

In Defense of Insecurity

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We applaud Kernis (this issue) for his integrative review of recent efforts to refine our understanding of self-esteem. Programmatic study of this central aspect of personality has long been hampered by the inertia of imprecise definitions, redundant conceptual distinctions, and persistent contradictions. Kernis's review provides much needed organization and synthesis to a construct that is overcrowded with meaning but underspecified in theory. He ties together several distinct lines of research—including perspectives on misrepresentation, intrapsychic consistency, evaluative contingency, and stability—under the rubric of fragile versus secure self-esteem. Equating secure with optimal self-esteem, he suggests that the humanistic notion of "authenticity" may be key to explaining the latter.

We concur with Kernis in many of his arguments and see considerable value in the distinctions and parallels he draws. Any good review, however, will raise as many questions as it resolves. Kernis's target article is no exception. We focus here on a few issues brought to light by his article, with the aim of complementing an otherwise cogent treatment of an important topic.

Self-Esteem and the Integrity of the Me

Self-esteem is the valuation of the "Me" that appears in self-consciousness, the Me that the formless "I" experiences as enduring, unified personal identity. We share Kernis's conception of self-esteem as the attitude or emotional response toward the Me that is objectified at the highest level of abstraction. This Me is necessarily superordinate to the separate physical, psychological, behavioral, and social features that make it up, any of which can be valued independently. One of us has argued elsewhere (Tafarodi & Milne, 2002; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001) that the valuative response to this whole Me can be diffracted into two semantic dimensions, corresponding to agency and social worth. This differentiation does not, however, contradict the basic integrity of the Me that is responded to. That one's response to a unified object can be decomposed into distinct axes of meaning does not imply that one is responding to anything less than the whole object at any moment (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Self-esteem, then, as understood

by Kernis and most contemporary researchers, assumes integrity of the attitude object—the self that is esteemed. This point of consensus has two implications for Kernis's arguments, one straightforward and the other less obvious but more interesting.

The obvious implication is that what Kernis refers to as "defensive high self-esteem" is not high self-esteem at all. Public misrepresentation of one's private self-esteem is a communicative act. It is a stance taken vis-à-vis another, not a "fragile" form of sentiment. Imagine three individuals with the same low self-esteem who appear very dissimilar at a social function. One openly communicates his self-doubt through his words and actions while the other two deliberately conceal theirs. Furthermore, one of the latter conceals "defensively," fearing rejection by others. The other has little fear of rejection, but conceals for other reasons, perhaps a heightened need for privacy, a desire for control, or disregard for his company. As we see it, none of these three individuals represents a form of "high" self-esteem. Were we to administer a self-report measure of self-esteem to the trio, the resulting high scores of the two dissemblers would reflect invalid measurement of low self-esteem and little more.

In his discussion of misrepresentation, Kernis mentions the case of "self-deception." Here, the individual is not aware of the inconsistency between low privately held and high publicly expressed self-esteem. Moreover, the public expression corresponds to a second private sentiment of which the individual is aware. As such, there is no deliberate misrepresentation. Self-deception, then, requires lack of awareness of a private valuation of the whole Me coupled with awareness of an opposing private valuation of the whole Me. If so, someone "self-deceptively" high in self-esteem is someone who is unconsciously low but consciously high in self-esteem—the very high-explicit-plus-low-implicit composite that Kernis discusses separately in his article. In both cases, the claim is for two self-esteems within the same individual. We suggest that this claim is conceptually problematic.

Adopting the framework of Epstein and Morling (1995), Kernis states that unconscious or "implicit" self-esteem

resides in the experiential system, reflecting feelings of self-worth that are nonconscious, but that nonetheless can "seep through" to affect people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Implicit self-esteem cannot be assessed by directly asking people how they feel about themselves. (this issue)

Few would deny that we hold in memory episodic and semantic representations that generate considerable affect even when their activation is insufficient to produce awareness of their content. So, for example, a passing glimpse of someone who resembles a scornful teacher of yesteryear may leave us feeling uneasy about ourselves without knowing why. Similarly, there may be any number of self-relevant representations that are characterized by chronic but subthreshold levels of activation. The affective cargo of these representations can exert pervasive influence on thought and behavior despite our inability to confront them. Might this argument also apply to self-esteem? Perhaps, but the implications are troubling. Kernis's case for implicit and explicit self-esteem leaves us with two evaluative representations of the whole me, one conscious and the other unconscious. To qualify as self-esteem, as defined above, each must be holistic in that it relates to the unified me, not just some part of it. But is it prudent to claim that we hold within our unconscious a highly abstracted and integrated conception of what we are worth, parallel to the one we are conscious of and can articulate? This is nothing less than an argument for duplication of self-identity, a notion that has significant ramifications for how we conceive of self-consciousness. Are there, then, two "Me"s, together with two "I"s that experience them? If so, we are all suffering from an intrinsic form of dissociative disorder! One way out of this morass is to reject the idea of "unconscious self-esteem." Or, at least, reject it in any sense other than a single private global self-evaluation that may be temporarily unconscious for the same reasons that any representation within the self-concept moves in and out of awareness as a function of its activation. This economy in no way denies that people differ in the extent to which they are troubled by various self-relevant representations of which they are unaware. All it denies is that any of these representations is equivalent in abstraction and globality to the self-esteem that is known to us in conscious thought.

