
Optimal Self-Esteem and Authenticity: Separating Fantasy from Reality

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AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

Optimal Self-Esteem and Authenticity: Separating Fantasy from Reality

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I looked forward to receiving the commentaries on my target article both with excitement and a bit of trepidation. As I read them, I felt a great deal of gratitude for the care and thoughtfulness with which the authors stated their concerns. It occurred to me that I could respond to these commentaries by thoughtfully assimilating their meaning and modifying my position accordingly. Given the issues here, however, it also occurred to me that I could be defensive and caustic and begin my response with a resounding #%+\$@&*! OFF! Fortunately, I quickly brushed off the latter possibility. All joking aside, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to process, integrate, and respond to the commentaries with the same high degree of seriousness with which they were written. The issues I address in my response include the following:

1. The pervasiveness and adaptiveness of contingent self-esteem.
2. The developmental factors that contribute to fragile and optimal self-esteem.
3. The use of the construct of narcissism as an overarching framework for understanding fragile and optimal self-esteem.
4. The potential pitfalls of a multifaceted self-esteem perspective.
5. The conceptualization and operationalization of implicit self-esteem and authenticity.

Is All Self-Esteem Contingent?

Several commentators argue either that everyone's self-esteem is contingent, or that so few people possess noncontingent (or optimal) self-esteem that it is theoretically and practically useless. Rhodewalt and Tragakis suggest that the distinction between contingent self-esteem and authentic self-esteem is "more a theoretical convenience than it is an empirical fact" (this issue). They write that regardless of the basis of

one's self-esteem, even individuals with optimal self-esteem will look to the social environment for self-definition and consequently display externally contingent and unstable self-esteem. Crocker and Nuer state that "we have relatively little choice about having contingencies of self-worth" (this issue); Arndt and Schimmel assert that "all self-esteem is inherently contingent on meeting standards or on some form of social acceptance or validation" (this issue). Although Heatherton and Wyland agree with my description of optimal self-esteem, they question its existence:

Who has it? The problem with this idealistic representation is that it may apply to very few people in the real world. Certainly we know few people in our social worlds who appear to have optimal self-esteem (although we admit to knowing people who would describe themselves in precisely these positive terms). (this issue)

Clearly, these commentators have raised some important issues. My sense is that they were raised, in part, because of the use of the term *contingent* to describe fragile self-esteem that is highly dependent upon specific outcomes, achievements, evaluations, and so forth. My use of the term *contingent* is not meant to imply that secure or optimal self-esteem is completely independent (i.e., noncontingent) of contextual events and significant others, especially during the formative years. Indeed, I think it likely that both genetically based factors, such as temperament, and environmental factors, such as parental support and communication, contribute to the development of optimal self-esteem (see Neiss, Stevenson, & Sedikides, this issue; Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000).

My own research (Kernis et al., 2000) shows that perceptions of parents' communication styles relate to children's stability and level of self-esteem. Specifically, compared to children with stable or high self-esteem, children with unstable or low self-esteem perceived their fathers to be highly critical, to engage in insulting

name calling, and to use guilt arousal and love withdrawal as control techniques. Moreover, compared to children with stable or high self-esteem, children with unstable or low self-esteem reported that their fathers less frequently talked about the good things that the children had done and were less likely to use value-affirming methods when they did show their approval. Ryan and Brown (this issue) report research showing that the more children perceived their parents' regard to be conditional, the more they felt compelled and pressured to behave in certain ways, the more they felt rejected by and resentment toward their parents, and the more unstable their self-esteem. Future research should examine objective indices of parental behaviors that may relate to children's self-esteem.

I (this issue) suggested that when parents explicitly deny the legitimacy of a child's inner experience, they are undermining the child's developing authenticity. In that context, I gave an example of a restless boy in an airport whose desire to burn off energy was thwarted by a highly controlling parent. Arndt and Schimel reinterpret this example to offer support for their contention that for children to feel worthy, they must conform to the standards imposed by their parents, and later, by the culture at large. In so doing, I think that they may have lost sight of the importance of the boy's perspective in this encounter. Specifically, although the boy was signaling his restlessness by repeatedly sliding off the chair, his parent was ignoring the message. Rather than repeatedly plopping the child back onto the chair, his parent could have taken him for a walk through the airport. I suggested that by giving the child this opportunity to burn off some energy, the parent would be affirming to the boy the validity of his internal state. Rather than focus on this affirming aspect of the parent's response, Arndt and Schimel choose to emphasize the necessity for the boy to behave "in a way that conforms to the avenue of expression the parent provides." In so doing, they are focusing on the conditions that are likely to promote contingent or fragile self-esteem. In contrast, the key aspect of the parent's affirming response is acknowledgment of the validity of the child's internal state by providing an avenue of expression that alleviates the child's restlessness. The bottom line is how the parent's behavior is experienced by the boy. If it is experienced as pressure to "conform to parental standards," authenticity will be undermined and contingent self-esteem will be promoted. If it is experienced as validating one's internal state, authenticity and optimal self-esteem will be enhanced.

