
Master of One's Psychological Domain? Not Likely if One's Self-Esteem is Unstable

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The authors examined the extent to which self-esteem (SE) stability relates to self-regulatory styles, self-concept clarity (SCC), and goal-related affect. The results supported the notion that individuals with unstable SE are not likely to possess a strong sense of self. Specifically, unstable as compared to stable SE was associated with (a) self-regulatory styles reflecting lower levels of self-determination, (b) lower SCC, and (c) goal-related affect characterized by greater tenseness and less interest. Theoretical implications are discussed.

Some people have a really good sense of who they are, their likes and dislikes, and why they do what they do, whereas other people are plagued by considerable self-doubt and confusion, buffeted around by external pressures and evaluations. Colloquially, the former are said to have a strong sense of self, whereas the latter are said to have a weak sense of self.

Having a strong sense of self (i.e., to be master of one's psychological domain) can be formally construed in a myriad of ways. Our view is that it entails at least three components. First, it means that one's feelings of self-worth are stable and secure, that is, they do not need continual validational stroking (Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Rogers, 1959). Second, it means that one's actions reflect a strong sense of agency and self-determination, as opposed to submissiveness to intrapsychic or externally based pressures (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Third, it means that one's self-concept is clearly and confidently defined (Campbell, 1990) so that it contributes to a coherent sense of direction in one's daily life.

The research we report in this article was designed to shed light on the interrelationships among these three

aspects of what we refer to as a strong sense of self. Specifically, we tested the hypotheses that possessing stable and secure self-esteem (SE) will be associated with (a) self-regulatory styles that reflect agency and self-determination and (b) self-concepts that are clearly and confidently defined. In the sections to follow, we review existing research and theory concerned with these components.

Stable and Secure SE

Previous research has shown that people vary considerably in the extent to which their immediate feelings of self-worth fluctuate across time and context (for summaries, see Greenier, Kernis, & Waschull, 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). Stable SEs have well-anchored feelings of self-worth that generally are unaffected by specific evaluative events and therefore are unlikely to change drastically with changing circumstances.¹ Unstable SEs possess fragile, vulnerable feelings of self-worth that are influenced by internally generated (e.g., reflecting on one's progress toward an important goal) and externally provided (e.g., a compliment) evaluative events. One of the core characteristics of people with fragile SE is that they react very strongly to events that they deem SE relevant; in fact, they may see SE relevance even in cases

Authors' Note: Daniel Whitaker is now at the Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia. The authors would like to thank Blossom Davies and Jinn-Jopp Bau for their assistance, and Lenny Martin and Abraham Tesser for their comments on the manuscript. This research was supported by National Science Foundation Grant SBR-9618882. Address correspondence regarding this article to Michael Kernis, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-3013; e-mail: mkernis@arches.uga.edu.

PSPB, Vol. 26 No. 10, October 2000 1297-1305
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where it does not exist (for a real-world example, see Kernis & Waschull, 1995, p. 93). That is, their feelings of self-worth are continually on the line as they go about their everyday activities.

Consistent with these assertions, past research has shown that compared to people with stable SE, people with unstable SE (a) focus relatively more on the SE-threatening aspects of aversive interpersonal events (Waschull & Kernis, 1996), (b) experience greater increases in depressive symptoms when faced with daily hassles (Kernis et al., 1998), (c) have self-feelings that are more affected by everyday negative and positive events (Greenier et al., 1999), and (d) take a more SE-protective (hence, less mastery oriented) stance toward learning (Waschull & Kernis, 1996). Of importance, each of these effects for SE stability emerged after controlling for the role of SE level. Other research has linked unstable SE (among high SEs) with greater anger and hostility proneness (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989) and with greater self-reported tendencies to boast following success and experience self-doubt following failure (Kernis, Greenier, Herlocker, Whisenhunt, & Abend, 1997). Available evidence therefore supports the view that whereas stable SE reflects having a strong sense of self, unstable SE does not (see also Rosenberg, 1986).