What Is Optimal?

The philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) argued that we experience ourselves within an "inescapable moral framework":

To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case

what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (p. 27)

We share this perspective and add that all claims about the "optimal" experience of the self also necessarily reduce to a position in moral space. As such, attempts to provide a purely naturalistic or utilitarian definition of optimal self-esteem will ultimately fall flat. Kernis does the best anyone can do in this situation, identifying the good with psychological and social adaptation. Adaptation to a culture, however, is, in large part, adaptation to the moral order of that culture. We take this inescapability from the moral as license to describe what we see as a problem with the authenticity that Kernis extols.

Kernis argues that secure self-esteem is optimal self-esteem and that "authenticity" provides the basis for this optimum experience. He defines authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (this issue). This casting is closely tied to the personality theory of Carl Rogers (1959, 1961), who saw authenticity reflected in the "congruence" between self and experience, or the "real" and "ideal" self. Kernis's authenticity is fostered through self-expression and relationships wherein "one is valued for who one is, and not for what one achieves" (this issue). This fits well with Rogers' prescriptive claim that "unconditional positive regard" is the basis of "unconditional positive *self*-regard" and that internalized "conditions of worth" are the bane of social development. These "conditions" are, of course, the "contingencies" that Kernis associates with fragile self-esteem. Optimal or "true" high self-esteem, in contrast, "is not 'earned,' nor can it be 'taken away'" (Kernis, this issue).

We certainly agree that hypersensitivity to the evaluative response of others, and to success and failure, is undesirable, as reflected in the psychological and social correlates described by Kernis. We counter, however, that the hyposensitivity implied by unconditional or noncontingent self-esteem is equally undesirable, as much for society as for the individual. Shame and guilt hinge upon internalized standards of acceptance and approval. Effective socialization could not occur without the pain of these social emotions. Kernis concedes that those with optimal self-esteem *are* emotionally affected by failure and disapproval, but claims that their negative reactions do not reflect contingencies of self-worth. We disagree. Shame, guilt, and self-disapproval are inherent in these reactions, which would otherwise lack the force required to shape behavior and guide moral development (Sabini & Silver, 1998; see Tangney, 1995, for a different view). To take full ownership of one's actions and effects on others means to infuse them with personal identity and to feel good or bad about them precisely because they express one's moral-aesthetic significance as an individual.

Discovery of what is good and bad within ourselves does not entail the denial, dissociation, and distortion that Rogers saw as pathological. It does, however, require that we ascribe value to ourselves according to what we are thinking, feeling, doing, and being for others. What is this, if not contingency? From this perspective, a truly noncontingent self-esteem is more akin to autism and sociopathy than "full functioning." A society of unconditionally self-satisfied individuals would be anarchic. Lasch (1995) had similar concerns in mind when he argued against "the abolition of shame":

We do children a terrible disservice, however, by showering them with undeserved approval. The kind of reassurance they need comes from the growing ability to meet impersonal standards of competence. Children need to risk failure and disappointment, to overcome obstacles, to face down the terrors that surround them. Self-respect cannot be conferred; it has to be earned. Current therapeutic and pedagogical practice, all empathy and understanding, hopes to manufacture self-respect without risk. Not even witch doctors could perform a medical miracle on that order. (p. 206)

Ironically, the tenor of this passage is more consistent with the tragic authenticity of existentialist philosophy, especially that of Heidegger and Sartre, than is Rogers' own prescription for unconditional self-regard. It also fits with May's (1953) interpretation of authenticity as "courage" in the face of anxiety and guilt. Nonetheless, we do not intend to discount the humanistic principle that underlies the ideal self outlined by Rogers and Kernis—that of the inherent dignity, worth, freedom, and rights of the individual. Recognition of this principle provides a sound moral foundation for self-esteem. We are simply suggesting that self-acceptance does, and should, rest upon much more than this. Optimal self-esteem, in our view, is neither noncontingent nor fully secure. Rather, it is optimally contingent and insecure, which is to say that it is normatively responsive to experience, according to the moral framework of the culture in which it develops. We discover ourselves by *identifying* with our actions and with the responses of others to our actions. Identification means drawing a share of one's identity—which includes one's worth—from those actions and responses. In this process, there is both the risk of loss and the promise of gain. If our self-esteem were not dependent in this way, what would serve as the engine of enculturated moral consciousness?

In his penetrating analysis of America's preoccupation with self-esteem, the sociologist John Hewitt

(1998) criticized the modern trend toward overinvesting our happiness, actual and desired, in how we feel about ourselves. As well-being becomes synonymous with high self-esteem, the pursuit of happiness becomes restricted to the private eradication of shame, guilt, and self-doubt, rather than sought through the collective improvement of society. Herein lies the tragedy of the Rogerian ideal: The more desirable it becomes, the worse we feel about not realizing it, which makes it more desirable still. There are, however, alternatives. In most other cultures, shame, guilt, and self-doubt are rarely interpreted as symptoms of a pathology that requires inner "healing." Rather, they are healthy cues to social adjustment or reorientation, and their expression is the sign of a mature moral sensibility. People living in those cultures are well aware of a dictum that we seem to have forgotten: A little insecurity is a good thing.

Note

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