we are concerned with normal, rather than pathological populations. Second, our research participants are also college students and we have measured self-esteem using self-report questionnaires. Whether people accurately report their feelings toward themselves is the subject of some debate (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Weinberger, 1990). This is a complex issue and one we will consider in a later section. At this point, we would simply note that we believe the study of self is properly the study of phenomenal experience (Rogers, 1961), and that self-report questionnaires provide useful information when it comes understanding how people feel about themselves.

Finally, we believe our arguments will be of greatest interest to those who use self-esteem as an explanatory construct. These include social, personality, and developmental psychologists, as well as those working in educational and organizational settings. Our ideas may be less relevant to clinical psychologists, who may find our emphasis on conscious experience in nonpathological populations unduly restricted.

## I. The Nature of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is part of everyday language and everyone seems intuitively to know what self-esteem "is." In fact, self-esteem means different things to different people and the term is used in at least three different ways.

### A. *Three Ways the Term Is Used*

#### 1. Global self-esteem

Sometimes the term is used to refer to a personality variable that captures the way people generally feel about themselves. Researchers call this form of self-esteem, *global* self-esteem or *trait* self-esteem, as it is relatively enduring across time and situations. In the remainder of this paper, we will use the term *self-esteem* (without any qualifiers) when referring to this variable.

Attempts to define self-esteem have ranged

from an emphasis on primitive libidinal impulses (Kernberg, 1975) to the perception that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe (Solomon et al., 1991). We take a decidedly less exotic approach and define self-esteem in terms of feelings of affection for oneself (Brown, 1993; 1998; Brown & Dutton, 1995). Within normal populations, high self-esteem is characterized by a general fondness or love for oneself; low self-esteem is characterized by mildly positive or ambivalent feelings toward oneself. In extreme cases, low self-esteem people hate themselves, but this kind of self-loathing occurs only in clinical populations (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989).

Readers should be aware that our definition emphasizes the affective nature of self-esteem. When we talk about self-esteem we are talking about how people *feel* about themselves. Other researchers treat self-esteem in more cognitive terms. For example, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) use the term self-esteem to refer to "global judgments of self-worth" (p. 590). This emphasis on judgmental processes shifts the focus of self-esteem from an affective construct (i.e., how people *feel* about themselves) to a cognitive one (i.e., what people *think* about themselves). To our mind, this distinction is a critical one, and we will revisit it throughout the paper.

## 2. Feelings of Self-Worth

Self-esteem is also used to refer to momentary self-evaluative reactions to valenced events. This is what people mean when they talk about events that "threaten self-esteem" or "boost self-esteem." For example, a person might say her self-esteem was sky-high after getting a big promotion or a person might say his self-esteem plummeted after a divorce. Although it is possible to view these reactions in cognitive, judgmental terms ("Having just succeeded, I think I'm a good person."), we believe these reactions are fundamentally affective in nature and call them *feelings of self-worth*. Feeling proud or pleased with ourselves (on the positive side), or humiliated and ashamed of ourselves (on the negative side) are examples of what we mean by feelings of self-worth.

Many researchers use the term *state* self-esteem to refer to the emotions we are calling feelings of self-worth, and *trait* self-esteem to refer to the way people generally feel about themselves (e.g., Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; McFarland & Ross, 1982). These terms connote an equivalency between the two constructs, implying that the essential difference is that global self-esteem persists while feelings of self-worth are temporary. We disagree with this approach. We do not believe that feeling proud is analogous to having high self-esteem. To illustrate our thinking, consider that most parents swell with pride when their children do something great. But these accomplishments don't alter how much love most parents feel for their children. The pride comes and goes in response to a particular event or achievement, but the love remains and is independent of whether the child has done something great or not. This is how we think of self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Feelings of self-worth rise and fall in response to particular outcomes, but self-esteem is enduring. They are different constructs with different antecedents and they differ in ways more fundamental than their temporal course.

## 3. Self- Evaluations

Finally, the term self-esteem is used to refer to the way people evaluate their various abilities and attributes. For example, a person who doubts his ability in school is sometimes said to have low *academic* self-esteem and a person who thinks she is good at sports is said to have high *athletic* self-esteem. The terms self-confidence and self-efficacy have also been used to refer to these beliefs, and many people equate self-confidence with self-esteem. We prefer to call these beliefs *self-evaluations* or *self-appraisals*, as they refer to the way people evaluate or appraise their physical attributes, abilities, and personality characteristics.

Not everyone makes this distinction, however. In fact, many scales design to measure self-esteem include subscales that measure self-evaluations in multiple domains. For example,

Heatherton and Polivy's (1991) measure of state self-esteem includes subscales to measure appearance self-esteem, performance self-esteem, and social self-esteem (see also, Harter, 1986; Marsh, 1993a; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). In our opinion, it confuses matters to say that people who think they are good at sports have high sports self-esteem.

Table 1 summarizes the various ways the term self-esteem has been used. A primary goal of this paper is to encourage researchers to come to some consensus regarding the use of each term. Our own preference is to view the three terms as distinct, not only in their temporal nature or generality, but in their very essence. Doing so, we believe, will clarify research in this area and allow researchers to better understand the behavior of the people they study.[1]

Table 1. Three ways the term "self-esteem" is used

| Usage | Emphasis on Affective Processes | Emphasis on Cognitive Processes |
|---|---|---|
| Global (or Trait) Self-Esteem | Overall feelings of affection for oneself, akin to self-love | An enduring judgment of one's worth as a person |
| State Self-Esteem (Feelings of Self-Worth) | Self-relevant emotional states, such as pride and shame | Temporary or current judgments of one's worth as a person |
| Domain Specific Self-Esteem (Self-Evaluations) | Evaluative judgments of one's specific qualities | Evaluative judgments of one's specific qualities |

Although conceptually distinct, the three constructs shown in Table 1 are highly correlated. High self-esteem people evaluate themselves more positively and experience higher feelings of self-worth than do low self-esteem people (Brown, 1998). These associations have led researchers to consider how these constructs are related.

### B. *A Cognitive (Bottom-Up) Model of Self-Esteem*

Almost without exception, researchers in personality and social psychology have assumed that these constructs are related in a bottom-up fashion. As shown in Figure 1, the bottom-up model holds that evaluative feedback (e.g., success or failure, interpersonal acceptance or rejection), influences self-evaluations, and that self-evaluations determine state self-esteem and trait self-esteem. We refer to this as a bottom-up model because it assumes that self-esteem is based on more elemental beliefs about one's particular qualities. IF you think you are attractive, and IF you think you are intelligent, and IF you think you are popular, THEN you will have high self-esteem.

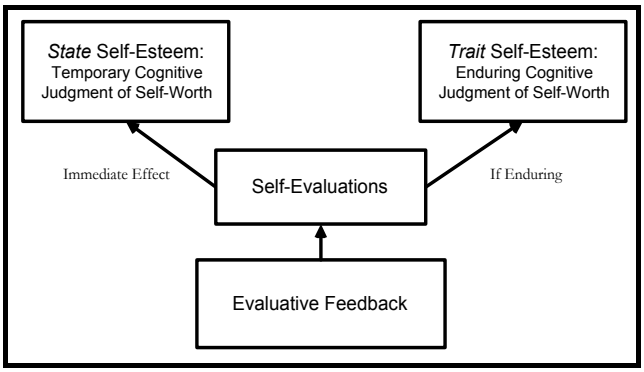


Figure 1. A cognitive model of self-esteem functioning

A variant on this approach assumes that not all self-evaluations influence self-esteem. Self-evaluations in domains of high personal importance exert a strong effect on self-esteem, but self-evaluations in domains of low personal importance do not. For example, it has been suggested that some people (typically men) base their self-esteem on their perceived competence whereas other people (usually women) base their self-esteem on their social skills (e.g., Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). To predict self-esteem, we first weight each self-evaluation by its importance and then sum the weighted values. William James (1980) is often credited with originating this position (a point we will consider in some detail later), but it was most clearly spelled out by Rosenberg (1965, 1979). Although the scale he developed to assess self-esteem does not refer to any particular domain of self-evaluation, Rosenberg believed that global self-esteem is based on the way people assess their specific qualities in areas of high personal importance.

> Ordinarily, we assume that if someone respects himself in certain particulars, then he respects himself in general. If he thinks he is smart, attractive, likable, moral, interesting, and so on, then he thinks well of himself in general. Yet it should be apparent that …a person's global self-esteem is based not solely on an assessment of his constituent qualities but on an assessment of the qualities that *count* (1979, p. 18). ... It is not simply the elements per se but their relationship, weighting, and combination that is responsible for the final outcome (1979, p. 21)

It is important to understand what is being said here. Rosenberg is often thought to have advocated a holistic view. But, in fact, it is molecular. It says that global self-esteem is a weighted function of a person's domain-specific self-evaluations.

The list of researchers who have endorsed this perspective reads like a "who's who" of contemporary eminence. Included in this list are Baumeister (1998), Campbell (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993), Crocker (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1997); Harter (1986), Heatherton (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), Kernis (Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Leary (Leary et al., 1995), Marsh (1986, 1990, 1993b), Pelham (1995), and Swann (Pelham & Swann, 1989). Each of these researchers views self-esteem as a judgmental process in which people survey their constituent qualities and somehow combine these judgments into an overall evaluation of themselves.

The bottom-up model makes an additional assumption. Because it assumes that self-evaluations underlie global self-esteem, the model assumes that self-esteem differences are due to underlying self-evaluations. For example, if we find that high self-esteem people persist longer after failure than do low self-esteem people, it must be because high self-esteem have more confidence in their ability to succeed (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Several important social psychological theories, including Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988) and Steele's self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) adopt this assumption. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that global self-esteem is of little value and that researchers should concentrate instead on self-evaluations (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Marsh, 1990).

To summarize, it is virtually axiomatic within the fields of personality and social psychology that global self-esteem depends on the way people evaluate their more specific qualities. If you think you have many positive qualities, then you will have high self-esteem. The bottom-up model closely resembles the standard social psychological approach to understanding the impression formation process. In the classic Asch paradigm, for example, people are given trait information about another person and are asked to indicate their liking for the person. Anderson (1974) and others conducted a great deal of research testing whether this kind of liking is best predicted by an additive model, an averaging model, or one in which each trait is first weighted according to the importance the person attaches to that trait. Following Solomon Asch (1946), most social psychologists rejected this elementaristic, bottom-up approach, favoring a more top-down model in which our overall liking for a person colors the way we interpret each of the person's qualities. It is curious that a field that has so uniformly rejected an elementaristic approach to understanding how we feel about other people has so uniformly embraced it as a way of understanding how people feel about themselves.

