Why We Don't Need Self-Esteem:
On Fundamental Needs, Contingent Love, and Mindfulness

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Self-esteem would appear to be a laudable quality. Indeed, from a superficial view, what could be wrong with esteeming the self? Esteeming oneself would seem akin to the other prescriptions of modern social-cognitive psychology: Be optimistic; hold positive illusions; expect success; feel efficacious; be happy. But like many of these "positive" prescriptions, the admonition to esteem oneself is more complex and problematic than it seems.

We believe that Kernis (this issue), in working to disentangle the issues of level of self-esteem from its stability, has brought some of the problematic dynamics of "self-esteeming" into the forefront. Our comments, derived from both self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Buddhist perspectives, suggest some reasons why.

Extending the issues raised by Kernis, previous SDT formulations of contingent and noncontingent self-esteem (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995), and our recent findings concerning mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), we suggest that when self-esteeming processes are salient there is something awry with self-regulation, and with well-being. Based on SDT, we argue that, although self-evaluation is a "natural" human tendency with both evolutionary (Sedikedes & Skowronski, 2000) and developmental (Ryan & Kuzckowski, 1994) foundations, ongoing concern with the worth of the self is a byproduct of need deprivation or conflict. Specifically, the salience of processes in which the self is esteemed or disparaged is etiologically linked with the experience of contingent regard by significant others. We hypothesize that contingent regard increases one's proneness to *introjection*, a form of behavioral regulation in which one's actions are motivated by desires to gain (or not lose) self or other approval. Introjection, in turn, leaves one vulnerable to exogenous social pressures, the pursuit of unfulfilling goals, and the inauthentic living that can follow from them. Based on Buddhist perspectives, we further suggest that regulation based on mindfulness, rather than on contingent self-regard, is associated with healthier and more vital living, and provides a basis for acting more authentically.

Self-as-Object; Self-as-Process

The dominant view of self in Western psychology is that of the "self-as-object" (McAdams, 1990). Derived primarily from the work of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902), this tradition describes the self as a concept that is largely internalized from the reactions and opinions of others. One's *self-concept* can be positive or negative, simple or complex. Yet, whatever its structure or valence, self-concepts are defined as involving, in part, appraisals and evaluations of one's being and attributes, and it is these evaluative schema that constitute self-esteem. These appraisals regarding worth can be relatively generalized (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965) or domain specific (Harter, 1993). In either case, the common view is: the more positive, the better.

In contrast to the self-as-object perspective is another take on self derived from developmental and organismic theorizing—the self-as-process (e.g., Blasi, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Loevinger, 1976). Researchers in the self-as-process tradition view the self not merely as a concept, or as an object of self-evaluation, but as the very process of assimilation and integration. The self represents the integrative core of the person and entails ongoing activities of extending, assimilating, and bringing meaning and coherence to life experiences. Thus, in this view, the self is both an inherent tendency and a dynamic, synthetic process. SDT has specifically focused on the conditions that support the integrative tendencies that characterize the self, versus those under which these tendencies or functions are compromised (Ryan, 1995).

Taking the self-as-process perspective, the question becomes not merely how high or low is self-esteem, but what is one doing when evaluating the self as an object? In this view, the very process of placing one's self in the role of object, and then evaluating "its" worth, is a motivated act. Indeed, apart from being handed a self-esteem survey by a psychologist, many people would not spontaneously ask themselves, "How worthy am I?" When they do, the question is, why do they? There are also people who are preoccupied with their worth. They regularly appraise themselves, compare themselves with others, and struggle to ward off threats to a positive view of self. Whether such individuals come away with positive or negative conclusions, the very fact that one's esteem is in question suggests a psychological vulnerability. This is consistent with Kernis's thesis, as it suggests that when self-esteem is a salient concern it is problematic, and likely to be contingent, unstable, and vulnerable. In contrast, optimal health is more likely when self-esteem is not a concern because the worth of the self is not at issue.

Self-Determination Theory

Such considerations led us to distinguish within SDT two "types" of self-esteem (see Deci & Ryan, 1995). *Contingent self-esteem* is experienced by people who are preoccupied with questions of worth and esteem, and who see their worth as dependent upon reaching certain standards, appearing certain ways, or accomplishing certain goals. It is not just that they are motivated, but also that they are strongly motivated by the desire to appear worthy to self and others. *Noncontingent self-esteem*, in contrast, characterizes persons for whom the issue of self-esteem is not salient, largely because they experience themselves on a fundamental level as worthy of esteem and love. Successes and failures do not implicate their self-worth, even when they lead to a reevaluation of actions and efforts.