Agentic Self-Regulation

People engage in actions for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they do things simply because they are asked to or because they perceive that a tangible reward or punishment awaits them. In such instances, people can be said to be operating as a pawn (deCharms, 1968), subject to the whims of their social environments. Other times, however, people choose to engage in activities because they are interesting or because they match important self-values. Research conducted over the past 30 years has amply demonstrated the many virtues of acting in accord with one's interests and values (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; deCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991).

Central to our present concerns is the construct of self-regulatory styles (Ryan & Connell, 1989), which refers to individual differences in the degree to which agency and self-determination are inherent in people's reasons for acting. At one extreme, external reasons reflect the absence of self-determination in that the impetus for action lies in factors external to the actor (e.g., another person's request that is tied implicitly or explicitly to reward or punishment). Introjected reasons involve minimal self-determination because they reflect an "internally controlling state in which affective and SE contingencies are applied to enforce or motivate an adopted value or set of actions" (Ryan, Rigby, & King,

1993, p. 587). Furthermore, introjected self-regulation involves "self and other approval-based pressures" (p. 586) and it promotes behaviors that "are performed because one 'should' do them, or because not doing so might engender anxiety, guilt, or loss of self-esteem" (p. 587). Identified reasons reflect considerably more self-determination because the individual personally and freely identifies with the importance of the activity for one's functioning and growth. At the other extreme of the continuum, intrinsic reasons reflect maximal self-determined regulation in that activities are done purely for the pleasure and enjoyment they provide.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991) asserts that optimally functioning individuals will possess self-regulatory styles that consist primarily of identified and intrinsic regulation rather than introjected and external regulation. Consistent with this view, Sheldon and Kasser (1995) reported that agentic self-regulation in pursuing one's goals related to greater life satisfaction and feelings of vitality, more positive daily moods, and higher SE. Other research has linked self-determined regulation to more positive outcomes with respect to achievement and voting behaviors (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). In short, self-regulatory styles that reflect agency and self-determination appear to capture an important aspect of a strong sense of self.

Self-Concept Clarity

Possessing a well-developed self-concept also has been implicated in optimal psychological functioning (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). If self-knowledge is confused, conflicted, and variable, it is unlikely to provide meaningful input into people's behaviors and reactions, thereby promoting greater responsiveness (often blind) to immediately salient contextual cues and outcomes (Brockner, 1984; Campbell, 1990). This heightened responsiveness can be particularly detrimental when environmental cues and outcomes are negative (Brockner, 1984; Campbell, 1990).

Campbell and her colleagues have eloquently articulated this position in their exposition of the construct of self-concept clarity (SCC), "defined as the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). A variety of indices have been used to capture specific aspects of SCC. For example, internal inconsistency has been indexed by the number of times individuals claim as self-descriptive trait adjectives that lie at opposite ends of a particular dimension (e.g., they are outgoing and reserved or bold and timid). Likewise, confidence has been assessed by mea-

asuring reaction times of self-descriptiveness judgments as well as explicit confidence ratings, and temporal instability has been assessed via the amount of change in self-descriptions across time. Most recently, Campbell and her colleagues (Campbell et al., 1996) have developed a global self-report measure of SCC that taps self-perceived consistency, confidence, and temporal stability of self-aspects. Central to the present concerns are findings that high SCC is positively related to a number of indices of psychological health and well-being, including high SE and low neuroticism (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). In short, possessing high SCC appears to be another important aspect of a strong sense of self.

The Present Research

Our primary focus in the research reported here was to examine the extent to which SE stability related to self-regulatory styles and SCC. In so doing, we aimed to shed light on factors that may promote or underlie unstable SE. In previous discussions on this issue, we suggested that two particularly important factors are heightened ego involvement and an impoverished self-concept (Greenier et al., 1995; Kernis & Waschull, 1995).

Ego involvement and self-regulatory styles. People with unstable SE possess feelings of self-worth that are “continually on the line” as they go about their everyday activities (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993, Study 2; Waschull & Kernis, 1996). Stated differently, unstable SEs are especially likely to link their immediate feelings of self-worth to specific everyday outcomes and experiences (i.e., heightened ego involvement). For these individuals, slights or failures activate feelings of worthlessness, whereas successes and goal attainments magnify feelings of value and worth. In contrast, the immediate feelings of self-worth of stable SEs are little affected by specific positive and negative evaluative events.