### C. *An Affective (Top-Down) Model of Self-Esteem*

There is another way to think about the nature of self-esteem, one that emphasizes affective processes rather than cognitive ones. According to this affective (or top-down) model, self-esteem develops early in life in response to temperamental and relational factors and, once formed, influences self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth (Brown, 1993, 1998; see also, Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Figure 2 depicts a schematic drawing of the model. The dotted lines represent an interaction term, underscoring that self-esteem exerts its most important effect when people confront evaluative feedback, particularly negative

feedback, such as failure in the achievement domain or interpersonal rejection. When low self-esteem people encounter negative feedback, they evaluate themselves more negatively and their feelings of self-worth fall. When high self-esteem people encounter negative feedback, they maintain their high self-evaluations and protect or quickly restore their feelings of self-worth. In our view, this is the primary advantage of having high self-esteem: It allows you to *fail* without feeling bad about yourself.[2]

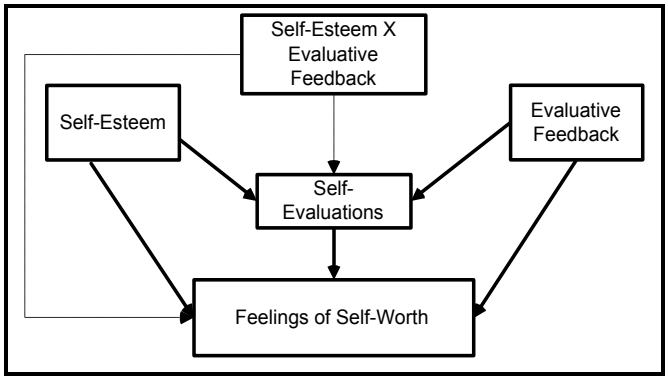


Figure 2. An affective model of self-esteem functioning

The distinction we have made between bottom-up and top-down models of self-esteem parallels models of happiness (Diener, 1984; Kozma, Stone, & Stones, 2000). Bottom-up models assume that a person's overall level of happiness is the result of a mental calculation in which the person considers the relative balance of life's pleasures and pains. This model follows the elemental approach of Lockean philosophical thought. The top-down model adopts a more Kantian view and reverses this causal sequence. It asserts that a person enjoys life because she or he is happy and not the other way around. Note, however, that the top-down approach does not assume that pleasurable experiences are irrelevant to ongoing feelings of happiness. It simply assumes that people with a happy disposition take pleasure and joy in many experiences. In this scheme, then, happiness is a capacity—the capacity to enjoy life. We think of self-esteem in similar terms: Self-esteem is a capacity to construe events in ways that promote, maintain, and protect feelings of self-worth

## II. **Testing the Affective Model**

In the remainder of this paper, we will review research designed to test the affective (top-down) model.

### A. *Self-Esteem and Self-Evaluation*

We begin by considering the nature of the association between self-esteem and self-evaluations. The first thing to note here is that self-esteem is virtually uncorrelated with every *objective* variable in life. People who *are* intelligent, good-looking, popular, and so forth do not have higher self-esteem than do those who lack these qualities (Feingold, 1992). Nor is self-esteem appreciably lower in socially disadvantaged groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, women, the poor, or the socially stigmatized (e.g., Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). In short, what you are *really* like has little if any bearing on your self-esteem. A professor with 11 grants and 115 publications is no more apt to have high self-esteem than is a professor with no grants and 1 publication.

On the assumption that what people are *really* like *ought* to influence how they feel about themselves, several theories have been offered to explain these null effects (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Tafarodi, 1998). For example, Crocker and Major (1989) have suggested that attractive people discount the positive feedback they receive ("I'm only getting this job because I'm good-looking") and unattractive people discount the negative feedback they receive ("I didn't get the job because I'm not good-looking enough). In this manner, attractiveness ends up being uncorrelated with self-esteem.

There is another way to view these data, however. Maybe they tell us something important about the nature of self-esteem itself: Maybe they mean just what they say: Self-esteem doesn't have anything to do with what you are "really like," because what you are "really like" doesn't have anything to do with how you feel about yourself. After all, psychologists don't labor to explain why parental love is uncorrelated with children's intelligence.

They just accept that parental love has nothing to do with intelligence. We think the same argument applies to understanding the origins of self-esteem.

Although self-esteem is uncorrelated with what people are *really* like, it is strongly related to what people think they are like. Among other things, high self-esteem people think they are more attractive, more intelligent, and better liked than do low self-esteem people. They're not, but they think they are.

The bottom-up model explains this association by assuming that one's perceived qualities, rather than one's actual qualities, determine self-esteem. If you think you have many positive qualities, then you will have high self-esteem. The top-down model reverses this causal sequence. It assumes that self-esteem influences self-evaluations in a top-down, schema driven manner. People who like themselves in general evaluate themselves positively—they like the way they look, and they think they are intelligent, and likable. This is not to say that self-esteem is the only factor that influences self-evaluations, only that the bottom-up assumption adopted by so many theorists is not the only way to interpret the correlation between self-esteem and self-evaluations.

## 1. How Do People Evaluate Themselves?

Correlational research can never establish the superiority of one model over the other (Marsh & Yeung, 1998), but we can carefully examine the nature of the association between self-esteem and self-evaluations and draw some reasonable inferences. As a starting point, we think it's instructive to simply ask "What do high and low self-esteem people think about themselves?" Brown and Dutton (1991) conducted a study to explore this issue. The participants were 90 university students who had scored in either the upper or lower tertile on the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale.[3] The Rosenberg scale measures global self-esteem. It focuses on general feelings toward the self without reference to any specific quality or attribute. The validity of the measure is well-established (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997).

As part of a larger investigation, we had students indicate how well each of 26 trait terms described them (1 = <u>not at all</u>; 7 = <u>very much</u>). Fourteen of the items referred to positively-valued qualities; the remaining items referred to negatively-valued qualities. In addition to making judgments about themselves, we also had the students indicate to what extent each item described "most other people."

Table 2 presents the data from this investigation. The first thing to notice is that self-esteem influences self-evaluation across a great many domains. High self-esteem students rated themselves more favorably than low self-esteem students on 11 of the 14 positively-valued traits, regarding themselves as more athletic, attractive, capable, creative, good-looking, kind, loyal, sexy, smart, talented, and well-liked. Two of the three items that failed to show significant group differences (compassionate and friendly) had probability levels of marginal significance ($\underline{p} < .08$ or less), so only one item, generous, was completely unrelated to self-esteem.

Table 2. Evaluations of Self and Others as a Function of Self-Esteem

| | SELF-EVALUATIONS | | High Self-Esteem | | Low Self-Esteem | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| POSITIVE TRAITS | High Self-Esteem | Low Self-Esteem | SELF | OTHERS | SELF | OTHERS |
| **ATHLETIC** | 5.60 | 4.81 | 5.60 | 4.43 | 4.81 | 4.62 |
| **ATTRACTIVE** | 5.10 | 4.38 | 5.10 | 4.32 | 4.38 | 4.38 |
| **CAPABLE** | 6.14 | 5.60 | 6.14 | 5.19 | 5.60 | 4.90 |
| COMPASSIONATE | 5.55 | 5.04 | 5.55 | 4.57 | 5.04 | 4.29 |
| **CREATIVE** | 4.98 | 4.44 | 4.98 | 4.45 | 4.44 | 4.46 |
| FRIENDLY | 5.81 | 5.44 | 5.81 | 4.93 | 5.44 | 4.71 |
| GENEROUS | 5.00 | 4.85 | 5.00 | 4.14 | 4.85 | 4.21 |
| **GOOD-LOOKING** | 5.19 | 4.40 | 5.19 | 4.07 | 4.40 | 4.21 |
| **KIND** | 6.05 | 5.46 | 6.05 | 4.86 | 5.46 | 4.74 |
| **LOYAL** | 6.20 | 5.54 | 6.20 | 4.12 | 5.54 | 4.13 |
| **SEXY** | 4.71 | 3.63 | 4.71 | 3.60 | 3.63 | 3.79 |
| **SMART** | 5.57 | 4.98 | 5.57 | 4.62 | 4.98 | 4.63 |
| **TALENTED** | 5.43 | 4.48 | 5.43 | 4.60 | 4.48 | 4.53 |
| **WELL-LIKED** | 5.71 | 5.06 | 5.71 | 4.64 | 5.06 | 4.54 |
| | | | | | | |
| NEGATIVE TRAITS | | | | | | |
| **INADEQUATE** | 1.40 | 2.33 | 1.40 | 2.81 | 2.33 | 2.94 |
| **INCOMPETENT** | 1.51 | 2.25 | 1.51 | 2.95 | 2.25 | 2.96 |
| **INCONSIDERATE** | 1.83 | 2.48 | 1.83 | 3.36 | 2.48 | 3.54 |
| INSENSITIVE | 2.19 | 2.56 | 2.19 | 3.26 | 2.56 | 3.46 |
| INSINCERE | 2.05 | 2.51 | 2.05 | 3.31 | 2.51 | 3.66 |
| **PHONY** | 1.52 | 2.04 | 1.52 | 3.67 | 2.04 | 3.81 |
| **THOUGHTLESS** | 1.81 | 2.38 | 1.81 | 3.17 | 2.38 | 3.23 |
| **UNATTRACTIVE** | 1.71 | 2.69 | 1.71 | 3.14 | 2.69 | 3.17 |
| **UNCOORDINATED** | 1.57 | 2.31 | 1.57 | 2.98 | 2.31 | 3.15 |
| **UNINTELLIGENT** | 1.45 | 2.08 | 1.45 | 2.74 | 2.08 | 2.77 |
| **UNPOPULAR** | 1.88 | 2.73 | 1.88 | 3.21 | 2.73 | 3.31 |
| **UNWISE** | 2.00 | 2.50 | 2.00 | 3.14 | 2.50 | 2.83 |

Note. Items in bold indicate that high self-esteem students evaluated themselves more favorably than did low self-esteem students. Underlined items indicate that self-evaluations were more favorable than were evaluations of most other people.

Analysis of the negatively-valued traits revealed a complementary pattern. High self-esteem students believed that 10 of the 12 negative traits were less descriptive of them than did low self-esteem students. Compared to those with low self-esteem, high self-esteem students rated themselves as less inadequate, incompetent, inconsiderate, phony, thoughtless, unattractive, uncoordinated, unintelligent, unpopular, and unwise. One of the 2 items not regarded as less self-descriptive by high self-esteem students (insincere) bordered on significance ($p < .06$), so, again, only one item, insensitive, was completely independent of self-esteem.

We conducted several additional analyses to determine whether these tendencies varied significantly as a function of the specific items we examined. For example, we performed an analysis of variance using self-esteem as a between-subjects factor and the specific trait descriptors as a repeated measure. For both positive and negative items, the main effects of self-esteem were significant and were not qualified by the repeated measure. In short, even allowing for some redundancy in these items, the data reveal a broad tendency for high self-esteem people to appraise themselves more positively and less negatively than low self-esteem people across a wide range of attributes.

Because these are correlational data, they do

not establish that global self-esteem determines people's attribute-specific self-evaluations. They are, however, consistent with this claim. The top-down approach asserts that people's perceptions of their specific qualities are schema-driven constructions, largely determined by their overall feelings of affection for themselves. The fact that people who feel good about themselves in a general way regard themselves as possessing numerous positive qualities and few negative qualities is consistent with this position.