In the vocabulary of SDT, motivation driven by self-esteem contingencies is a form of introjected regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Connell, 1989). In introjection one acts to gain (or avoid losing) self and other regard, rather than to satisfy intrinsic motivation (interest) or fulfill identifications (personal values). Introjection represents one part of the personality pushing other parts around, using the sense of worth (pride) as its rewards and self-criticism (shame, guilt) as punishments. According to SDT, introjection is a controlled form of motivation marked by inner conflict, pressure, and fluctuating feelings about the self. Nonetheless, introjection can be highly motivating, as people will go to great lengths to maintain positive feelings of worth.

Introjection represents the internalization of the contingent regard of significant others. If a mother, for example, showers loving praise on her daughter following a success, yet shuns or disparages her following failure, than she sets the stage for her child to subsequently treat herself as she has been treated. The daughter is likely to develop the intrapsychic tendency to shun or love her own self contingently. SDT further suggests that a child will be particularly prone to introjection the more he or she desires relatedness to the parent. Thus parents who are merely hostile or neglectful will typically fail to inspire any internalization, including introjection, because they have supplied no motivational basis for the adoption of the standards or values they hold. Indeed, it is often the most "invested" parents, who, if they are also psychologically controlling, engender the strongest forms of introjection (e.g., Strauss & Ryan, 1987).

In the SDT view, when people have experienced significant others as loving or valuing them contingently, the more actively they engage in esteeming or disesteeming themselves, and the more approval or recognition of worth begins to "feel like a need." As Kernis suggests, narcissistic personalities exemplify this dynamic. Narcissists require continuous affirmation from others to "stay afloat" psychologically. Accordingly, they often pursue accomplishment, power, or attractiveness in order to be affirmed. Yet, even when the narcissist succeeds in obtaining approval, the approval provides only a temporary affective buoy. Even in less extreme cases, many people are regularly motivated or driven by the concern with what others think about them, or with meeting the internalized standards that have been associated with felt approval.

This dynamic is so familiar that many motivators (e.g., teachers, parents, bosses, and coaches) manipulate it to control behavior or ensure compliance. For example, teachers often publicly compare students' performance or convey contingent regard for students who achieve or behave according to their standards. Parents often express their love and caring when their child succeeds at parentally valued tasks, whereas they meet failure with disapproval or withdrawal, rather than support and understanding. Coaches often control athletes through evaluative social comparisons and contingent praise or disparagement. There is no question here that introjection, like more tangible rewards and punishments (see Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999), can motivate many behaviors. It is simply that, like tangible rewards and punishments, there are "hidden costs" behind compliance based on control through contingent self and other approval.

Experiments on ego-involvement (e.g., Ryan, 1982; Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991) demonstrate this "double-edged" form of regulation. In such experiments, participants are led to believe that valued attributes will be judged by their performance at a task, and accordingly, they often become strongly motivated to prove themselves. At the same time their affect is more negative, their intrinsic motivation undermined, and their effort more pressured and unstable. Thus ego-involvement motivates but in a controlling manner, and it is gains or losses in self-esteem that supply the basis of the control. Ego-involvement is, however, just a specific instance of introjected regulation and of behavior driven by contingencies of self and other regard. In all introjection, the person is motivated to protect feelings of worth that are experienced as "on the line," a dynamic potentiated when socializers, knowingly or unconsciously, use contingent regard as a regulatory strategy.

Studies by Assor, Roth, and Deci (in press) illustrate this phenomenon. Based on SDT, Assor et al. hypothesized that children's perceptions of their parents use of conditional regard would result in introjected internalization of behavioral regulations, more negative feelings toward parents, and lower well-being. Results supported this view, showing that students' perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' conditional regard in important life domains were related to feelings of internal compulsion and pressure to enact behaviors, feeling rejected by and resentment toward parents, and

greater fluctuations in self-esteem. In a second study, mothers' reports of their own parents' use of conditional regard predicted (a) poorer well-being and more controlling parenting attitudes in the mothers themselves, and (b) their daughters' viewing them as using conditional regard. These results suggest that use of conditional regard as a socializing practice yields self-esteem instability and is readily transmitted from generation to generation.