Crocker and Nuer assert that although people have little choice over whether to have contingencies of self-worth, they do have choice over whether to engage in the momentary pursuit of self-esteem. What, then, determines whether people engage in the momentary pursuit of self-esteem? My own view is that people are most likely to pursue self-esteem when their self-es-

teem is contingent, they want to meet a particular contingency, and the immediate environment is perceived as providing opportunities to satisfy this salient contingency. In contrast to Crocker and Nuer, I believe that people (especially adults) can choose whether to endorse contingencies as bases for their self-esteem. Sometimes, people do not know that they have a choice, and they blindly accept contingencies imposed upon them by others. In other cases, people learn that they have a choice, and they override preexisting contingencies. One component of this learning process is becoming aware of the specific contingency (or contingencies) that underlies self-esteem. A second component involves getting in touch both emotionally and cognitively with one's experience when satisfying or falling short of one's contingencies. A third component involves knowing and accepting that no logical connection exists between any one specific outcome and global implications for one's feelings of self-worth. Many people have self-esteem contingencies thrust upon them as children. As adults, however, people have the choice whether they will continue to "own" these contingencies for themselves. Should they "disown" these contingencies, they are better able to maintain the fundamental sense that they are worthwhile and valuable individuals (Ryan & Brown, this issue). This latter option seems much more desirable than having contingent feelings of self-worth that are bounced around by the vicissitudes of everyday evaluative events.

Heatherton and Wyland (this issue) are skeptical about the importance of studying optimal self-esteem because they believe that very few people have it. However, I am not convinced that the putative rarity of optimal self-esteem (which ultimately is an empirical issue) is a valid indicator of its importance. People's standings on many psychological constructs are normally distributed, which means that very few score especially high or low. Very few people are geniuses, but this does not detract from the importance of conceptualizing genius and the factors that facilitate or interfere with its emergence. In addition, recent work on positive emotions has underscored the need to understand positive emotions in their own right, rather than as mere opposites of negative emotions. Likewise, I think that we can learn a great deal from studying both the optimal and detrimental features of high self-esteem.

Does Contingent Self-Esteem Have an Up Side?

I emphasized the fragile nature of contingent high self-esteem and its link to introjected and external self-regulatory strategies (see also Ryan & Brown, this issue). Similarly, Crocker and Nuer insightfully describe the downside of directly pursuing self-esteem.

Other commentators, however, focus on the potentially more sanguine features of contingent self-esteem. In their commentary, Tafarodi and Ho argue (this issue) that effective socialization hinges upon experiencing shame and guilt. They suggest that without shame, guilt, and self-disapproval, emotional reactions to failure and disapproval would lack the "force required to shape behavior and guide moral development" (this issue). Arndt and Schimel argue that "self-esteem that is contingent on achieving high performance standards may in some contexts lead to achievements that benefit everyone in the culture" (this issue). They also suggest that self-esteem that is contingent on performance or social validation may be necessary to develop the skills and abilities needed to promote success.

From a self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Brown, this issue; Ryan & Deci, 2002), effective socialization entails values and mores of significant others and the culture becoming part of the integrated self and providing the basis for autonomous, self-determined behavior. Shame and guilt occur when these regulations are taken in as introjects but not integrated with the self. "Regulations that have been taken in by an individual but not integrated with the self would not be the basis for autonomous self-regulation, but instead would function more as controllers of behavior" (Ryan & Deci, p. 15). In other words, shame, guilt, and self-disapproval reflect introjected self-regulation that is associated with lower psychological health and well-being compared with autonomy-based forms of self-regulation (Ryan & Deci). Importantly, an individual who is functioning autonomously is not synonymous with an individual who ignores all social customs, mores, and values. Rather, autonomous functioning characterizes people who have internalized formerly external regulations as personally important and freely endorsed. I would add that to have optimal self-esteem does not mean that one is insensitive to the needs, values, and prescriptions of others. In fact, I believe that optimal self-esteem promotes the capacity to be more fully engaged with others in meaningful and valuable exchanges that are mutually satisfying.