The data in Table 2 seem less consistent with the weighted averaging, bottom-up model. This model assumes that each person bases his/her self-esteem on a few core attributes, with a good deal of variability across individuals (Coopersmith, 1967; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Harter, 1990). The data shown in Table 2 provide no evidence for this kind of specificity. High self-esteem people regard themselves more positively and less negatively than low self-esteem people on virtually every trait that's important to possess. This generality bespeaks of a certain arbitrariness to these judgments. It matters very little what the attribute is— high self-esteem people lay claim to possessing it if it is positively-regarded and deny possessing it if it is negatively-regarded (Brown et al., 2001). Although this generality doesn't rule out the possibility that some smaller set of attributes might be relevant to the development of self-esteem, it does suggest that once self-esteem arises it colors people's evaluations of themselves in many domains.

Two other aspects of Table 2 are noteworthy. To see whether the positivity high self-esteem people show toward themselves is part of a broader tendency to evaluate social objects more positively than low self-esteem people, we examined students' evaluations of "most other people." There were no significant self-esteem differences for any of the 26 items, indicating that high self-esteem people do not simply hold more positive views of people in general.

It's also important to note that self-esteem differences did not emerge because low self-esteem students appraised themselves so negatively. In fact, they rated themselves above the scale midpoint of 4 for 13 of the 14 positive traits and well below the scale midpoint for all 12 of the negative traits. This point is made even more dramatically when we examine how these students compared themselves to most other people. The far right-hand columns in Table 2 show that these low self-esteem students regarded themselves more positively and less negatively than they regarded most other people (see also, Brown, 1986; Suls, Lernos, & Stewart, 2002). They rated themselves more favorably than they rated most other people for 7 of the 14 positive traits, and less negatively than most other people for 11 of the 12 negative traits. This latter finding is particularly important. Low self-esteem people are frequently assumed to think of themselves in negative terms—to regard themselves as homely, inadequate, dim-witted, and unlovable. But this is not the case. Low self-esteem people actually view themselves as much *less* unattractive, inadequate, unintelligent, and unpopular than most other people.

This finding has an important implication. The cognitive model assumes that self-evaluations are a defining feature of low self-esteem. When we ask "Why do low self-esteem people feel bad about themselves?", the cognitive model replies "because they evaluate themselves so negatively." One problem with this argument is that low self-esteem people don't evaluate themselves so negatively. They are actually quite positive with respect to what they think. Not as positive as high self-esteem people, of course, but positive nonetheless. This finding casts doubt on the claim that negative self-evaluations underlie low self-esteem.

It might be wondered whether our sample accounts for these findings. In particular, maybe these positivity biases are found only among college students. Although there is no evidence that this is the case (Brown, 1998), we do not doubt that true self-deprecation occurs in some populations (e.g., the severely depressed). But this admission does not negate the central point being made here, which is this: Many people

who evaluate themselves positively don't feel good about themselves, and self-esteem differences are reliably found in the absence of absolute negativity on the part of those classified as having low self-esteem. These findings imply that negative self-evaluations are not the sine qua non of low self-esteem. We believe this idea has been under-appreciated by previous theorists.

To summarize, high self-esteem people believe they possess many positive qualities and few negative qualities. Low self-esteem people show a similar tendency but to a lesser degree. These findings suggest two things: First, self-esteem differences in self-evaluation are so broad and pervasive that it makes better sense to assume that self-esteem colors people's evaluations of their specific attributes rather than assume that self-esteem is built up, piece-by-piece, on people's more specific self-appraisals. Second, when self-esteem differences are found, they are not due to negative thinking on the part of low self-esteem people.

## 2. Does Self-Esteem Interact with Evaluative Feedback to Affect Self-Evaluations?

The top-down model shown in Figure 2 predicts that self-esteem and evaluative feedback interact to predict self-evaluations. The effect is such that negative feedback is more apt to make low self-esteem people think negatively about themselves (Brown et al., 2001). An investigation by Dutton and Brown (1996) illustrates these effects. Using random assignment to conditions, we led high self-esteem participants and low self-esteem participants to succeed or fail on an intellectual task. The participants then evaluated themselves in four different areas: (a) the specific ability measured by the test ("how high/low are you in this ability?"); (b) general intelligence ("how intelligent/unintelligent are you?"); (c) interpersonal qualities ("how kind/phony are you?"); and (d) general perceptions of one's worth as a person ("overall, how good/bad a person are you?").

Figure 3 presents some of the results from this investigation. The first panel shows that both self-esteem groups thought they were lower in the specific ability when they failed than when they succeeded. This is not surprising. If you have just done poorly at a test of a novel (indeed, fictitious) ability, it is reasonable to assume that you lack ability in this area. Panel 2 in Figure 3 shows participants' perceptions of their general intelligence, and here we see a different pattern. Failure led low self-esteem participants to doubt their general intelligence, but it did not have this effect on high self-esteem participants.

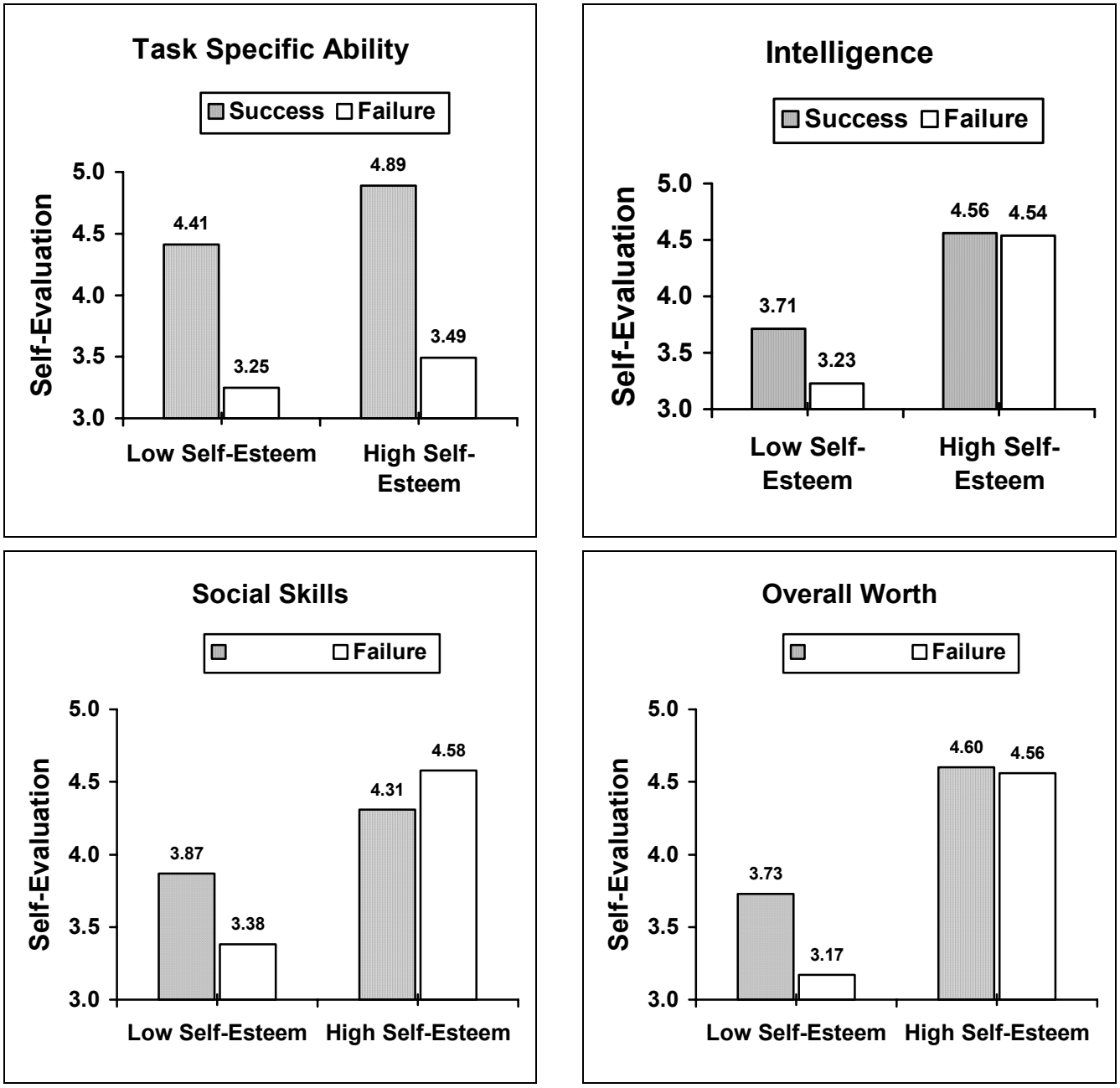


Figure 3. Self-evaluations as a function of self-esteem, success/failure, and the generality of the evaluation. (Adapted from Dutton & Brown, 1996)

The results are even more dramatic when we look at how failure influenced participants' perceptions of their interpersonal qualities (e.g., "How kind and warm are you?"). After failing a test of their intellectual ability, low self-esteem participants tended to belittle their social qualities. High self-esteem participants did not show this tendency. Instead of overgeneralizing the negative effects of failure, they tended to compensate for failure by exaggerating their perceived social skills (for similar results, see Baumeister, 1982a; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Brown & Smart, 1991; Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Epstein, 1992; Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992; Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989; Sanbonmatsu, Harpster Akimoto, & Moulin, 1994; for related work with depressives, see Beck, 1967; Carver & Ganellen, 1983; Carver,

Ganellen, & Behar-Mitrani, 1985; Wenzlaff & Grozier, 1988).

Finally, we can look at how test performance affected participants' perceptions of their general worth as a person (see Panel 4 in Figure 3). In comparison with success, failure led low self-esteem participants to doubt their worth as a person but it had no such effect on high self-esteem participants.

To summarize, self-esteem and evaluative feedback interacted to influence self-evaluations. Failure was much more apt to change the way low self-esteem participants evaluated themselves than it was to alter the self-evaluations of high self-esteem participants. These findings suggest that, rather than providing the solid bedrock upon which self-esteem rests, self-evaluations are fluid and are more properly viewed as consequences of self-esteem rather than antecedents (see Brown et al., 2001). People with different self-esteem levels adjust their self-evaluations in response to evaluative feedback.

## B. *Self-Esteem and Emotion*

### 1. Does Self-Esteem Function To Regulate Feelings Of Self-Worth, Especially Following Evaluative Feedback?

The affective model (see Figure 2) assumes that self-esteem functions primarily to regulate feelings of self-worth and that high self-esteem people are less apt to feel bad about themselves when they fail than are low self-esteem people. An investigation by Brown and Dutton (1995) tested these predictions. High self-esteem and low self-esteem participants were led to experience success or failure at a test that allegedly measured an important intellectual ability. After learning how they had done, the participants completed an eight-item emotion scale. Four of the items (happy, glad, unhappy, sad) represented very general emotional responses to a positive or negative outcome. The other four items (proud, pleased with myself, ashamed, and humiliated) referred specifically to how people feel about themselves. These latter emotions are examples of what we have called feelings of self-worth.

