

# Secure Versus Fragile High Self-Esteem as a Predictor of Verbal Defensiveness: Converging Findings Across Three Different Markers

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**ABSTRACT** Why is it that many individuals verbally rationalize and distort self-esteem threatening information? We examined whether such verbal defensiveness (Feldman Barrett, Williams, & Fong, 2002) differs as a function of whether individuals' high self-esteem is secure or fragile. Our findings indicated that individuals whose self-esteem was stable, not contingent, or congruent with high implicit self-esteem exhibited especially low amounts of verbal defensiveness. In contrast, verbal defensiveness was considerably higher when individuals' high self-esteem was unstable, contingent, or paired with discrepant low implicit self-esteem. Discussion centers on why the possession of well-anchored and secure high self-esteem obviates defensiveness directed toward enhancing, maintaining, or bolstering feelings of self-worth.

Although a perennial favorite of parents, therapists, educators, policy makers, and laypeople, high self-esteem has recently come under attack from several fronts. Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), for example, implicate high, not low, self-esteem in aggressive behavior. Likewise, Heatherton and Vohs (2000) report that individuals with high self-esteem become decidedly unlikable when others or events threaten their egos. Other challenges question the importance of self-esteem as a determinant of important life outcomes. In a review of the vast self-esteem literature, Baumeister,

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Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) conclude that although self-esteem relates to affect and motivation, it is not predictive of such markers of adaptive functioning as academic achievement and popularity.

While agreeing with Baumeister et al.'s (2003) conclusions, O'Brien, Bartoletti, Leitzel, and O'Brien (2006) maintain that most self-esteem researchers never claimed that self-esteem would be an important predictor of complex, but specific, behaviors such as academic performance. As these authors note, "Most self-esteem researchers have simply reported the modest-to-moderate (.10 – .40) correlations they observed between self-esteem and school performance and other specific markers of adaptation (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Coopersmith, 1967, 1981; Harter, 1999; O'Brien & Epstein, 1988). Correlations in the .10 to .40 range suggest that self-esteem could only have, at most, a modest causal relationship with variables like school performance and/or that school performance could, at most, only modestly affect global self-esteem levels" (p. 27). Furthermore, rather than self-esteem being a ubiquitous predictor of specific, yet complex, behaviors related to adaptation, O'Brien and his colleagues suggest that a more nuanced conclusion is appropriate. In their words, "Self-esteem may have some relevance, some of the time, with some individuals, in interaction with other variables, in terms of predicting such things as school performance" (p. 28).

Another approach to understanding the role of self-esteem in adaptive functioning, championed by Kernis and his colleagues (e.g., Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989; Kernis, 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991), and more recently by others (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002, 2005; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006) holds that multiple forms of high self-esteem exist, only some of which relate to positive psychological functioning. Briefly, one critical factor is the extent to which high self-esteem is *fragile* or *secure* (see Kernis, 2003). Individuals with fragile high self-esteem are willing to go to great lengths to defend their positive, yet vulnerable, feelings of self-worth. Defensiveness (e.g., anger and hostility) and other maladaptive processes (e.g., excessive reactivity to evaluative feedback) characterize these individuals. In contrast, individuals with secure high self-esteem like themselves "warts and

all,” and they have well-anchored feelings of self-worth that broadly relate to healthy psychological functioning and positive outcomes. The purpose of the research we report in this article is to examine the relevance of secure and fragile high self-esteem to individual differences in *verbal defensiveness* (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002). In the following sections, we elaborate on the distinction between secure versus fragile high self-esteem and describe the construct of verbal defensiveness and its assessment.

### Secure Versus Fragile High Self-Esteem

Recent theorists characterize secure high self-esteem as involving favorable feelings of self-worth that arise naturally from successfully dealing with life challenges, being authentic and expressing one's true self in everyday life, and having relationships in which one is valued for whom one is and not for what one achieves (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kernis, 2003; Rogers, 1959). In addition, individuals with secure high self-esteem are presumed to genuinely like and be happy with themselves, possess feelings of self-worth that are well anchored and relatively stable, and accept their weaknesses. Finally, individuals with secure high self-esteem do not feel a need to be superior to others; for these individuals, high self-esteem is a given and does not need to be validated on an everyday basis.