With respect to achievement, Ryan and Brown (this issue) note that while self-esteem contingencies can be very powerful motivators of performance, they come with a price. People who are motivated by self- and other-based approval contingencies (i.e., introjects) feel tense and pressured in their goal strivings (Kernis et al., 2000). Research on heightened ego-involvement (e.g., Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991) has shown that when participants are told that their task performance will be used to judge their valued attributes, they become highly motivated to prove themselves, yet they experience more negative affect and less intrinsic motivation, and they feel more pressured. In short, when individuals pursue achievement to feel worthwhile, their efforts in-

evitably are not fully satisfying because they are compulsive and driven rather than volitional (Ryan & Brown, this issue). I suggest that great achievements may also be motivated out of "love for the game" rather than for tangible external rewards or contingencies.

What Is Optimal About Optimal Self-Esteem?

Several commentators question my characterization of optimal self-esteem as positive feelings of self-worth that are relatively stable on a daily basis, are accompanied by positive implicit feelings of self-worth, and are not dependent upon specific achievements or outcomes. Crocker and Nuer are concerned that "viewing optimal self-esteem in this way can trigger an anxious and self-centered focus on getting something for the self." Certainly people can feel pressured to obtain their own vision of optimal self-esteem. If they achieve their vision under such duress, however, my guess is that they would not possess optimal self-esteem as I described it. Ryan and Brown note the paradox surrounding optimal self-esteem—if one purposely seeks it out, one is unlikely to be successful. In their view, purposely seeking high self-esteem probably reflects compensatory efforts to alleviate the unfulfilled satisfaction of basic needs for self-determination, competence, and relatedness (see also Kernis, 2000). As Herman Hesse (1951) described in his book *Siddhartha*, purposely seeking answers to questions about one's path in life is often stifling and blinding, whereas allowing the answers to "come to oneself" is often more informative and enlightening. Likewise, allowing optimal self-esteem to "come to oneself" through experiencing oneself as authentic in one's daily life is likely to reap more benefits than seeking optimal self-esteem *per se*.

Heine (this issue) raises the possibility that the nature of optimal self-esteem may vary from culture to culture. In his words

Authentic high self-esteem is optimal in North America because the cultural environment there affords a better payoff compared with other kinds of self-esteem. In contrast, behaving in situationally appropriate ways (e.g., Suh, 2000) and maintaining a self-critical perspective (e.g., Heine et al., 2001) yields a good (and perhaps optimal) payoff in Japan because of the contingencies between the self-concept and cultural environment there. (this issue)

Unfortunately, these conclusions are based on studies that did not distinguish between fragile and secure forms of high self-esteem. Heine's commentary reinforces the importance of making this distinction when examining cultural differences in self-esteem.

LaGuardia and Ryff (this issue) think that the components of self-esteem may be related to health in more complex ways than I suggested. Specifically, they propose that self-esteem threats may prompt “natural” self-esteem instability as they lead people to reexamine themselves. They further suggest that this instability may promote growth and psychological health to the extent that it leads people to access their true self and to integrate or reject the threatening information. I believe that LaGuardia and Ryff are on target in their discussion of how accessing the self to examine the implications of potentially threatening information can promote growth. Where I diverge from them is in their assertion that for this process to occur, self-esteem *must* suffer, even if only briefly. My view is more in line with that espoused by Koole and Kuhl, who suggest that secure self-esteem may “safeguard the person’s cognitive access to the self and thereby foster authentic functioning ... [by acting] ... as a vital self-regulatory mechanism that helps individuals to stay in touch with their inner feelings and needs, particularly during stressful episodes” (this issue).

I emphasized the role that authenticity provides as the basis for optimal self-esteem. However, I believe that authenticity and secure high self-esteem likely are reciprocally related to each other. That is, authenticity may provide both the foundation for achieving secure high self-esteem and the processes through which secure high self-esteem relates to psychological and interpersonal adjustment. Besides collecting validity data for our authenticity scale, my colleagues and I will conduct research to examine its relationships with optimal high self-esteem and various indices of psychological and interpersonal adjustment. These studies will allow us to examine potentially reciprocal relations between authenticity and secure high self-esteem.