Before reviewing the findings, it is important to explain why these two types of emotions were chosen for study. Feelings of self-worth are self-relevant emotions. They refer to how people feel about themselves. Not all emotions have this quality. Happiness, for example, is a diffuse emotion that does not necessarily involve the self as a reference point. One can feel happy while standing in the warm sunshine or watching a toddler eat an ice cream cone. These experiences will not, however, evoke feelings of pride. This is because pride always describes how people feel about themselves, usually arising when people assume causal responsibility for bringing about a positive outcome (Weiner, 1986). This doesn't mean that happiness never results from a self-relevant experience. After all, students are happy when they get good grades. But they feel proud only insofar as these grades are viewed as arising from a self-relevant factor (Brown & Weiner, 1984). The key distinction to be made, then, is that self-relevant emotions *always* involve the self as a reference point, but that non self-relevant emotions (such has happiness and sadness) *do not necessarily* involve the self as a reference point.

Because we believe that self-esteem functions primarily to regulate feelings of self-worth, we anticipated that self-esteem would be a stronger predictor of feelings of self-worth following success and failure than more general feelings of happiness and sadness. The data displayed in Figure 4 support this prediction. The left-hand panel displays the results for the four general emotions. These data show only a main effect of success/failure. Participants felt sadder after they had failed than after they had succeeded, and this was just as true of high self-esteem participants as of low self-esteem participants. The situation is different when we look at how participants felt *about themselves* after learning they had succeeded or failed (see the right side of Figure 4). Here we do find an effect of self-esteem. Low self-esteem participants felt good about themselves when they succeeded but not when they failed. This

was much less true of the high self-esteem participants; how they felt about themselves did not depend so much on whether they had just succeeded or failed (see also, Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2002; Brown & Marshall, 2001).


Figure 4. Emotional responses to success and failure as a function of emotion type and self-esteem. (Adapted from Brown & Dutton, 1995, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 712-722.)

These data make several points. Although both self-esteem groups felt unhappy and disappointed when they failed, only low self-esteem participants felt bad *about themselves* when they failed. It seems that low self-esteem people take failure very personally. It humiliates them and makes them feel ashamed of themselves. High self-esteem people do not show this effect; failure does not make them feel bad about themselves.

There's another way to look at these data. Low self-esteem people's feelings towards themselves are very conditional. If they succeed they feel good about themselves, if they fail they feel bad about themselves (see also, Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). This is a very precarious approach to emotional life. For low self-esteem people, "you're only as good as your latest outcome." The comedian, David Letterman, aptly describes the experience:

> Every night you're trying to prove your self-worth. It's like meeting your girlfriend's family for the first time. You want to be the absolute best, wittiest, smartest, most charming, best-smelling version of yourself you can possibly be. That's how I feel every night I go down there to the Ed Sullivan theater. If I can make these 500 people enjoy the experience, and have a higher regard for me when I'm finished, it makes me feel like an entire person. … How things go for me every night is how I feel about myself for the next 24 hours. (David Letterman, *Parade Magazine*, May 26, 1996, p. 6).

High self-esteem people do not live this way. How they feel about themselves doesn't depend on whether they have just accomplished something or not. Their feelings of self-worth are more solid and more steady and they don't swing from one extreme to another. This is what we mean when we say high self-esteem people are better at regulating their feelings of self-worth.

These findings are pertinent to issues of current interest in social psychology and personality. Kernis and colleagues (Kernis, 1993; Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow,

1993) have argued that some people have unstable high self-esteem. They report having high self-esteem, but their feelings of self-worth fluctuate from day to day. In a similar vein, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) have spoken of high self-esteem people who possess contingent self-esteem. They feel good about themselves when their self-worth contingencies are being met, but bad about themselves when these contingencies are not being met (see also, Hirschfeld, Klerman, Chodoff, Korchin, & Barrett, 1976).

In our judgment, there is no such thing as unstable *high* self-esteem or contingent *high* self-esteem. Both terms refer to low self-esteem people who are encountering success and are experiencing high feelings of self-worth. After all, parents who say "I love my child on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, but not on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays" don't love their child at all. The same is true of parents who say "I love my children when they bring home "A's" but not when they bring home "B's." We believe this argument also characterizes people's feelings about themselves. People who say "I only feel good about myself *when* or *if*" don't really feel good about themselves at all. From this perspective, unstable and contingent high self-esteem are a disguised form of low self-esteem—one in which the person's feelings of self-worth are highly conditional on recent achievements and events.

Why, then, do scores on the Rosenberg scale fluctuate from day-to-day? Like all self-report questionnaires, responses to this scale are influenced by a variety of factors, including social context, mood, and even error variance (Schwarz, 1999). Most importantly, they are also influenced by feelings of self-worth. People who are feeling currently feeling proud of themselves will report higher self-esteem than will those who are not. This will be especially true of low self-esteem people, which is why low self-esteem people show greater day-to-day variability on the Rosenberg scale than do high self-esteem people (Kernis, 1993). In our opinion, these daily fluctuations in feelings of self-worth should not be confused with changes in self-esteem itself.

## 2. Is Self-Esteem The Key Variable?

Global self-esteem is related to many other personality variables, including anxiety, depression, shyness, and loneliness to name a few. Because of these associations, it is important to establish that the effects we have reported are due to self-esteem rather than some correlated third variable. Brown and Marshall (2001, Study 2) addressed this issue. In the first part of the investigation, participants completed three self-report questionnaires: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI; Helmreich & Stapp, 1974). The PANAS measures emotional states. Ten of the items measure positive affect (PA) (e.g., active, alert, enthusiastic, excited) and ten measure negative affect (NA) (e.g., distressed, hostile, nervous, scared). These affective states are presumed to represent an underlying dimension of personality, reflecting a predisposition to experience either positive or negative affective states. The TSBI is commonly used by personality and social psychologists to measure self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1989), but it really measures perceived competence and confidence in social situations (e.g., "I have no doubts about my social competence." "I am not likely to speak to people until they speak to me."). In this sense, it is a measure of self-evaluations, not self-esteem.

As in the earlier study by Brown and Dutton (1995), the participants took a test that measured an intellectual ability and were experimentally assigned to receive either positive or negative feedback. We then assessed their feelings of self-worth. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the degree to which each of the four predictor variables interacted with the success-failure manipulation to predict participants' emotional reactions to their task performance. Although the four predictors were highly correlated and interacted with evaluative feedback to affect feelings of self-worth when entered individually, only scores on the Rosenberg scale *uniquely* interacted with the success-failure manipulation to predict feelings

of self-worth. Substantively, these findings indicate that it is the variance uniquely attributable to global self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg scale) that predicts who feels bad about themselves in the face of failure and who does not.

### 3. Do Self-Evaluations Underlie Self-Esteem Differences in Response to Evaluative Feedback?

Because cognitive theories of self-esteem functioning assume that self-esteem is based on self-evaluations, they assume that self-evaluations underlie self-esteem differences in behavior. From this perspective, low self-esteem people behave differently than high self-esteem people because they evaluate themselves more negatively.

Steele's (1988) self-affirmation theory provides a way to understand this position. Self-affirmation theory argues that people cope with threats to self-worth in one domain by reaffirming their worth in alternative domains (see also, Tesser & Cornell, 1991). To illustrate, students who receive a poor grade in school might console themselves by focusing on their athletic prowess. Steele and his colleagues have used self-affirmation theory to explain self-esteem differences in behavior (Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992; Spencer et al., 1993; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). They contend that high self-esteem people are better able to withstand negative feedback because they possess more positive self-evaluations. These evaluations, it is said, function as cognitive resources. When high self-esteem people fail, they draw on their many positive self-evaluations to reaffirm themselves.

We agree that high self-esteem people hold more favorable beliefs about their specific attributes than do their low self-esteem counterparts, and that positive self-evaluations provide numerous benefits to people (Brown, 1991; Taylor & Brown, 1988), but we don't believe these evaluations mediate, determine, or explain why high self-esteem people are better able to fail without feeling bad about themselves. We emphasize global feelings of affection for oneself over specific self-evaluations, and assume that what is most distinctive about high self-esteem people is the way they use self-evaluations to protect and restore their feelings of self-worth in the face of threats to the self.

There is some support for this more process-oriented view. Earlier we noted that low self-esteem people do not think poorly of themselves in an absolute sense. In fact, they think quite highly of themselves and believe they have many positive attributes and abilities. If positive self-evaluations were all it took to effectively handle the negative effects of failure, it would appear that low self-esteem people could do so. The fact that they don't suggests self-esteem differences depend less on the content of the self-concept and more on people's ability to use their self-evaluations to dampen the negative impact of failure. To invoke a poker analogy, what distinguishes the two self-esteem groups is not so much the cards they hold as the way they play their hands.

Dutton and Brown (1997, Study 2) conducted an investigation to address this issue directly. At the start of the study, the participants completed the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and then indicated the extent to which 10 attributes described them. Five of the attributes were positive (intelligent, athletic, attractive, talented, and kind) and five were negative (unintelligent, uncoordinated, unattractive, incompetent, and inconsiderate). These items were chosen because they are highly important to college students (see, for example, Pelham & Swann, 1989).

During the second part of the investigation, the participants performed an intellectual task and received positive or negative feedback (determined by random assignment). Finally, they rated their feelings of self-worth on the same scale used by Brown and Dutton (1995) and Brown and Marshall (2001). Figure 5 shows participants' emotional reactions as a function of their self-esteem level (upper and bottom tertile) and their self-evaluations (upper and bottom tertile).[4] The data show that low self-esteem participants were more adversely affected by

failure than were high self-esteem participants, and that this did not depend on whether or not these participants thought they were "good at many things." In fact, low self-esteem participants who scored in the upper third on the self-evaluation measure were just as likely to feel bad about themselves when they failed as were those who scored in the lower third on the self-evaluation measure. Conversely, high self-esteem participants who scored in the lower third on the self-evaluation measure did not feel any worse about themselves when they failed than did those who scored in the upper third on the self-evaluation measure. In short, self-esteem guided participants' emotional responses to evaluative feedback, and this effect didn't depend on differences in self-evaluation.