Deci and Ryan (1995) make similar assertions with respect to what they call contingent and true SE. In their words, “contingent self-esteem refers to feelings about oneself that result from—indeed, are dependent on—matching some standard of excellence or living up to some interpersonal or intrapsychic expectations” (p. 32). In contrast, true SE refers to feelings of self-worth that are well-anchored and secure, that is, that do not depend on the attainment of specific outcomes or require continual validation. Deci and Ryan (1995) suggest that contingent SE is anchored in external and introjected self-regulatory processes that reflect the operation of self and other administered controls. These forms of controlling regulation are especially powerful precisely because they involve the linking of behaviors and outcomes to self- and other-based (dis)approval. True SE, in

contrast, is thought to emerge naturally out of the more agentic identified and intrinsic self-regulatory styles.

To our knowledge, the relationship between contingent (true) SE and self-regulatory styles has not been directly examined. As just noted, contingent and unstable SE (and true and stable SE) share a number of features (e.g., contingent and unstable SE both reflect heightened dependence on specific outcomes as determinants of self-worth).² Consequently, we predicted that the more unstable individuals’ SE, the more they would engage in external and introjected self-regulation and the less they would engage in identified and intrinsic self-regulation.

Impoverished self-concept. Having a poorly developed self-concept may lead individuals to rely on, and be more affected by, specific evaluative information, thereby contributing to unstable SE. In other words, the less confident and internally consistent one’s self-knowledge, the less well-anchored one’s feelings of self-worth are likely to be. Based on this line of reasoning, we predicted that the more unstable one’s SE, the lower one’s degree of SCC.

To test these hypotheses, participants completed the SCC scale (Campbell et al., 1996) as well as measures of SE level and SE stability. They also generated a list of 10 personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), that is, recurring goals that guided their everyday behaviors. For each striving, they indicated the extent to which they engaged in it because of reasons reflecting external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic self-regulatory processes. Approximately 4 weeks later, participants returned to complete measures of the internal consistency and confidence aspects of SCC. At that time, they also indicated the extent to which they experienced various emotions when they engaged in each striving during the intervening time period. Given the retrospective nature of these emotion accounts, they cannot be viewed as definitive. This limitation notwithstanding, we anticipated that they would provide converging evidence pertaining to the extent to which people possess a strong sense of self (i.e., more negative/less positive affect associated with unstable SE).

METHOD

Participants

The study consisted of 126 male and female undergraduate students (15 men, 108 women, 3 not recorded) who participated in this study in exchange for credit toward a course research involvement requirement. Data collection took place in two separate waves conducted over successive winter and spring academic quarters.

Procedure and Measures

The study took place in three phases. Phase 1 involved the assessment of SE level, self-regulatory styles, and SCC in small group settings. Phase 2, which took place the following week, involved the assessment of SE stability. In Phase 3 (small group settings approximately 4 weeks after Phase 1), goal-related affect and internal consistency and confidence of self-ascriptions (components of SCC) were assessed.

PHASE 1

SE level. Participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, a well-validated measure of global feelings of self-worth (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991), with instructions to base their responses on how much they typically or generally agree with each of the 10 items. Responses were made on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) and were summed (after appropriate reversals) so that higher scores reflect higher SE ($M = 39.70$, $SD = 7.21$).

Self-regulatory styles. Participants generated a list of 10 personal strivings, defined as “things that you typically or characteristically are trying to do in your everyday behavior.” Further elaboration indicated that strivings are recurrent, repeating goals and that they could be either positive or negative. A number of examples of strivings were provided.³ Next, participants transferred these strivings, one at a time, to another questionnaire to rate the extent to which each of eight possible reasons accounts for why they typically or usually engage in the striving. Ratings were made on 7-point scales (0 = *is not at all a reason* to 6 = *is an extremely important reason*). Two reasons were provided for each of the four reason categories; most were taken or adapted from Sheldon and Kasser (1995) and Koestner et al. (1996).