Research by Grolnick and Apostoleris (2002) compliments these results. For example, they conducted an experiment in which some mothers were induced to be ego-involved in their children's performance at a laboratory task. Ego-involvement led mothers to be more pressuring and controlling with their children, a trend that was especially strong for mothers whose style was less autonomy-supportive to begin with. Maternal controllingness led, in turn, to diminished motivation and creativity in children. Thus, it appears that when caregivers experience their own self-esteem to be contingent on their children's performance or accomplishments, they are likely to become more controlling, creating the very conditions that contribute to the development of an introjected regulatory style in their children.

Why Self-Esteem Is Not a Need

SDT posits that there are basic psychological needs in development, defined as those psychological and social supports or nutriments that are required or essential for optimal growth, integrity, and well-being. Also, to be a need, the nutriment must be nonderivative and, thus, the basic "satisfier" responsible for the functional advantage regarding growth, integrity, or well-being. According to SDT, the most basic of these needs are those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the experience of volition, ownership, and initiative in one's own behavior, and is facilitated when people are not coercively or seductively controlled and when choices are afforded when possible. Competence refers to the experience of being able to effectively act on, and have an impact within, one's environment. It is facilitated by optimal challenges and by positive, effectance-relevant feedback. Relatedness refers to feelings of belonging and connection, and is facilitated by the conveyance of acceptance, warmth, or caring.

Each of these three constructs has shown itself to fit the definition of a need or a necessary nutriment for growth, integrity, and well-being. Numerous field and experimental studies have shown that variations in need satisfaction account for substantial variance in self-motivation, adjustment, and integrity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Further, diary studies show that even at a within-subjects level of analysis, fluctuations in basic need satisfaction for autonomy, competence, and relatedness predict fluctuations in well-being (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Finally, cross-cultural work (e.g., Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2000) has suggested that in diverse cultures, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are among the four most nominated attributes of highly satisfying events. Interestingly, Sheldon and colleagues (2000) found that the other attribute within the top four most nominated across nations was self-esteem.

Despite this, SDT does not view self-esteem as a need, even though some have suggested it should (e.g., Anderson, Chen, & Carter, 2000; Psyzczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). Indeed, as implied earlier, the salience of self-esteem to a person is expected from the SDT framework to be a sign of need deficiencies, rather than of need fulfillment. Furthermore, self-esteem fits few of the criteria of a basic need. First, it is not invariably associated with greater growth, integrity, or well-being, as Kernis notes. The search for self-esteem often leads people to engage in activities they don't value or endorse, but of which others approve, fostering a vulnerability to conformity, risky behaviors, or self-compromising acts. Second, in the SDT view, self-esteem is a derivative or byproduct of need dynamics rather than being itself a basic need. A person who experiences considerable support for relatedness, autonomy, and competence will no doubt have high self-esteem, as our own results have shown (Ryan & Deci, 2001). However, when competence, autonomy, or relatedness need fulfillment is thwarted, one's experience of self-worth is also damaged, leading to either insecure or low self-esteem.

The very importance of having a psychology of basic needs lies in the fact that by positing them, one can make dynamic predictions about what happens when they are met or unmet. By positing needs one can have a theoretical basis for interpreting what behaviors are substitute forms of fulfillment, what are compensations, and what are truly authentic motivations. In fact, the failure of most modern "cognitive" psychology to posit any needs at all, and rather to treat all motives as "equal" (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser & Deci, 1996), has led to an impoverished depth to our models of human behavior.

The need for depth thinking is no where more obvious than in the psychology of self-esteem. Much behavior in modern societies can be dynamically understood as an attempt, albeit often indirect, to get basic needs met. People work endlessly to buy possessions that they hope others will admire; they exercise and diet incessantly to gain bodies that others might desire; they pressure themselves to achieve or gain status, in hopes that this will bring to them the sense of love or control that is somehow absent. This may not occur at a conscious level, though sometimes it does. But it is a motivational dynamic that, in either case,

cannot be understood without positing that there are some nutriments so basic that people will twist themselves into a pretzel to experience them. A psychology of basic needs provides the dynamic framework capable of interpreting the meaning of self-esteem and its mixed effects.