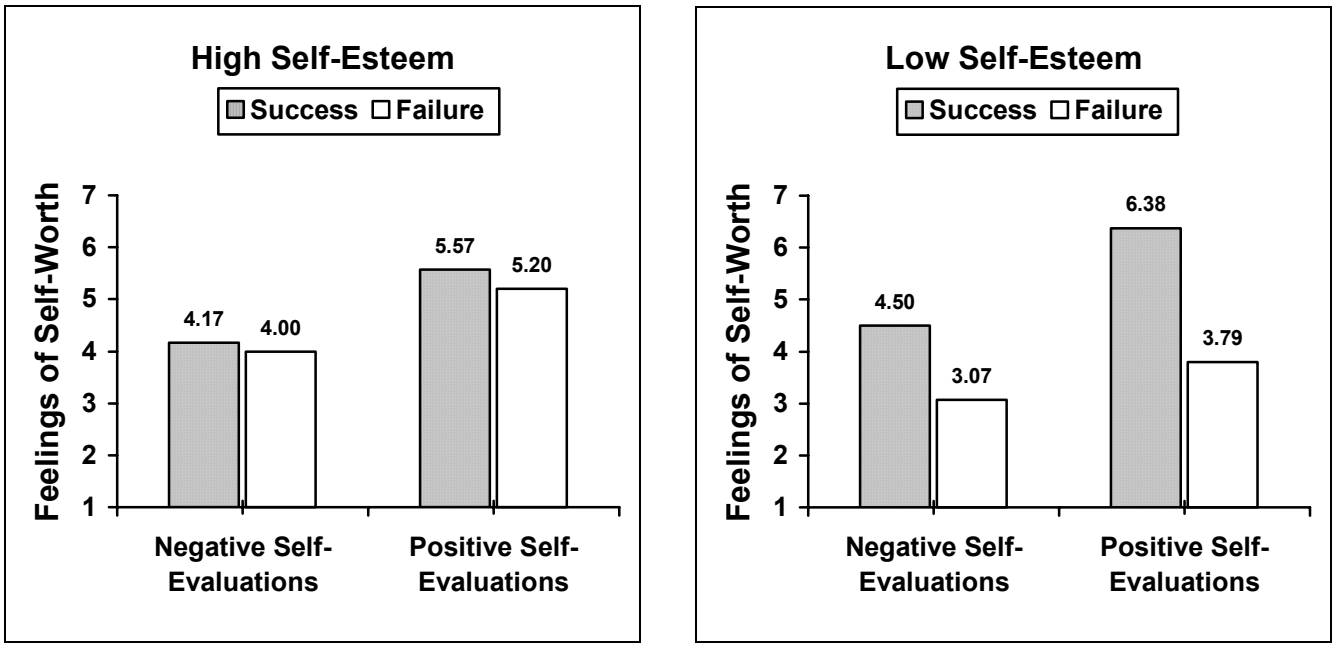


Figure 5. Emotional responses to success and failure as a function of self-esteem and self-evaluations (Adapted from Dutton & Brown, Study 2, 1997, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 139-148.)

We recognize that these data are not definitive. Perhaps our self-evaluation measure wasn't broad enough. Maybe we should have assessed participants' beliefs about their musical ability, cooking skills, or any of a dozen other attributes and abilities. We could also have included a measure of how important these self-views were or how certain participants were of their standing on each attribute (Campbell, 1990; Pelham, 1991). These are important issues that our research failed to capture. But it is also possible that our findings say something important about the nature of self-esteem and its influence on how people cope with failure. As noted earlier, many people think that negative self-evaluations are a defining feature of low self-esteem, and that low self-esteem people would feel better about themselves if only they evaluated themselves more positively. But low self-esteem people don't think of themselves as ugly, bereft of all talent, and wholly unlovable. They actually evaluate themselves quite positively, especially when compared with their evaluations of most other people. Moreover, even low self-esteem people who evaluate themselves positively suffer emotional distress when they fail. We believe this is because self-esteem differences don't depend on underlying self-evaluations. Many low self-esteem people (implicitly) say "I know I have many positive qualities and talents, but I still feel bad about myself when I fail." Come Oscar time, Hollywood seems to be teeming with such people.

C. *Comparing Global Self-Esteem and Specific Self-Views*

Our findings regarding the relative importance of global self-esteem and specific self-views seem to contradict decades of psychological wisdom. Beginning with Mischel's (1968) critique, psychologists have increasingly turned away from global personality variables toward more specific, cognitively-based constructs (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1981). In a similar vein, social psychologists working in the attitude area have argued that specific beliefs and attitudes are better predictors of behavior than are more general beliefs and attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

This emphasis on specificity over generality also found its way into research on self-concept. Many contemporary theorists focus their research on specific views of the self rather than on global self-esteem, arguing that global self-esteem is too broad a construct to be of much value (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Gergen, 1971; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Marsh, 1990, Swann, 1990).

1. **Self-esteem guides people's emotional reactions; self-evaluations guide people's cognitive reactions**

Instead of arguing which variable is more important, Dutton and Brown (1997, Study 1) sought to specify the conditions under which each variable operates. Building on earlier theoretical work by Shrauger (1975), they argued that although global self-esteem determines people's *emotional* reactions to evaluative feedback (i.e., how evaluative feedback makes people feel about themselves), self-evaluations determine people's *cognitive* reactions to evaluative feedback. With respect to this latter point, Dutton and Brown hypothesized that people who believe they are highly able will be less cognitively accepting of negative feedback than will those who doubt their ability to succeed.

To test these hypotheses, Dutton and Brown first had participants solve some sample problems from an intellectual task they were about take. The participants then rated their ability and their expectancies for success. These judgments were combined to form an index of self-evaluations of ability. By varying the difficulty of the problems they received, the participants were then led to experience success or failure at the task. Finally, they indicated (a) to what extent they thought their performance was a valid reflection of their ability and (b) how they felt about themselves following their performance.

Based on evidence that global self-esteem guides people's emotional reactions to evaluative feedback, Dutton and Brown (1997) predicted that how people feel about themselves after they fail is determined by their self-esteem level, not their task-specific self-evaluations. The data displayed in the upper half of Figure 6 support this assertion. Independent of how they evaluated themselves, low self-esteem participants felt worse about themselves when they failed than did high self esteem participants. These findings provide further evidence that people's emotional reactions to evaluative feedback depend on how they *feel* about themselves, not on what they *think* about themselves.

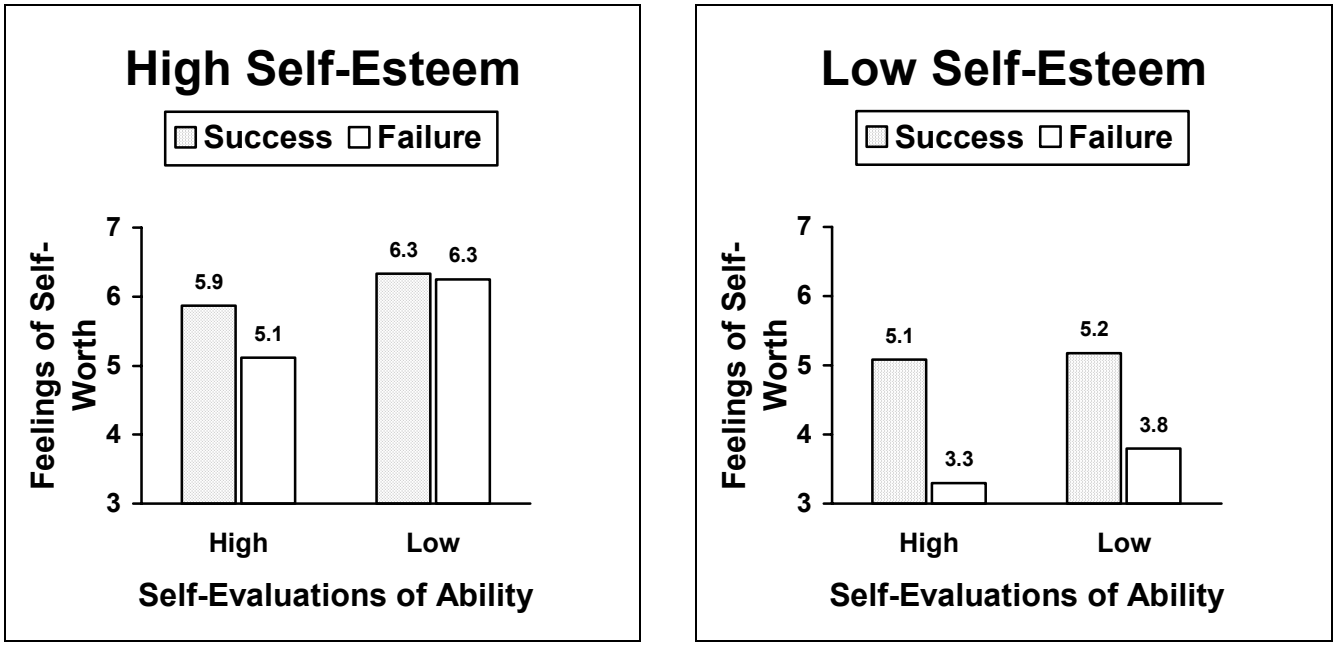


Figure 6. Emotional reactions to success and failure as a function of self-esteem and self-evaluations of ability. (Adapted from Dutton & Brown, 1997, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 139-148, Study 1)

The situation is different when we examine participants' cognitive reactions to success and failure. Figure 7 shows that, regardless of their self-esteem level, participants who believed they had high ability were more cognitively accepting of success than of failure, and participants who believed they had low ability were more cognitively accepting of failure than of success. This finding supports the claim that people's cognitive reactions to evaluative feedback are guided by their self-evaluations, rather than by their self-esteem level.

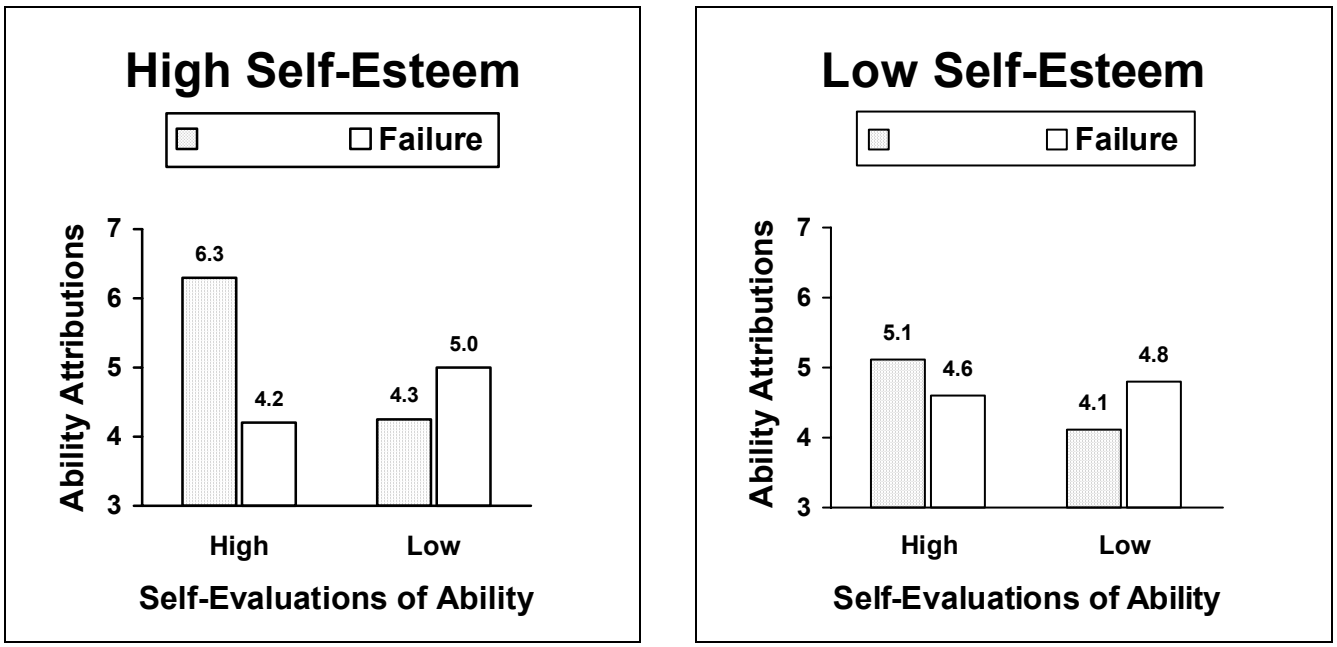


Figure 7. Cognitive reactions to success and failure as a function of self-esteem and self-views. (Adapted from Dutton & Brown, 1997, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 139-148, Study 1)

To summarize, people's reactions to evaluative feedback are guided by both their global self-esteem and their specific self-views. Their emotional reactions depend on whether their self-esteem level is high or low, but their cognitive reactions depend on whether they think they have high or low ability in that domain. To illustrate this point, consider a golfer's reaction when she shoots a score of 95 for 18 holes. If we want to know whether the person regards this score as a success or a failure, we need to know how the person evaluates her ability in golf. If she thinks of herself as a good golfer, she is apt to regard this score as a negative outcome. But if we want to know how she feels about herself when she fails, we need to look at her global self-esteem level. If she has high self-esteem, she will deal with this negative outcome rather effectively.