External reasons were “I do it because somebody else wants me to or because I will get something from somebody if I do” and “I do it because something about my external situation forces me to do it.” Introjected reasons were “I force myself to do it to avoid feeling guilty or anxious” and “I do it because I am supposed to do it.” Identified reasons were “I do it because it ties into my personal values and beliefs” and “I do it because I feel that doing it will help me grow or develop in a way that is personally important to me.” Intrinsic reasons were “I do it because of the pleasure and fun of doing it” and “I do it because of the interest and enjoyment of doing it.” Responses to the two items in each category first were summed for each striving and then averaged across the 10 strivings.

In addition to analyzing each category separately, following Ryan and Connell (1989) and others (e.g., Koestner et al., 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Vallerand &

Bissonette, 1992), we created a “weighted striving self-determination index” by first doubling the external and intrinsic scores (which are the two extremes) and then subtracting the external and introjected scores from the sum of the identified and intrinsic scores ($M = 91.98$, $SD = 106.03$).

SCC. Participants completed the SCC Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), which contains 12 items (e.g., “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another. In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am”). Responses were made on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and were summed (after appropriate reversals) so that higher scores reflect lower SCC.

PHASE 2

SE stability. The following week, participants were asked to complete Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale once approximately every 12 hours from 10:00 p.m. Monday to 10:00 a.m. Friday. Response anchors of *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* were separated by 10 dots, and participants were asked to circle the dot that best reflected how much they agreed with each item “at this moment.” These instructions and response format were used to distinguish the multiple current SE assessments from the SE level assessment. SE stability was computed as the standard deviation of the total scores across these multiple assessments; the lower the standard deviation, the more stable was the individual’s SE. In this sample, SE level and SE stability were correlated at $-.41$. As in previous research, only those participants who completed at least six of eight assessments were retained for analyses.⁴ For the sake of completeness, we report on the findings from ancillary analyses in which the mean scores from these multiple assessments (SE current) were substituted for SE level scores (see Note 6).

PHASE 3

Goal-related affect. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced the following emotions when pursuing their listed strivings over the past 4 weeks (since the first session when they generated their strivings): tenseness (tense, relaxed), dejected (dejected, depressed), interest (interested, bored), and happy (happy, enthusiastic). Ratings were made separately for each striving on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). After reverse scoring the items of relaxed and bored, composites for each pair were created by summing ratings across all strivings.

Internal consistency and confidence of trait ascriptions. This measure contained 24 pairs of bipolar trait adjectives. With one exception (cautious-daring was not included because daring was inadvertently omitted), they were the same as those used by Campbell (1990).

TABLE 1: Correlation Matrix of Measures

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. SE level	(.91)														
2. SE stability	-.42	—													
3. Clarity	-.65	.52	(.91)												
4. External	-.35	.33	.49	(.91)											
5. Introjected	-.27	.21	.40	.74	(.87)										
6. Identified	.30	-.30	-.26	-.15	.01	(.86)									
7. Intrinsic	.44	-.31	-.51	-.35	-.29	.61	(.86)								
8. SD index	.47	-.40	-.60	-.85	.73	.49	.76	—							
9. Tense	-.39	.37	-.48	.38	.50	-.17	-.36	-.49	(.85)						
10. Happy	.40	-.24	-.41	-.23	-.25	.39	.54	.47	-.67	(.88)					
11. Interest	.38	-.27	-.42	-.40	-.36	.43	.51	.57	-.60	.79	(.82)				
12. Dejected	-.54	.33	.58	.48	.39	-.28	-.34	-.52	.67	-.53	-.65	(.92)			
13. SE current	.79	-.41	.52	-.33	-.30	.27	.35	.43	-.39	.42	.43	-.57	—		
14. Yes/yes	.03	.16	.14	.10	.21	-.09	-.17	-.19	.15	-.10	-.19	.07	-.11	—	
15. Con yes/yes	.28	-.20	-.23	-.26	-.20	.27	.25	.33	-.30	.42	.48	-.35	.32	-.31	—
<i>M</i>	39.70	5.67	33.33	48.95	57.64	93.06	77.24	91.98	69.15	98.84	109.83	43.73	81.53	.19	5.06
<i>SD</i>	7.21	3.92	10.39	26.90	24.93	18.24	21.76	106.03	18.86	17.71	14.49	19.51	17.06	.10	.90

NOTE: SD index = self-determination index, Con = confidence ratings, SE = self-esteem. *N*s range from 123 to 126. SE stability and clarity are scored such that low values reflect stable SE and high clarity, respectively. $r_s > .17$, $p < .05$. Entries in parentheses along the diagonal are coefficient alphas.