When dynamically considered, self-esteem concerns appear as the result of need deprivation. Contingent regard entails the withholding of relatedness, and it typically runs over autonomy. One can pursue the withheld relatedness by introjecting or complying with others' standards or values. However, in this, dynamic autonomy is pitted against relatedness, such that the search for esteem blocks rather than enhances growth. Any of us who spent time during adolescence "impressing" our friends may recall how the desire for esteem not only can inhibit growth, it may lead to risky and sometimes regressive behaviors. Similarly, one may pursue achievement as a means of feeling worthwhile. But because true self-esteem and security lies in knowing that one is worthwhile regardless of the outcomes one attains—in short, in being (and having felt) unconditionally loveable or worthy—then such achievement inevitably doesn't fully satisfy. Instead it often takes on an addictive quality and becomes compulsive and driven rather than volitional.

Several strands of research within SDT illustrate such dynamics. For example, materialists are people who place a high value on amassing wealth and possessions relative to their values for the more basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). According to SDT, people high in materialism are insecure—and to compensate for it they strive for visible signs of worth and status (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). This hypothesis has been supported by well-replicated findings that, even when people are successful in amassing material goods, the attainment of such goods does not in itself yield happiness or well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Even more relevant is the finding (Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995) that teens who embrace materialism have backgrounds characterized by an absence of parental warmth (relatedness deficiency) and excessive control (autonomy deficiency). Similarly, investigations of various clinical issues, from eating disorders to obsessive-compulsive personality, implicate deprivations of, or conflicts between, basic psychological needs (Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995).

Beyond Self-Esteem

Essentially we are arguing that esteeming the self is a risky business. High contingent self-esteem leads people to be engaged in ongoing acts that at best temporarily reassure them of their worth. Alternatively, people with low self-esteem are lacking in supports for, and satisfactions of, one or more of the basic needs for autonomy, competence, or relatedness. They thus don't feel worthy, as they are missing a sense of love, authenticity, or effectiveness. Thus, high or low, concern with self-esteem will be associated with its temporal fluctuation, its contingent character, and, therefore, its instability and vulnerability. Thus, a paradox of self-esteem: If you need it, you don't have it, and if you have it, you don't need it.

What might it look like to operate without concern with self-esteem? In such a scenario, when standards are not met, failures occur, or rejections are experienced, one can experience disappointment, feel sadness and loss, or question and reevaluate one's actions—but the self as a whole is not made into an object, and then disparaged. Reciprocally, when one meets standards, succeeds at valued tasks, or is positively regarded by others, one can feel pleased, energized, or excited without the necessity of "inflating" the self, puffing up one's prideful ego, or other forms of ego-enhancement. Like parents who praise their child's efforts or products ("What a great job!") rather than the child's self or person ("What a good girl or boy!"), healthy self-regulation is not about judging one's worth as a whole. Instead, it entails taking interest in what one has been up to and what has occurred, including its effects and meaning.

True Self and No Self: Self-Determination, Buddhism, and Mindfulness

Such considerations derived from SDT converge well with Buddhist perspectives on the regulation of behavior. For instance, in discussing Buddhist perspectives on psychotherapy, Hanh (1998) commented that traditional Western therapies address the problem of low self-esteem. In contrast, he asserted that Buddhist approaches view both high and low self-esteem as problematic. Similarly, in SDT, one is fully functioning when acting authentically—both in accord with one's own interests or values, and with respect to what is authentically or "really" happening to oneself. In the SDT view, action driven by esteem-related contingencies is inauthentic, regardless of whether it enhances or diminishes one's self-image.

Consider what is occurring when one constructs and appraises an image of "Me" (that is, a self-concept). Often, the constructed Me dominates experience, and the awareness that it is a creation of thought is simply lost. For example, a young man who has just experienced rejection tells a friend that he is a "loser" who "doesn't deserve happiness." In this he has created an image of himself, which he then takes to be "real." Equally fooled is the person who consoles himself with the idea that that he is a good and moral person, as if

those were inherent characteristics. No matter how descriptive these constructions might seem, they are incomplete and biased, and they represent only one way of construing the self at any given time. When mistaken as "real," the fact that they are motivated creations is forgotten.