### 2. Self-Protection and the Anticipated Negative Value of Failure

A good deal of evidence suggests that low self-esteem people are generally more self-protective than are high self-esteem people (Baumeister et al., 1989, Brown, 1998; Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). Instead of taking risks, they adopt a more cautious style, pursing safer, less rewarding outcomes to riskier, more profitable ones. Expectancy-value models of behavior provide a framework for understanding these differences. These models assume that freely chosen behavior depends on two factors: a person's expectation that she can achieve some outcome, in conjunction with the value the person places on obtaining vs. not obtaining the outcome.

Cognitive theories trace self-esteem differences in behavior to the expectancy component of the expectancy-value model. They assume that low self-esteem people are less willing to take risks because they lack confidence in their ability to succeed. Affective models emphasize the value component in the expectancy-value model. They assume that the negative incentive value of failure (the pain of failure) is greater for low self-esteem people than for high self-esteem people and that this explains why low self-esteem people are more self-protective.

One way to think about these divergent perspectives is in terms of confidence and consequence. The cognitive model assumes that a lack of confidence guides the behavior of low self-esteem people. Low self-esteem people play it safe because they lack confidence that they will succeed. Presumably, if they thought they were better at things (e.g., thought they had higher ability), they would not be risk averse. The affective model assumes that consequence, not confidence, is the key variable to consider. Low self-esteem people are risk averse not because they don't think they can succeed but because they are afraid to fail. Literally, they are afraid to try. (For related perspectives, see Downey & Feldman, 1996; Higgins, 1997.)

### 3. Global Self-Esteem and Specific Self-Views Interact to Influence Information-Seeking Behavior

Bernichon, Cook, and Brown (2002) recently used these insights to understand information-seeking behavior. Research in this area presents something of a paradox. On the one hand, there is evidence that people who feel bad about themselves are particularly disturbed by negative feedback and avoid it as a means of self-protection (e.g., Brown & Dutton, 1995a; Brown & Marshall, 2001; Dutton & Brown, 1997). On the other hand, there is evidence that people with negative self-views seek negative feedback as a means of verifying their negative self-appraisals (e.g., Swann, 1990, 1996). In an attempt to resolve this paradox, Bernichon et al. argued that high self-esteem people verify their negative self-views, but low self-esteem people do not. This basis for this prediction resides in the way each self-esteem group handles negative feedback. People who verify a negative self-view expose themselves to the pain of criticism and rejection. Because high self-esteem people are adept at neutralizing the negative impact of rejection, they can *afford* to verify a negative self-view without feeling devastated. In contrast, low self-esteem people deal ineffectively with

rejection and find it to be emotionally distressing. As a consequence, they should be much more reluctant to verify a negative self-view. In short, Bernichon et al. predicted that self-esteem and specific self-views interact to affect the seeking of evaluative feedback, such that low self-esteem people are less interested in verifying a negative self-view than are high self-esteem people.

To test these ideas, Bernichon et al. had female participants first complete a questionnaire that measured their self-esteem and their perceived sociability. Then, they interacted with another participant in the context of a get-acquainted conversation. Later, the participants learned that their partner thought they were either comfortable in social situations or uncomfortable in social situations. Finally, the participants indicated how interested they were in getting to know their partner better.

The left hand-side of Figure 8 shows the usual self-verification effect. Among participants with high self-esteem, those with positive self-views preferred the positive evaluator to the negative evaluator and those with negative self-views preferred the negative evaluator to the positive evaluator. No such pattern emerged among low self-esteem participants. Here, those with positive self-views expressed no preference either way and those with negative self-views preferred a positive (nonself-verifying evaluator) to a negative (self-verifying) one. These findings identify conditions under which global self-esteem and self-evaluations interact to affect behavior.

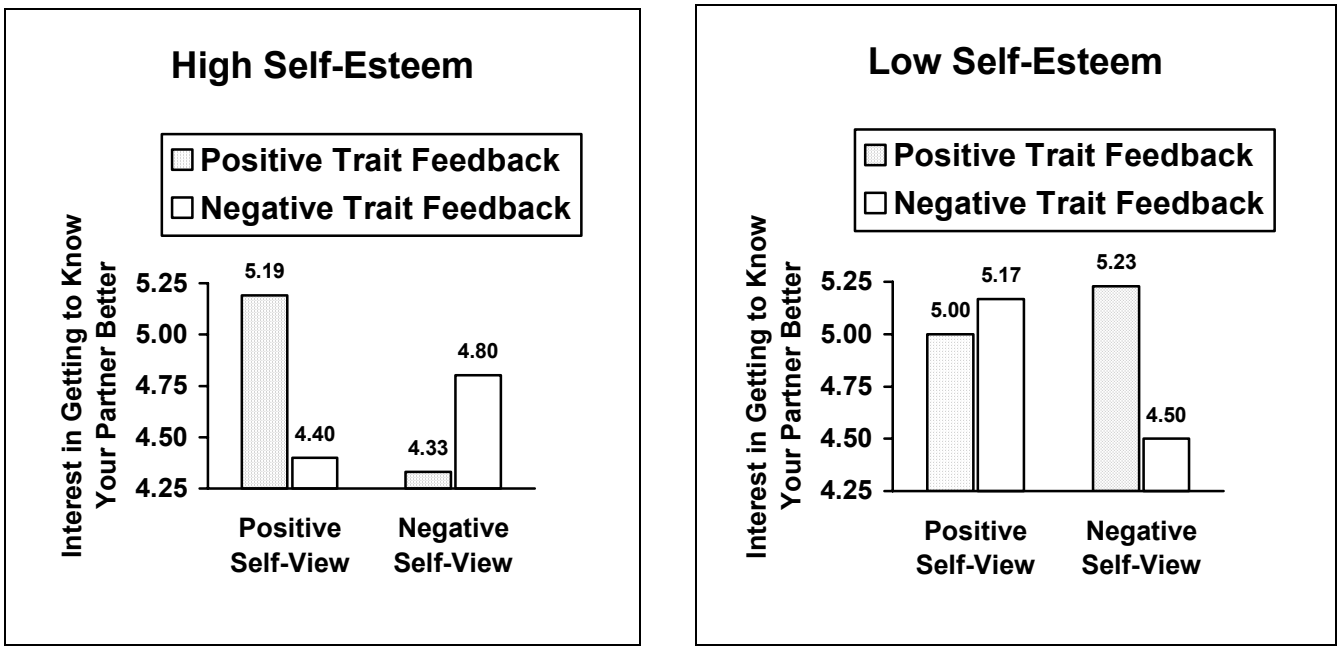


Figure 8. Feedback seeking as a function of feedback valence, self-esteem, and self-view. (Adapted from Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2002: Study 1; under review)

## III. **General Discussion**

Cognitive models of self-esteem adopt an information-integration approach to understanding the origins of self-esteem. They assume that self-esteem develops from a largely rational process. People survey their various characteristics and somehow combine this information into an overall judgment. Stanley Coopersmith (1967), a pioneer in the area of self-esteem research, aptly summarized this approach:

> [Self-esteem] is based on a *judgmental* process in which the individual examines his performance, capacities, and attributes according to his personal standards and values,

> and arrives at a *decision* of his own worthiness. (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 7, emphasis added)

We do not believe this is so. In our judgment, people don't examine their various qualities and decide whether or not to love themselves. People's feelings toward themselves are more irrational than this. As the French philosopher, Pascal, noted, "The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know." Although Pascal was referring to love for others, we believe this principle also applies when we consider how people feel about themselves.

Numerous factors led us to this conclusion. For one, the self-esteem described by the cognitive approach is conditional and fragile and vulnerable to attack. In the event that something happened to undermine our self-evaluations in that domain, our self-esteem would evaporate (see Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). If it is to have any value, self-esteem ought to insulate people from just such experiences. High self-esteem people ought to (and do) feel good about themselves even when they learn they are not capable or competent in some domain. This analysis suggests that high self-esteem does not depend on an algebraic assessment of one's constituent qualities.

The cognitive model also assumes a high degree of cognitive sophistication. As such, the model predicts that self-esteem doesn't develop until at least middle childhood, when the cognitive abilities necessary to make the various judgments the model describes have developed. Harter, a developmental psychologist, makes this point explicitly, asserting that global self-esteem is "a complex, cognitive construction that does not emerge until approximately the mental age of 8" (Harter, 1986, p. 145). This characterization is at odds with evidence that children show differences reflective of self-esteem at a very young age and that these differences predict self-esteem later in life (Cassidy, 1990; Sroufe, 1983; Sroufe, Carlson, & Shulman, 1993).

Finally, the cognitive model begs the question of what determines self-evaluations in the first place. Consider, for example, people's ideas about how attractive they are. At all ages, and for both sexes, perceived attractiveness is closely related to self-esteem (Harter, 1993; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990). People who like the way they look, like themselves (and people who like themselves, like the way they look). The cognitive approach assumes that the causal arrow goes from perceived attractiveness to self-esteem. People somehow come to regard themselves as attractive or unattractive, and this decision affects their level of self-esteem. What this approach leaves unanswered is the question of why some people regard themselves as attractive to begin with.

One solution would be to assume that people correctly perceive how attractive they really are, but this is not the case. People's ideas about their attractiveness are not strongly tied to what others think; nor is actual attractiveness related to self-esteem (Feingold, 1992). The same is true for virtually all highly evaluative attributes. High self-esteem people think they are more competent, intelligent, talented, and well liked than do low self-esteem people, but this is not the case. On average, high self-esteem people are no *better* in these areas than are low self-esteem people, and people who truly possess these qualities do not have higher self-esteem than people who lack them.

What we find, then, is that self-esteem is strongly related to what people think they are like, but virtually unrelated to what people are really like. This pattern poses a problem for the cognitive model: If people's ideas about themselves aren't based on what they are really like, where do they come from?

An affective model of self-esteem explains these findings by assuming that self-esteem develops early in life and then functions as a lens through which people view their characteristics and experiences. Virtually all traits are ambiguous and can be interpreted in many ways (Dunning, 1993). High self-esteem people are most apt to adopt a congenial interpretation, one that leads them to believe they have many positive qualities and very few negative qualities (Brown et al., 2001).