One adjective from each of the 24 pairs was presented prior to the second item in any pair. Participants indicated whether each adjective describes them (yes/no) and how confident they were in their answer. Following Hampson (1997), trait inconsistency was operationalized as the number of yes/yes responses made to both members of a bipolar adjective pair. Although Campbell has incorporated no/no responses into her trait inconsistency measure, we believe that their meaning is somewhat ambiguous (see also Hampson, 1997) in that they may reflect the absence of a self-schema (Markus, 1977) or low self-complexity (Linville, 1985) rather than inconsistency per se.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the psychometric properties and the correlation matrix for all measures used in this study.

SE level and SE stability were correlated significantly with each other and with the various other measures. Therefore, in addition to examining zero-order relationships, we also conducted regression analyses to examine the extent to which SE stability and SE level independently predicted self-regulatory styles, SCC, and goal-related affect. In Step 1, SE stability and SE level were entered simultaneously. In Step 2, the SE Stability \times SE Level product term was added. As previously noted, these analyses then were repeated with the mean of current SE scores (SE current) substituted for SE level. To aid in the interpretation of significant interactions, predicted values were generated using values 1 standard deviation above and below the mean.⁵

Self-Regulation

External regulation. SE level was negatively correlated with external regulation, whereas SE stability was positively correlated (see Table 2 for the values). Regression analyses revealed significant main effects for both SE stability ($B = 1.54$), $F(1, 123) = 6.15$, $p < .02$, and SE level ($B = -.95$), $F(1, 123) = 7.95$, $p < .01$, indicating that the more unstable or lower was individuals' SE, the greater their degree of external self-regulation.

Introjected regulation. SE level was negatively correlated with introjected regulation, whereas SE stability was positively correlated. In a regression analysis, however, the SE stability main effect was not significant ($p > .20$) but the main effect for SE level was significant ($B = -.77$), $F(1, 123) = 5.59$, $p < .02$. Given the centrality of this regulatory style to our theorizing, we conducted separate regression analyses on each of the two introjected reasons. These analyses yielded significant SE stability ($B = .70$), $F(1, 123) = 4.19$, $p < .05$, and SE level ($B = -.47$), $F(1, 123) = 5.50$, $p < .02$, main effects for the item "I force myself to do it to avoid feeling guilty or anxious," indicating greater endorsement of this item the lower and more unstable individual's SE. In contrast, neither the SE stability ($F < 1$) nor SE level ($p < .11$) main effect emerged for the item "I do it because I am supposed to do it."

Identified regulation. SE level was positively correlated with identified regulation, whereas SE stability was negatively correlated. Regression analyses revealed significant main effects for both SE stability ($B = -1.01$), $F(1, 123) = 5.45$, $p < .03$, and SE level ($B = .53$), $F(1, 123) =$

5.18, $p < .03$, indicating that the more unstable or lower individuals' SE, the lower their degree of identified self-regulation. In addition, a marginally significant SE Stability \times SE Level interaction emerged, $F(1, 122) = 3.48$, $p < .07$. Predicted values indicated that unstable SE tended to be related to less identified regulation more so among high SEs (unstable = 117.10, stable = 130.60) than among low SEs (unstable = 105.46, stable = 107.78).

Intrinsic regulation. SE level was positively correlated with intrinsic regulation, whereas SE stability was negatively correlated. A marginal main effect emerged for SE stability ($B = -.83$), $F(1, 123) = 2.87$, $p < .10$, and a significant main effect emerged for SE level ($B = 1.13$), $F(1, 123) = 17.93$, $p < .001$, indicating that the lower individuals' SE, and to some extent the more unstable their SE, the lower their degree of intrinsic self-regulation.