In contrast, fragile high self-esteem involves favorable, but shallow, feelings of self-worth that often fluctuate a good deal from day to day or within a given day (Kernis, 2005). For individuals with fragile high self-esteem, positive feelings of worth often depend on matching some criterion representing what it means to be worthy, such as excelling in academics or sports or being popular or attractive. Without continual validation through such things as achievements or compliments, individuals' feelings of self-worth may plummet (Deci & Ryan, 1995). To ward off such drops, individuals with fragile high self-esteem often overreact to perceived threats to their self-worth by becoming angry and either criticizing or attacking the source of the threat (Kernis, Granneman et al., 1989). Furthermore, protecting or bolstering these positive, yet fragile, feelings of worth can become all-consuming to these individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Given that high self-esteem can be either secure or fragile, an important question is how to assess which is operative. Three major ways have been proposed in the literature, to which we now turn.

*Stability of Self-Esteem*

(In)Stability of self-esteem reflects what Rosenberg (1986) called “barometric,” or short-term, fluctuations of self-esteem, and it is conceptualized as the dispositional tendency to experience substantial short-term fluctuations in immediate, or contextually based, feelings of self-worth (Kernis, 2005; Kernis, Granneman et al., 1989). The extent to which individuals experience variability in immediate feelings of self-worth across time is both theoretically and empirically distinct from their self-esteem level. Specifically, researchers predominantly assess self-esteem level at a single time point, and they instruct respondents to base their responses on how they “generally” or “typically” feel about themselves. Research has shown that individuals’ “baseline” (Rosenberg, 1986) self-esteem (i.e., level) changes very slowly, and it remains relatively stable over the life span (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Conversely, self-esteem stability is measured at multiple time-points (e.g., twice per day over the course of 4 to 5 days) in a more naturalistic context (i.e., not in a laboratory), and respondents are instructed to base their responses on how they feel “right now” or “at this moment.” Researchers calculate stability of self-esteem by computing the standard deviation of each individual’s total current self-esteem scores across these multiple time-points; higher standard deviations reflect greater short-term, contextually based, fluctuations in self-esteem (i.e., greater self-esteem instability).

The importance of self-esteem stability to both psychological and interpersonal functioning over and above self-esteem level is now well established. Greater self-esteem instability relates to greater anger and hostility proneness (Kernis, Granneman, et al., 1989), depression in the face of daily hassles (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000), and reactivity to both positive and negative events, especially those that concern self-esteem and social rejection (Greenier et al., 1999). Moreover, Kernis et al. (2000) found that individuals with unstable self-esteem possess lower self-concept clarity and engage in goal-related behaviors for less self-determined reasons than do individuals with stable self-esteem. Taken together, these and related findings indicate that individuals with unstable self-esteem possess fragile feelings of self-worth and that they are highly reactive to self-relevant events (for a summary of findings, see Kernis, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

*Self-esteem stability and secure versus fragile high self-esteem.* Most important for the present purposes, researchers have reported findings suggesting that individuals with unstable high self-esteem are more defensive and self-aggrandizing than are their stable high self-esteem counterparts, yet they are lower in psychological health and well-being. One manifestation of defensiveness is frequent outbursts of anger and hostility, which often are aimed at restoring damaged self-feelings (Felson, 1984; Feshbach, 1970). Kernis, Granneman et al. (1989) found that whereas unstable high self-esteem individuals scored the highest on several well-validated anger and hostility inventories (e.g., the Novaco Anger Inventory; Novaco, 1975), stable high self-esteem individuals scored the lowest, and stable and unstable low self-esteem individuals scored between these two extremes. Other research indicates that unstable high self-esteem individuals overreact and report greater desires to “get even” in response to hypothetical partner transgressions (Kernis, Goldman, & Paradise, 2006). Moreover, compared to those with stable high self-esteem, individuals with unstable high self-esteem self-aggrandize and report that they would be more likely to boast about a success to their friends (Kernis, Greenier, Herlocker, Whisenhunt, & Abend, 1997); after an actual success, they also are more likely to claim that they did so in spite of the operation of performance inhibiting factors (Kernis, Granneman, & Barclay, 1992). Notably, these enhanced tendencies toward self-glorification and aggressiveness do not translate into greater psychological health and well-being, consistent with the view that unstable high self-esteem is a form of *fragile* high self-esteem. Specifically, Paradise and Kernis (1999) administered Ryff’s (1989) multicomponent measure of psychological well-being along with measures of level and stability of self-esteem. Their findings indicated that whereas individuals with stable high self-esteem reported that they functioned in a highly autonomous manner, possessed a clear sense of meaning in their lives, related effectively within both their physical and social environments, and were highly self-accepting, the same was less true of individuals with unstable high self-esteem.