For these, and other reasons, we believe it is

more fruitful to think of self-esteem as an affective disposition that, once formed, influences how people evaluate themselves and cope with failure. The research we have reported in this paper is consistent with this position. This research, which is reviewed in Table 3, establishes that (a) self-esteem influences self-evaluations, particularly following evaluative feedback; (b) self-esteem influences how people feel about themselves when they fail; (c) self-esteem differences are not simply due to differences in self-evaluations; and (d) self-esteem and self-evaluations interact to affect behavior. All of these findings are predicted by the top-down, affective model we adopt.

Table 3: Summary of major findings and preferred interpretation

| Research | Central Finding | Our Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| Brown and Dutton (1991) | High self-esteem people think they're good at virtually everything | Self-esteem colors the way people appraise themselves. |
| Brown and Dutton (1991) | Even low self-esteem people appraise themselves in positive terms, especially in comparison with their evaluations of others. | Negative self-evaluations are not the defining feature of low self-esteem. |
| Dutton and Brown (1996) | Self-esteem interacts with evaluative feedback to influence self-evaluations | Self-evaluations are consequences of self-esteem, not antecedents. |
| Brown and Dutton (1995) | Both self-esteem groups feel sad when they fail, but only low self-esteem people feel bad about themselves. | Self-esteem is involved in the regulation of a particular class of emotions we call feelings of self-worth;<br>Low self-esteem people's feelings of self-worth are very conditional; this is much less true of high self-esteem people. |
| Brown and Marshall (2001) | Variables that correlate with self-esteem also predict how people feel about themselves when they fail, but these effects disappear once self-esteem is statistically controlled. | Self-esteem is a unique predictor of how people feel about themselves when they fail. |
| Dutton and Brown (1997, Study 2) | Self-esteem influences how people feel about themselves when they fail, and this effect doesn't depend on whether people evaluate themselves positively. | Self-esteem differences are not reducible to differences in self-evaluations. |
| Dutton and Brown (1997, Study 1) | Self-esteem influences people's emotional responses to evaluative feedback, but self-evaluations influences people's cognitive reactions to evaluative feedback. | Self-esteem and self-evaluations are both important, but have different consequences. |
| Bernichon, Cook, and Brown (2002) | High self-esteem people verify a negative self-view, low self-esteem people do not | Self-esteem and self-evaluations interact to predict behavior, particularly in situations that hold the potential for failure, rejection, and disappointment. |

Although we believe the bulk of the evidence supports our claims, we recognize that not everyone will be swayed by our arguments. Some might argue that we have attacked a straw man in this paper. The bottom-up model maintains that self-evaluations determine self-esteem, but it does not deny that, once formed, self-esteem also influences self-evaluations. Said differently, proponents of the bottom-up model allow for top-down processes as well,

provided that these processes occur after self-esteem has developed.

In contrast, the affective model we favor makes no allowance for bottom-up processes at all. It assumes that self-esteem forms entirely from factors that have nothing to do with judgmental processes. Indeed, it assumes that self-esteem *cannot* form from such processes. Readers might reasonably respond that we have provided no evidence to support this assertion. We have documented that self-esteem has a top-down component, but we have not demonstrated that it lacks a bottom-up one. We concede this point, and recognize its importance, but we believe research in this area will best be advanced by abandoning the notion that self-esteem is based on judgmental processes. In the remainder of this paper, we will discuss some of the advantages and implications of our model

### A. *Why Distinguish the Three Uses of Self-Esteem?*

Throughout this paper, we have highlighted the need to distinguish global self-esteem from the way people feel about themselves at any moment (which we call feelings of self-worth), and the way they evaluate their particular qualities (which we call self-evaluations). In our judgment, it confuses matters to equate global self-esteem with highly favorable self-evaluations. In contrast, many psychologists use these terms interchangeably (see, for example, Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). This is allowable within the bottom-up approach, because self-evaluations are thought to underlie self-esteem. After all, if self-esteem is nothing more than self-evaluations, there is no need to distinguish them.

Within the cognitive model, there is also no need to distinguish trait self-esteem from "state self-esteem," because they are assumed to differ only in their temporal course. This assumption has a practical consequence: It enables research to "experimentally manipulate" self-esteem by leading people to believe they are good or bad at things. For example, in a test of terror-management theory (Greenberg, Solomon & Pyszczynski, 1997), Arndt and Greenberg (1999) reported that they experimentally instilled high self-esteem in some participants and low self-esteem in other participants. Doing so, these researchers argued, enabled them to draw a causal conclusion that would be precluded by treating self-esteem as a stable component of personality.

This trait-state equivalency is certainly not restricted to the study of self-esteem (see for example, Carver & Scheier, 1981; Dweck, 1999; Higgins, 1997). While warranted in some circumstances, we do not believe this equivalency holds when it comes to self-esteem. As we see it, self-esteem is a capacity—a capacity to respond to evaluative feedback in ways that maintain high feelings of self-worth. Providing positive feedback to low self-esteem people does not endow them with this capacity, so we do not believe it approximates the experience of having high self-esteem.

At the risk of overstretching our reach, we will try to clarify this point using diabetes as an example. When nondiabetics eat, they immediately produce insulin to metabolize the sugar. Doing so allows them to keep their blood sugar at a healthy, constant level. The situation is quite different for diabetics. Their bodies do not produce enough insulin, and food poses a threat to their well-being. Giving them insulin keeps them alive, but it doesn't cure them of diabetes.

We realize the analogy is strained, but diabetes is like self-esteem, sugar is like failure, and insulin is like self-evaluations. High self-esteem people immediately neutralize the effects of failure by adjusting their self-evaluations. Low self-esteem people lack this ability and struggle to maintain high feelings of self-worth when they fail. It is doubtful whether any amount of external feedback, however positive it may be, could endow low self-esteem people with this capacity (any more than an insulin injection cures people of diabetes).

### B. *Understanding William James*

To be credible, any attempt to supplant the cognitive model must reconcile its approach with

the work of William James (1890). This is the case because advocates of the bottom-up model credit James with its development (see, for example, Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Pelham, 1995). In an oft-cited portion of his chapter on the self, James argued

> our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we *back* ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities; a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our successes; thus, Self-esteem = Success/Pretensions (1890; p. 310).

Most researchers have assumed that James is saying that self-evaluations determine global self-esteem. We have high self-esteem if we think our attained outcomes (our successes, in James's term) exceed our pretensions. Marsh (1993b) framed the issue as follows: "James's theory of self is a social cognition model in which domain-specific self-evaluations are the building blocks of self-esteem" (p. 975).

Although we anticipate disagreement on the matter, we do not believe James is offering a formula for understanding the origins of global self-esteem, but is referring instead to factors that determine feelings of self-worth. We say that, in part, because although James believed self-esteem can be fluid ("... the barometer of our self-esteem and confidence rises and falls from one day to another," p. 307), he also believed self-esteem was stable and removed from everyday experiences ("there is a certain average tone of self-feeling which each one of us carries about with him, and which is independent of the objective reasons we may have for satisfaction or discontent," p. 306). One way to resolve this apparent contradiction is to treat global self-esteem as the stable construct and feelings of self-worth as the dynamic one.

Insofar as the formula James offered describes a fluid construct, we assume he is referring to feelings of self-worth, not global self-esteem. Unfortunately, the issue is further confused by James's tendency to use the term "*pretensions*" in two ways. Sometimes he uses the term to refer to domains of personal importance.

> I who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek. My deficiencies there give me no sense of personal humiliation at all. Had I 'pretensions' to be a linguist, it would have been just the reverse. (p. 310)

Here James is saying that his performance as a psychologist evokes a stronger emotional reaction than does his performance as a linguist. In more general terms, he is arguing that outcomes in domains of high personal importance produce greater emotional reactions than do outcomes in domains of low personal importance. This treats pretensions in terms of values, in terms of what is important to the person.

On other occasions, James uses the term "pretensions" to refer to a person's aspiration level—to a minimum level of performance a person would be satisfied with.

> So we have the paradox of a man shamed to death because he is only the second pugilist or the second oarsman in the world. That he is able to beat the whole population of the globe minus one is nothing; he has pitted himself to beat that one; and as long as he doesn't do that nothing else counts. Yonder puny fellow, however, whom every one can beat, suffers no chagrin about it, for he has long ago abandoned the attempt to 'carry that line' as the merchants say, of self at all. (pp. 310-311)

This passage treats pretensions in terms of one's level of aspiration. It says that how people feel about an attained outcome is not simply a function of the outcome itself—it depends on the standards people use for gauging success and failure. By way of illustration, consider two students who both get a "B" in a course. This grade will represent failure to a student who aspired to get an "A," but success to a student who aspired to get a "C." This analysis suggests that there are two routes to feeling good about your performance in some domain. You can either raise your level of accomplishment or lower your level of aspiration. According to

James, either one will suffice to make you feel better.

> [Self-esteem] may be increased as well by diminishing the denominator as by increasing the numerator. To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified. .... 'Make thy claim of wages a zero, then hast thou the world under thy feet.' (p. 311).

Figure 9 presents one way to integrate James's formula with the research we have reviewed in this paper. First, to understand whether an outcome is regarded as a success or failure, we need to consider the actual performance relative to the person's level of aspiration. This is akin to saying that people's self-evaluations guide their cognitive reactions to an attained outcome. To predict a person's emotional reaction to this outcome, we need to multiply it by importance (pretensions as values). The more important the outcome is, the stronger will be the person's emotional reaction. All else being equal, people will be happier to have succeeded at an important task than an unimportant one. Finally, to understand people's self-relevant emotional reactions to their attained outcomes, we need to consider global self-esteem as well. All else being equal, a poor performance will cause greater emotional distress (i.e., low feelings of self-worth) among a low self-esteem person than among a high self-esteem person.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Step 1: | Perceived Outcome = | $\frac{\text{Successes}}{\text{Pretensions}}$ | = | $\frac{\text{Objective Outcome}}{\text{Level of Aspiration (Self-Evaluation)}}$ | | |
| Step 2: | Emotional Reaction = | Perceived Outcome | * | Pretensions as Values | | |
| Step 3: | Feelings of Self-Worth = | Perceived Outcome | * | Pretensions as Values | * | Global Self-Esteem |

Figure 9. Understanding William James

C. *The Benefits of Having High Self-Esteem*

As noted earlier, many psychologists have concluded that global self-esteem is relatively unimportant. For example, Leary, Cottrell, and Phillips argued that self-esteem doesn't have "any inherent value" (2001, p. 898), and Crocker and Wolfe stated that "self-esteem, although powerfully related to affect and life satisfaction, is relatively unimportant as a cause of behavior" (2001, p. 604) (see also, Marsh, 1990).

In this article we have emphasized that high self-esteem endows people with the ability to fail without feeling bad about themselves. We do not believe this is a trivial outcome. For many years, psychologists have noted that people have a basic need to feel good about themselves. They want to feel proud of themselves rather than ashamed of themselves. In short, they strive to maximize and protect their feelings of self-worth. The importance of this "self-enhancement" motive was perhaps best stated by the Pulitzer prize winning anthropologist Ernest Becker, who wrote:

> The fundamental datum for our science is a fact that at first seems banal, or irrelevant: it is the fact that—as far as we can tell—*all organisms like to 'feel good' about themselves.* ... Thus in the most brief and direct manner, we have a *law* of human development …. (Becker, 1968, p. 328)

High self-esteem people are especially adept at satisfying this self-enhancement need. They deal with failure and disappointment without suffering diminished feelings of self-worth. In our opinion, the ability to satisfy a motive McDougall (1923) called the "master sentiment" is not a trivial benefit of having high self-esteem. Undoubtedly, this is at least one (if not the main) reason why high self-esteem people consistently report greater life satisfaction than do low self-esteem people (Diener & Diener, 1995, Myers & Diener, 1995). Life is a lot easier when one can

fail without feeling bad about oneself.