Murray and Rose (this issue) focus on the possibility that optimal self-esteem may actually promote some forms of defensiveness within intimate relationships. “Specifically, we suspect that people with a more authentic sense of self may be more likely to engage in the types of defensive partner-enhancement processes that are critical for relationship well-being” (this issue). And, later, they state that “intimates with optimal self-esteem may more readily compensate for difficulties and restore a sense of felt security in their relationships through defensive cognitions and approach behaviors aimed at enhancing the value of the relationship” (this issue). They report data from several studies showing that individuals with high self-esteem respond to threatening information by becoming more convinced of their partners’ continued acceptance, essentially using their relationships as a resource for self-affirmation. These findings are interesting and important in their own right. Unfortunately, none of the studies reviewed by Murray and Rose include a

way to distinguish between fragile and secure forms of fragile high self-esteem. Thus, a full understanding of how optimal self-esteem relates to defensiveness within relationships awaits future research. I would like to see these studies assess nondefensive reactions as well, such as attempts to verify the existence of threats and to work through potential conflicts. I suspect that, compared to fragile forms of high self-esteem, optimal self-esteem will relate to greater use of these nondefensive reactions and to lesser use of the defensive reactions described by Murray and Rose (see also Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

Can Narcissism Provide an Alternative Framework for Understanding Fragile and Optimal Self-Esteem?

Rhodewalt and Tragakis (this issue) and Tracey and Robins (this issue) address some commonalities that exist between narcissism and fragile self-esteem. As I noted in my article and elsewhere (Kernis, 2001), although I believe that various forms of fragile self-esteem tap into an aspect of the “narcissistic experience,” I do not believe that singularly, or in combination, they are the same as narcissism. Tracey and Robins take exception to my position and present a developmentally based model of narcissism in which they incorporate the various forms of fragile self-esteem that I discussed in my article. Although I found many aspects of their model appealing, I had some difficulty with their temporal ordering of the emergence of specific forms of fragile self-esteem. As they put it

Briefly, particular early childhood experiences and, possibly, temperamental characteristics contribute to the development of the narcissistic personality, which is characterized by defensive self-esteem and a dissociation between implicit and explicit self-representations (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001b). These defensive processes and dissociated self-representations contribute to contingent self-esteem, which in turn leads to fluctuations in self-esteem over time, that is, to unstable self-esteem. (this issue)

I believe that the relationship among these forms of fragile self-esteem is more complex than their unidirectional temporal ordering suggests. I described some of these complexities in my target article. I do think Tracy and Robins raise an important question regarding how to conceptualize the interrelationships among these variables. In fact, my colleagues and I currently are in the process of collecting data to answer this question. In the meantime, I remain reluctant to use the construct of narcissism as an overarching framework for understanding fragile and optimal self-esteem. One reason for my reluctance is that narcissism connotes the posses-

sion of inflated self-esteem, a sense of entitlement, and ongoing feelings of superiority over others, none of which necessarily characterize people with unstable or contingent high self-esteem (in the absence of threat). Even more important, the construct of narcissism is mute with respect to those qualities that characterize optimal self-esteem. Specifically, being low on narcissism does not mean that one has optimal self-esteem. In fact, research has shown that low narcissism is related to low self-esteem (John & Robins, 1994; Kernis & Sun, 1994). Ideally, a complete framework should address both fragile and optimal self-esteem.

Is a Multifaceted View of High Self-Esteem Parsimonious?

LaGuardia and Ryff question the utility of maintaining distinctions among various types of high self-esteem (see also Tracey & Robins, this issue). Specifically, they suggested that the dimensions of stability, defensiveness, contingency, and implicit are likely to reflect overlapping dimensions and so may “perpetuate an unwieldy rather than parsimonious conceptualization of self-esteem” (this issue). The issue of parsimony is an important one. The extent to which these dimensions are markers for the same underlying construct (degree of optimal self-esteem) is an important question that my colleagues and I are in the process of investigating. A number of outcomes are possible. First, these dimensions may not load on the same latent factor, showing that they are distinguishable components of self-esteem. Second, they may load highly on a single latent factor, indicating that they represent multiple indicators of a single underlying construct. Third, they may load on the same latent construct but to a degree low enough that a multicomponent conceptualization is warranted. This last outcome would provide evidence for a broad latent construct of optimal self-esteem, while simultaneously providing support for treating the dimensions as valid indicators of different, but interrelated, aspects of self-esteem (similar to what emerged for a multicomponent conceptualization of psychological well-being; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Note that a similar scenario exists with respect to our measure of authenticity.