Self-determination (SD) index. SE level was positively correlated with the self-determination index, whereas SE stability was negatively correlated. Regression analyses revealed significant main effects for both SE stability ($B = -6.48$), $F(1, 123) = 8.01$, $p < .01$, and SE level ($B = 5.47$), $F(1, 123) = 19.29$, $p < .001$, indicating that the more unstable or lower individuals' SE, the lower their overall self-determined self-regulation.

Goal-Related Affect

SE level was positively correlated with feelings of tenseness and dejection and negatively correlated with feelings of interest and happiness; the opposite was true for SE stability. In regression analyses, however, the main effect for SE stability was significant only for tenseness ($B = 1.22$), $F(1, 122) = 8.11$, $p < .01$ (other $ps > .14$); the main effect for SE level was significant for all emotions, $F_s > 8.89$, $ps < .01$. In addition, a SE Stability \times SE Level interaction emerged for interest, $F(1, 121) = 4.00$, $p < .05$. Predicted values indicated that unstable SE was related to less interest among high SEs (unstable SE = 109.96, stable SE = 118.22) but not among low SEs (unstable SE = 104.18, stable SE = 103.07).

SCC

Campbell et al.'s SCC Scale. SE level was negatively correlated with scores on the SCC, whereas SE stability was positively correlated (recall that high SCC scores reflect low clarity). Regression analyses revealed significant main effects for both SE stability ($B = .82$), $F(1, 121) = 19.23$, $p < .001$, and SE level ($B = -.75$), $F(1, 121) = 54.25$, $p < .001$, indicating that the more unstable and lower individuals' SE, the lower their SCC.

Internal inconsistency and confidence in trait self-ascriptions. SE level was uncorrelated with the percentage of yes/yes responses, whereas SE stability was marginally correlated ($p < .07$). Regression analyses revealed a

TABLE 2: Predicted Values for Inconsistent Responses and Confidence Ratings as a Function of SE Stability and SE Level

	SE Level	
	Low	High
SE stability		
Unstable	.18 (4.86)	.23 (4.92)
Stable	.19 (4.59)	.17 (5.52)

NOTE: SE = self-esteem. Numbers in parentheses are confidence ratings. Higher numbers reflect greater confidence. Values are yes/yes responses.

a significant main effect for SE stability, $F(1, 122) = 4.70$, $p < .04$, but the main effect for SE level was negligible ($F < 1.4$), resulting in a model that was only marginally significant ($p < .10$). In addition, a significant SE Stability \times SE Level interaction emerged, $F(1, 121) = 4.63$, $p < .04$ (the overall model was significant, $p < .04$). Predicted values are displayed in Table 2, where it can be seen that unstable SE related to more frequent yes/yes responses among high but not among low SEs.

SE level was positively correlated with confidence ratings for yes/yes pairs, whereas SE stability was negatively correlated. Regression analyses indicated that unstable SE was related to lower confidence ratings for yes/yes responses (see Table 2) among high SEs but to higher ratings among low SEs. This pattern was reflected in a significant main effect for SE level ($p < .02$) and a significant SE Stability \times SE Level interaction, $F(1, 119) = 9.06$, $p < .01$.⁶

DISCUSSION

The present findings link SE stability to self-regulatory processes, SCC, and emotional experiences. First, compared to unstable SEs, stable SEs reported that they engaged in goal-oriented behaviors less so because of external and internal controls and more so because they thought the goal was important or enjoyable to pursue. Second, stable (compared to unstable) SEs scored lower on the SCC Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), thereby indicating that their self-concepts were more clearly defined and confidently held. Third, when asked to recall the emotional tone of their goal strivings over the previous 4 weeks, stable SEs reported feeling less tense (and, among high SEs, more interest)⁷ than did unstable SEs.