Viewing the self-enhancement motive in affective terms differs from how other theorists have defined the term. Other theorists have taken the term to mean that people are motivated to evaluate themselves positively (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Shrauger, 1975; Swann, 1990). It is certainly the case that in many situations and in many cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself as highly capable or somehow *better* than one's peers. But this is not invariably so. In some situations and in some cultures, feelings of self-worth may be promoted by thinking of oneself as ordinary or average, or even *worse* than others. These apparent differences reveal an underlying similarity. The universal need is not a need to *think* of oneself in any specific way, but a need to maximize feelings of self-worth. (Brown & Kobayashi, 2001; Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999).

From this perspective, self-evaluations are rather arbitrary. They are important only insofar as they promote feelings of self-worth. In contemporary Western cultures, feelings of self-worth are promoted by thinking of oneself in highly positive terms. High self-esteem people, being particularly adept at preserving high feelings of self-worth, claim to possess many positive qualities. If the contingencies were to change—e.g., if it suddenly became fashionable to be modest and unassuming, we expect that high self-esteem people would regard themselves as especially self-effacing. By claiming to possess whatever qualities are valued by the cultures (or subculture) in which they reside, high self-esteem people use their self-evaluations to promote and protect their feelings of self-worth (Brown et al., 2001; Brown & Kobayashi, 2001; Kobayashi & Brown, 2002).

This analysis bears on a current debate in social psychology and personality. Noting that East Asians are typically less self-enhancing than are North Americans and people from Western Europe, Heine, Lehman, Markus, and Kitayama (1999) questioned whether self-enhancement needs are universal (see also, Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999). If self-enhancement is viewed in cognitive terms— as a need to think about oneself in highly positive terms, we agree that the need is not universal. If, however, self-enhancement is viewed in affective terms—as a need to feel proud of oneself rather than ashamed and humiliated, then we disagree. As Becker noted, there is a basic human need to feel good about themselves rather than bad about themselves.

This analysis can also be used to understand the dynamics of self-esteem across the life span. In contemporary America, the belief that one is attractive and popular is critical during adolescence; in adulthood, beliefs about one's productivity and sagacity become increasingly important. Because high self-esteem people are adept at promoting high feelings of self-worth, they will believe they possess attributes that are valued by their particular reference group at the time. The *correlates* of self-esteem will therefore shift as people age (Harter, 1990), reflecting changes in the manifestations of self-esteem rather than in its basis.

D. *Is This Really High Self-Esteem?*

The portrait we have painted of the high self-esteem person is one who uses a variety of strategies to promote, protect, and maintain high feelings of self-worth in the face of failure. Some readers might wonder whether this is really high self-esteem. After all, wouldn't a person who was truly secure in his/her self-love feel no need to protect his/her feelings of self-worth in the face of failure?

There are two ways to examine this question. One is to assume that we haven't measured high self-esteem at all. As we noted at the outset of this paper, our participants were relatively young college students and they may be fooling themselves (or the experimenters) when they claim to have high self-esteem on a face-valid, self-report measure like the Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Perhaps our results would have been different had we used a less obvious measure of self-esteem, such as the implicit self-esteem scale used by Greenwald and Farnham (2000). Currently, there is little consensus regarding the use of such measures: Some studies find that these measures influence

particular variables in predictable ways (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999), but others do not (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker (2000).

All studies find a very weak correlation between implicit and explicit measures. This could mean that the two measures tap different aspects of self-esteem or it could mean that only one of the measures taps self-esteem. If so, which one? In this regard, we would note an important point about such measures. Developers of implicit measures claim they distinguish people who truly have high self-esteem from those who merely claim to have high self-esteem because of self-presentational concerns or because of an inability to access their true feelings. No one has suggested, however, that a person who reports having low self-esteem is being insincere or deceitful. Consequently, although the two measures might disagree when it comes to who has high self-esteem, there ought to be perfect agreement when it comes to identifying people with low self-esteem. It seems to us that before implicit measures can be used to identity people who really have high self-esteem, they must first demonstrate that they can correctly identify people with low self-esteem. Until such time, we believe explicit, self-report measure provide the more valid measure of self-esteem.

Assuming we have measured self-esteem correctly, we must still explain why our high self-esteem participants felt the need to alter their self-evaluations in order to preserve their feelings of self-worth. Although we suspect some people are so secure in their self-love they feel no need to offset negative feedback, we think such people are very rare. For most of us, failure, rejection, and criticism are unpleasant and the key question is not whether they affect us at all but whether we deal with them effectively.

In many respects, the situation mirrors the dynamics of a happy, successful interpersonal relationship. In addition to loving one's partner, one must also engage in a variety of behaviors that ensure that positive feelings toward one's partner are maintained (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Among other things, these behaviors include focusing on (and even exaggerating) the person's good qualities and giving the person the benefit of the doubt when untoward behaviors are committed (e.g., making situational attributions when your partner forgets your anniversary). These are the same behaviors high self-esteem people use to maintain high feelings of self-worth. If we readily concede that a successful relationship is an active process in which people actively nurture and maintain their feelings of affection for each other, why not view self-esteem as an active process in which people actively nurture and maintain their feelings of self-worth? In other words, why should behaviors regarded as an interpersonal strength be viewed as a sign of personal weakness?

### E. *What Gives High Self-Esteem People the Ability to Respond Adaptively to Failure?*

An obvious issue we've yet to consider is what gives high self-esteem people the ability to respond adaptively to failure? To answer this question, we believe we must first consider the origins of self-esteem.

Affective models of self-esteem assume that self-esteem develops early in life in response to biological and relational factors. With respect to the first of these factors, children who are easily distressed are more apt to develop low self-esteem than are children who are placid and easy-going. After all, if you inherit a predisposition to feel bad in general, you are less likely to feel good about yourself. Evidence for the heritability of self-esteem provides support for this conjecture (McGuire, Manke, Saudino, Reiss, Hetherington, & Plomin, 1999; Roy, Neale, & Kendler, 1995).

Relational factors are apt to play an even more important role. Children who receive unconditional love from their parents introject this love at an early age. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory provides one way to understand how this transfer takes place. As is widely known, Bowlby believed that the attachment bond between parent and child serves a paradoxical function. By becoming securely attached, the child feels safe enough to leave the

parent and explore the environment.

We see important similarities between the securely attached child and the experience of being a high self-esteem person. Securely attached child are willing to take risks and explore the world because they know they can always return to a safe base of parental love. This is reminiscent of how high self-esteem people feel. They are willing to take risks because they can deal effectively with failure should it occur. This analysis suggests that attachment styles and self-esteem ought to be correlated. This is indeed the case. Attachment styles in infancy predict self-esteem in preschool and kindergarten (Cassidy, 1990; Sroufe, 1983), with securely attached children showing the highest self-esteem. Similar patterns have been found with adolescents and young adults (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Morris, 1997; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

To summarize, the affective model of self-esteem assumes that self-esteem is an emotional construct. It develops early in life in response to biological (temperamental) and relational factors. This emphasis on early childhood experiences does not mean that self-esteem can never change. It simply means that early experiences lay the foundation for high self-esteem or low self-esteem. Later experiences in life may also affect self-esteem, although none is apt to be as important as the parent-child relationship. One reason that latter experiences are less consequential is that they are always viewed through the prism or schema that is established earlier. Once high or low self-esteem develops, it guides the way we view ourselves, other people, and the experiences and events we confront. Often, this guiding process occurs at an automatic or preconscious level (Epstein, 1990), making it difficult to detect and even harder to correct. For this reason, self-esteem tends to persist.

## IV. **Concluding Remarks**

Throughout this paper we have invoked a metaphor of "parental love" to convey our ideas about the nature of self-esteem. Although feelings of pride rise and fall, most (though not all) parents love their children unconditionally, regardless of whether their children have just succeeded or failed. Moreover, this love also leads them to view their children in positive terms. At the moment of delivery, most parents don't say: "Wait a minute. I'm not deciding how I feel until after I've taken a thorough inventory. Toes first. Toes are cute. OK, I'm starting to like the baby a little." Instead, most parents experience an immediate outpouring of love that leads them to imbue their newborns with all sorts of wonderful characteristics. They think "Look at those toes; they're so cute. And those lips. Those are the cutest little lips I've ever seen." The causal process is very much a top-down one, from global feelings of affection to beliefs that one's children are cute, delightful, and even talented, and smart.

This is how we think about the relation between global self-esteem and the way people evaluate themselves in specific domains. People who are fond of themselves imbue themselves with many positive qualities: They like the way they look; they enjoy their sense of humor; they appreciate their talents. And they are able to tolerate failure well precisely because their self-esteem is not contingent on their self-evaluations.

We are certainly not the first researchers to draw attention to these parallels. Over a generation ago, Epstein (1980) wrote.

> People with high self-esteem, in effect, carry with them a loving parent who is proud of their successes and tolerant of their failures. Such people tend to have an optimistic view about life, and to be able to tolerate external stress without becoming excessively anxious. Although capable of being disappointed and depressed by specific experiences, people with high self-esteem recover quickly, as do children who are secure in their mother's love. In contrast, people with low self-esteem carry within them a disapproving parent who is harshly critical of their failures, and register only short-lived pleasures when they succeed. Such people are apt to be unduly sensitive to failure and to rejection, to have low tolerance for frustration, to take a long time to recover following disappointments, and to have a pessimistic view of life. The picture is not

> unlike that of children who are insecure in their parent's love. (Epstein, 1980, p. 106)

The data we have reviewed in this paper lend empirical weight to Epstein's depiction. We have argued that high self-esteem people deal with failure more adaptively than do low self-esteem people. Not because they believe they do many other things well, but because their self-esteem is explicitly not based on their self-evaluations. In our judgment, self-esteem has little to do with what we think about ourselves and everything to do with how we feel about ourselves.

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## VI. **Footnotes**

[1]In work published prior to 1993, we used the terms self-esteem and self-evaluation interchangeably, and failed to distinguish global self-esteem from feelings of self-worth. Our position here therefore represents a revision of our previous work.

[2]Throughout this paper, we use the term "failure" to refer to various forms of negative feedback, including interpersonal rejection, a poor performance in the intellectual sphere, athletic defeat, and even being criticized and ignored. While acknowledging that there are important differences between these forms of negative feedback, we also believe there are enough similarities to warrant subsuming them under a single rubric.

[3]Throughout the remainder of this paper, the designations "high self-esteem" and "low self-esteem" will refer to participants who scored in the upper or bottom third, respectively, of the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale.

[4]The data in the original study were analyzed using the complete range of self-esteem scores and scores on the self-evaluation measure. They are displayed here to better convey the nature of the effects. This is also true for the data shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

## VII. **Author Identification Notes**

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