The question then becomes: Would we want to esteem, or recommend that others esteem, the filtered, partial, inevitably distorted sense of self that the mind has created? This goes beyond a discussion of the techniques often used to enhance well-being. It suggests that the reified self itself is problematic. If one recognizes that the Me is a creation of thought, as are one's reactions to events, defenses, identities, and so on, then there appears to be a deeper sense of self that is operational, one that Buddhist psychological theory and practice has affirmed is the ground upon which all mental activity, self-related or otherwise, takes place (Epstein, 1995).

This idea of a deeper self bears on Kernis's discussion of optimal self-esteem. Recognizing the limitations and pitfalls of both low and some forms of high self-esteem, Kernis suggests that optimal self-esteem (secure high self-esteem) is advanced through such authentic actions as awareness of self and the unbiased processing of self-related information. Through such actions, "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self" (this issue) is enhanced.

We agree with aspects of this formulation. To be sure, contingent self-esteem leads to nonautonomous forms of regulation such as introjection. By contrast, more autonomous self-regulation depends upon a fuller processing of the values of action, and of one's motivations. That is, in healthy self-regulation the person is focused not only on what others approve of, but also on one's own abiding values, pressing needs, and the true demands of the situation. The more informed and full one's awareness, the more likely that behavior that follows from it is autonomous and well integrated (Ryan, 1995). In fact, openness to experiencing what "is" in the present moment, without defending against it, facilitates integrated functioning, aiding the ability to act congruently with respect to one's perceptions, goals, and values (Hodgins & Knee, 2002).

One way to characterize such fuller awareness is the concept of *mindfulness* (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hodgins & Knee, 2002). Mindfulness entails an open, nonjudgmental awareness of what is occurring in the present. Mindfulness turned toward the mind's contents leads to the recognition that the Me is a mental construction and reveals that self-esteeming processes are themselves just mental activities that play out on the screen of awareness that this deeper self can observe. In mindfulness, and true self-determination, there is no fixed concept of self to protect or enhance; "all the facts are friendly" (Rogers, 1961, p. 25), and all inform one's experiences and behaviors. In contrast, as

long as one remains invested in a specific self concept ("I am *X*"), there will inevitably be times when one is not *X* or one does not live up to the image one has created. Thus, identification of one's self with a concept or image catalyzes defensive activities that, although perhaps useful to preserving self-esteem, are not likely to serve many salutary ends, as research cited by Kernis shows. The true basis for well-being appears to be in stepping outside of the self-concept altogether. As Claxton (2000) noted, when the "chronically active" self system is disabled

> so too are all its defensive inhibitions and evasions. Thus one sees oneself clearly and honestly, without distortion or prevarication; but because these characteristics are not referred to a central, identified-with self, they are no longer interpreted as shameful personal attributes, but as inherent parts of one's own dappled uniqueness … . Both oneself and the world are experienced "warts and all"—and, being at last in possession of "the full facts," action is bound to be more skillful and appropriate. (p. 109)

Recently we (Brown & Ryan, 2003) investigated inter- and intrapersonal variations in mindfulness. In accord with our formulation mentioned previously, mindfulness was associated at both between- and within-person levels of analysis with more autonomous regulation, less introjection, and higher self-esteem. Further, mindfulness was associated both with greater satisfaction with one's own behavior and higher well-being. In contrast, those who were less mindful were more likely to be under the sway of self-esteem and approval motives, and were more likely to manifest poor decision making and experience lower well-being.

In sum, the self of "self-esteem" is a reification, a constructed image that leads people to be overly attached to achievements, possessions, and relationships despite the true impermanence and interdependent origins of such things. Optimal well-being from the both the Buddhist and SDT perspectives would lead us beyond self-esteem. Paradoxically, in Buddhism psychological health is often described as the recognition of no self—awareness that there is no permanent, real, or fixed self to latch onto—whereas in SDT such health is described as operating from one's true self—the authentic, spontaneous, and open integrative process. Although these seem, on the surface, to be contradictory ideas, both no self and SDT's true self represent regulation that is based upon reflective, wholistic processing in which action accords with awareness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As Epstein (1995) argued, a person who has understood the emptiness of self bears "an uncanny resemblance to what we expect in the West from those who have a highly developed sense of self" (p. 72). Our research reflects that, showing that a person who is acting in an integrated, mindful way seeks not self-esteem, but rather, right action, all things considered.

Note

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