Even if we found that these dimensions are best characterized as multiple indicators of a single underlying construct, this would not necessarily mean that maintaining distinctions among them is not justified. First, including multiple indicators would increase the measurement reliability of the manifest or observable construct. Second, research that examines the interrelations among these dimensions has already yielded important findings. Crocker and her colleagues, for example, showed that specific contingencies interact with specific contextual events to heighten unstable self-esteem (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Third, as I described in my target article, many inter-

esting questions can be examined regarding the interplay of these dimensions. Fourth, existing research shows that the overlap among several of these dimensions is not considerable (e.g., r between stability and contingent self-esteem = .24; defensiveness as measured by scores on the Crowne–Marlowe Desirability scale is unrelated to self-esteem instability).

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Authenticity and Implicit Self-Esteem

Several cogent concerns were raised about how best to conceptualize and operationalize the constructs of authenticity and implicit self-esteem. Tafarodi and Ho question the possibility 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 issue). The crux of Tafarodi and Ho’s view is that implicit self-esteem is not a separate form of self-esteem. Instead, they argue that we have one self-esteem 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 issue).

In a similar vein, Gregg (this issue) raises concerns about defining self-esteem as involving self-directed feelings of self-worth, liking, and acceptance, rather than as a summary evaluation (like attitude researchers) that manifests itself in affective, cognitive, and behavioral ways. Gregg’s concern aside, I believe that defining explicit self-esteem as feelings of self-worth, liking, and acceptance is preferable to defining it as a summary evaluation. My major concern is that our understanding of the richness of people’s feelings toward themselves would be sacrificed if self-esteem was reduced to a summary evaluation.

In addition, Greg notes the necessity for affect to be subjectively experienced, and so he takes exception to the notion that implicit self-esteem involves nonconscious affect. Presently, we know precious little about the properties of implicit self-esteem, and it may turn out that implicit and explicit self-esteem differ in ways other than whether they are conscious. Epstein and Morling (1995), for example, suggested that implicit self-esteem is more primitive and nonrational than its explicit counterpart. Gregg’s commentary raises some interesting questions that researchers and theorists interested in implicit self-esteem would do well to address. For example, does implicit self-esteem necessarily take the same form as explicit self-esteem? Relatedly, if one prefers to define explicit self-esteem in terms of “feelings of self-worth, liking, and acceptance,” can one do the same for implicit self-esteem? Is implicit self-esteem more affected than explicit self-esteem by events that occur outside people’s awareness? Conversely, is explicit self-esteem more affected than implicit self-esteem by events of which people are aware?

Weinberger (this issue) also offers a number of interesting predictions that follow from embedding implicit self-esteem into larger attitude and motivation literatures. I wholeheartedly agree with this approach and with the notion that implicit measures used in other domains (e.g., story telling) can be fruitfully applied to implicit self-esteem. Weinberger also raises some important questions regarding the use of self-reports to assess processes related to authenticity. This is an important issue that my colleagues and I plan to address, in part, by collecting validity data that do not depend upon self-reports. Beyond these efforts, I want to note that I recognize that a self-report measure of authenticity has the same inherent difficulties as the majority of self-report measures. Specifically, some people may deliberately misrepresent themselves or have limited access to the information upon which valid responses to the authenticity measure depend. Obtaining validity data is one way to deal with these difficulties. I presented initial data showing that scores on one of our fragility indices (contingent SE) are related to lower authenticity scores, particularly behavioral authenticity scores. However, I recognize that much more work needs to be done before concerns such as those raised by Weinberger can be adequately addressed. I trust that my resolve to address these concerns will not be regarded as naive. When I began my research program on stability of self-esteem more than 10 years ago, it also initially met with some skepticism. Specifically, the concern then raised was that what my colleagues and I were capturing with our stability measure was response unreliability. Data from many studies that yielded theoretically predicted findings carried out over the years has quieted this concern so that it is no longer an issue; self-esteem instability is recognized as having clear psychological implications. I am optimistic that we can do the same for our authenticity measure by remaining sensitive to its limitations while carefully collecting validity data.

The Importance of Social and Nonsocial Factors in Promoting Optimal Self-Esteem

Leary (this issue) suggests that the three conditions I deemed important for developing optimal self-esteem (success dealing with life's challenges, the operation of one's true self, relationships in which people are valued for who they are) are important "because each is associated with feeling that one is relationally valued by other people." I agree that the interpersonal consequences of one's actions often have important implications for self-esteem. At the same time, I believe that the intrapersonal implications of one's actions are often underappreciated by self-esteem theorists and researchers. Successfully dealing with life's challenges

means that one is efficacious in a way that reflects one's true or core self. As one learns about one's skills and talents, feelings of worth and self-acceptance follow naturally from their expression (see also Rhodewalt & Tragakis, this issue). My view is that if people judge their successes primarily by whether they will be liked or accepted by others, success or failure is likely to lead to fragile (i.e., contingent) self-esteem.