Of importance, the major findings for SE stability held regardless of whether SE level as traditionally measured, or the average of multiple current SE scores, was controlled. Thus, independent of the valence of people's feelings of self-worth, the extent to which their current feelings fluctuate was shown to relate to a broad spectrum of psychological processes. This window into the psychological world of stable and unstable SEs sug-

gests that stable SEs are more likely to have a strong sense of self: They do things because they enjoy them and because they are of self-importance; they report confidence and clarity in their self-knowledge; and they experience relative calm, not tenseness, when attempting to achieve their goals. On the other hand, unstable SEs are less likely to have a strong sense of self: They do things to avoid feeling guilty or anxious or to satisfy others, their self-knowledge is muddled, and their goal-oriented behaviors engender feelings of tenseness.⁸

Several scenarios can account for the various links between these aspects of psychological functioning. In one, possessing fragile, vulnerable feelings of self-worth may foster a reliance on others' wishes in the hopes that validation will be forthcoming while simultaneously fostering a reduction in focus on one's own desires and interests. Moreover, the considerable responsiveness of unstable SEs to daily positive and negative daily events (Greenier et al., 1999) may undermine the clarity and continuity of their self-knowledge. In another, controlling regulatory processes may foster SE that becomes progressively more unstable or contingent (Deci & Ryan, 1995) over time. A relative lack of self-knowledge is to be expected as well given the lack of organismic awareness that characterizes non-self-determined regulatory processes (Deci & Ryan 1985).

Undoubtedly, other scenarios with different sequential chains can be generated, but the present data do not allow us to distinguish between them. In some respects, there may be little value in pitting one against the other. We believe that SE stability, self-regulatory styles, and SCC are components of an interlocking system that are likely to have reciprocal influences on one another. Our interests and concerns led us to "break into" the system at SE stability to examine the extent to which it predicted these other components. Regardless of one's theoretical leanings, our findings speak to the value of examining the "crosstalk" between SE, self-concept, affective, and motivational phenomena.

Our conceptualization of unstable SE has a number of features in common with Deci and Ryan's (1995) conceptualization of contingent SE. Both emphasize the link between feelings of self-worth and specific outcomes. Both describe enhanced tendencies to be caught up in the processes of defending, maintaining, and (in the case of unstable or contingent high SE) maximizing one's positive, although tenuous, feelings of self-worth. At the opposite end of the spectrum, stable and true SE (especially if high) are taken to reflect secure, well-anchored feelings of self-worth that do not need continual validation. Pleasure following success and disappointment following failure are experienced by people with stable or true SE; however, the impact of these

events is unlikely to generalize to their global feelings of self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis et al., 1998).

Despite this overlap, differences between them do exist. First, whereas we explicitly distinguish between typical and current feelings of self-worth, Deci and Ryan (1995) do not. We believe that it is important to maintain such a distinction, both conceptually and empirically (for further discussion and supportive evidence, see Kernis, Jadrnich, Stoner, & Sun, 1996; Kernis & Johnson, 1990). Second, whereas by definition unstable SE fluctuates, contingent SE can be stable as long as standards or expectations are continually met. As Deci and Ryan (1995) put it,

A man who feels like a good and worthy person (i.e., has high self-esteem) only when he has just accomplished a profitable business transaction would have contingent self-esteem. If he were very successful, frequently negotiating such deals, he would have a continuing high level of self-esteem; yet that high level would be tenuous, always requiring that he continue to pass the tests of life, always requiring that he match some controlling standard. (p. 32)

Our view is that positive events (either internally generated or externally provided) will trigger in unstable SEs short-term increases in their current feelings of self-worth that recede with the passage of time. In fact, recent research demonstrates that positive events do have a greater impact on the immediate self-feelings of unstable as compared to stable SEs (Greenier et al., 1999). Third, whereas we acknowledge the role that impoverished self-concepts may play in unstable SE, Deci and Ryan do not. This discussion is not meant to take anything away from the important conceptualization offered by Deci and Ryan. Rather, its purpose is to point to the usefulness of maintaining the distinction between unstable and contingent SE. With the advent of measures tapping into contingent SE (Crocker & Wolfe, 1998; Paradise & Kernis, 1998), future research can include direct comparisons between contingent and unstable SE.