Research by Lewis and his colleagues (as described in Lewis, 1993) raises the intriguing possibility that optimal self-esteem has its roots in infants' means-end ability, defined as "the infant's understanding of the relationship between his or her own activity and a desired object or goal" (p. 151). Means-end ability is thought to develop during the first two years of life. In the research conducted by Lewis and his colleagues, infants 2, 4, 6, and 8 months of age learned to pull a string that triggered a brief presentation of a smiling face accompanied by children singing. Infants in a yoked control condition received the same number of presentations of the smiling face and children singing, but these presentations were *unrelated* to the infants' string pulling. Thus, infants in the experimental, but not control, condition learned that their string pulling resulted in a desired outcome (i.e., they were successful). This initial learning phase was followed by an extinction phase and a second learning phase. Facial expressions of joy were recorded throughout the session. The findings showed that for children in the learning condition, facial expressions of joy increased from baseline during the initial learning phase, were absent during extinction, and increased again during the second learning phase. In stark contrast, no change from baseline occurred in facial expressions of joy among children in the yoked control condition. Thus, infants as young as 8 weeks old experienced increased joy because they caused a desired outcome through their own actions.

Although Lewis's (1993) research involved an unusual cause-effect, extrapolating from it may provide considerable insight into the meaning of "success" that I believe fosters optimal self-esteem. As infants develop into young children, a variety of physical, cognitive, emotional, and motivational capabilities become more complex and sophisticated. As developing children experience these changes, they may experience themselves as able and efficacious or as feeble and incompetent. Of course, social feedback can, and does, contribute to these experiences. This social feedback may be controlling and highly evaluative, in which case, even if it is positive, it will undermine the security of the child's self-esteem, or it may be informational and noncontrolling, in which case it will foster authenticity and the development of optimal self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985). I believe that apart from social feedback, children's experience of themselves as efficacious and volitional in bringing about desired ef-

fects contributes to optimal self-esteem. Self-esteem researchers and theorists have justifiably placed a great deal of importance on the facilitating or undermining role of the social environment. In my view, however, more attention should be focused on the individual as an efficacious agent of action in both social and nonsocial contexts (for exceptions, see Deci & Ryan, 1995; Rhodewalt & Tragakis, this issue).

As individuals progress through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, they experience multiple self-esteem "moments" that have important implications for the nature of their self-esteem (cf. Mruk, 1999). These moments may challenge or affirm their sense of authenticity and well-being. Depending upon how these challenges are resolved, individuals may proceed further down the path toward either optimal or fragile (or low) self-esteem. No matter whether these "moments" are challenges or affirmations, they provide significant opportunities for growth and self-understanding. People may choose to ignore these opportunities, by, for example, impulsively conforming to social pressures or attacking the source of a perceived threat. Alternatively, people may take advantage of these opportunities by trying to get "in touch with" their true or core selves. To the extent that individuals consult their feelings and motives when deciding how to respond, they are tapping into the potential to develop more optimal self-esteem. Ultimately, their responses may follow social dictates, but if they are freely chosen and fully informed by their true self, they reflect authenticity. Authenticity, in turn, is a vital ingredient in promoting optimal self-esteem. Thus, optimal self-esteem reflects, in part, the culmination of people's experiences of themselves as authentic in these self-esteem "moments," rather than the effect of ongoing internal or external pressures or contingencies.

Final Comments

Interest in the nature of self-esteem and its role in psychological functioning continues to grow. Increasingly, complex answers are being offered for what once seemed like simple questions. For example, the belief that high self-esteem is unequivocally desirable is no longer cast in stone, as researchers and theorists from various perspectives have acknowledged the existence of a potential downside to high self-esteem. In my target article, I attempted to consolidate these various viewpoints and to provide a framework for understanding what is adaptive or optimal about high self-esteem and authenticity. Not surprisingly, aspects of this framework were challenged by a highly astute group of commentators. I have offered my reaction here to some of the issues raised by these commentators. My hope is that the framework I presented, along with the issues that commentators raised, will stimulate extensive examination of the adaptive and detrimental features of high self-esteem. I am convinced

that these efforts will contribute greatly to our understanding of the roles that self-esteem and authenticity play in healthy psychological functioning.

Notes

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