Although our review and discussion have focused on SE stability, SE level clearly figured in the findings as well. Numerous effects emerged, many of which replicated prior research. For example, SE level was inversely related to self-determined self-regulatory styles (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) and to SCC as measured by the SCC Scale (Campbell et al., 1996). A complete picture of having a strong sense of self therefore necessitates incorporating both SE level and SE stability. Although in most cases these two SE components had additive effects, they sometimes interacted with one another. Regardless, stable high SEs were most self-determining in their self-regulatory styles, highest in SCC, least inconsistent in their

trait ascriptions, and most favorable in their goal-related affect (specifically feelings of interest and the relative absence of tension). In short, they are the master of their psychological domain.

These findings, along with those from prior research (e.g., Kernis et al., 1989, 1993, 1998) indicate that stable high SEs have many of the qualities associated with one perspective on high SE that is derived from a number of humanistically oriented theories (e.g., Rogers, 1959). According to this perspective,

High SEs feel that they are worthwhile and valuable individuals, they like and are satisfied with themselves, and they are comfortable with and accepting of their weaknesses. To have high SE, then, is to have positive feelings toward oneself that are built upon solid foundations which do not require continual validation or promotion. (Kernis & Goldman, 1999, p. 596)

Unstable high SEs, on the other hand, appear to fit a very different characterization of high SE (Baumeister, Smart, & Bowden, 1998):

High SEs feel very proud of themselves, superior to most other people, and very willing and able to defend against possible threats to their positive self-feelings. . . . Furthermore, high SEs do not like to see weaknesses in themselves (or for other people to see them) so they work hard to undermine the legitimacy of threatening evaluative events or information. (Kernis & Goldman, 1999, p. 595)

We believe that both perspectives are correct in that each characterizes some high SEs (for additional discussion, see Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999). Consistent with this view, a growing number of SE researchers and theorists have concluded that SE is more complex than whether it is high or low. In addition to distinctions made between contingent and true SE, and between stable and unstable SE, others have distinguished between genuine and defensive SE (e.g., Schneider & Turkat, 1975) and between implicit and explicit SE (Epstein & Morling, 1995; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Inherent in each of these distinctions is that SE of the same valence may have a variety of qualities and exhibit a wide range of relations to other aspects of psychological functioning. We applaud these various efforts to depict the complexity of SE and hope that they will routinely be incorporated into research and theory concerning the role of SE in optimal psychological functioning and well-being.

NOTES

1. We refer to stable and unstable SEs for ease of explication only. Conceptually and empirically, we view self-esteem (SE) stability and SE level as continuous variables.

2. We defer discussion of how they differ until after the presentation of our findings.

3. We thank Robert Emmons for graciously providing us with these materials.

4. We began with 146 participants. We lost or dropped 20 individuals because they failed to participate in one or more phases of the study, completed less than six stability forms, or admitted during debriefing that they simultaneously completed multiple stability forms (involving three or more forms). If they admitted simultaneously completing two forms and could identify which ones, only these forms were eliminated from analyses.

5. Given the small number of male participants, preliminary analyses centered on whether there were any gender differences on any of the measures presented in this article. There were none; therefore, gender was not included in the regression analyses we report.

6. When the analyses were repeated with the mean of participants' current SE substituted for SE level, essentially the same findings emerged for SE stability.

7. It is unclear why unstable SE was associated with lower goal-related interest among high, but not among low, SEs. This is something that should be addressed in future research.

8. We should acknowledge that the findings that emerged for trait inconsistency and confidence ratings diverged somewhat from those that emerged for the Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) Scale. Specifically, unstable SE was related to more frequent yes/yes inconsistencies and to lower corresponding confidence ratings, but only among high SEs. Why this divergence occurred is not immediately clear, although it is worth noting that scores on the SCC did not significantly correlate with yes/yes inconsistencies. Furthermore, it may be that for some participants, yes/yes responses reflected complexity rather than inconsistency per se (I am X sometimes and not X other times) (see Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). These considerations raise the possibility that additional factors may need to be taken into account to ensure that inconsistent responding does reflect low SCC. Hopefully this issue will be addressed in future research.

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Received October 30, 1998

Revision accepted September 6, 1999