### *Contingent Self-Esteem*

Deci and Ryan (1995) argue that positive feelings of self-worth that depend on attaining specific outcomes or matching standards reflect

*contingent* (versus *true*) self-esteem. In Deci and Ryan's view, contingent high self-esteem is fragile because it only remains high if individuals meet certain internally imposed or externally based standards of worthiness. In other words, contingent high self-esteem is not well-anchored because it requires continual bolstering and validation. In fact, Deci and Ryan (1995) assert that individuals with contingent high self-esteem will rationalize or even distort potentially threatening information to avoid declines in feelings of self-worth (cf. Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002; Kernis, 2003). Unfortunately, excessive use of self-esteem protection processes can undermine self-determined behavior, intrinsic motivation, mastery, and psychological well-being (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 2000; Kernis, 2000, 2003; Molden & Dweck, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Research and theory (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) suggest that individual differences exist in the domains on which people base their self-esteem. For example, college students with high academic performance contingencies experience declines in their global feelings of self-worth when they learn of rejection by graduate schools (Crocker et al., 2002) and become less likable after they receive negative academic performance feedback (Park & Crocker, 2005). In addition, individuals high in contingent self-worth based on others' approval seek excessive relational reassurance from their partner and interpret benign information as rejecting, both of which serve to undermine their relationships (Crocker & Park, 2004).

Crocker and colleagues' research makes it evident that a within-persons approach that focuses on domain-specific contingent self-esteem has its utility. However, another approach focuses on individual differences in the overall extent to which one's feelings of self-esteem are contingent (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). In this vein, Paradise and Kernis (1999) created a measure (The Contingent Self-Esteem Scale; for a copy of the measure, see Kernis & Goldman, 2006) to assess the dispositional tendency to link feelings of self-worth to performance outcomes, evaluations by others, or meeting certain standards. Using this measure, researchers have demonstrated that contingent self-esteem mediates the relationship between external environmental pressures and drinking behaviors (Neighbors, Larimer, Markman Geisner, & Knee, 2004). Indeed, individuals with highly contingent self-esteem fall prey to external pressures for alcohol consumption, drink more frequently, and report greater

drinking problems than do individuals with less contingent self-esteem. Other research demonstrates that individuals high in contingent self-esteem feel especially badly following attraction-based social comparisons, irrespective of self-esteem level or self-reported feelings of attractiveness (Patrick, Neighbors, & Knee, 2004). Finally, Paradise (1999) found that individuals with highly contingent self-esteem, regardless of self-esteem level, become especially angry and hostile in response to evaluative threat.

*Contingent self-esteem and secure versus fragile high self-esteem.* Research examining the direct link between contingent high self-esteem and defensive processes is lacking. However, we believe that Deci and Ryan's (1995) account of individual differences in contingent self-esteem is compelling and that it has considerable implications for the distinction between secure and fragile high self-esteem (see also Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Paradise, 2002). However, other scholars (Arndt & Schimel, 2003; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; and Rhodewalt & Tragakis, 2003) assert that everyone has contingent self-esteem and that what differentiates people is the particular domain(s) on which their self-esteem is contingent. From this perspective, a measure of general overall contingency would have little or no value in discriminating between people with fragile versus secure high self-esteem; moreover, in this light, little reason exists for expecting convergence in findings across measures of individual differences in self-esteem stability and contingent self-esteem.

### *Implicit Self-Esteem*

The idea that certain psychological forces exist outside of conscious awareness (i.e., are implicit) is not new (e.g., Freud, 1915/1957; for historical summary, see Hetts & Pelham, 2001). Epstein (1990, 2006; Epstein & Morling, 1995) provides a general framework for both explicit and implicit self-systems, describing two distinct but interwoven psychological structures that "... operate in parallel and are interactive. Behavior is determined by their combined influence" (2006, p. 69). In Epstein's view, whereas the explicit self-system is cognitive and based on rational, conscious logic, the implicit self-system is experiential and based on nonconscious, affective experience (for a similar theory concerning dual attitudes in general, see Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Explicit self-esteem represents

feelings of self-worth that are within conscious awareness. In contrast, implicit self-esteem reflects automatic, overlearned, and non-conscious “affective associations about the self” (Pelham et al., 2005, p. 85; see also Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988; Spalding & Hardin, 1999).

One way to assess implicit self-esteem is the “Name Letter Effect” (NLE; Nuttin, 1987), based on the notion that “people’s positive associations about themselves spill over into their evaluations of objects associated with the self” (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002, p. 170). Specifically, individuals with high implicit self-esteem rate the letters in their own names higher than they do the other letters of the alphabet or than the normative rating for those letters. The NLE recently has been shown to be both reliable and valid (Bosson et al., 2000, 2003; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001) and not simply a function of mere-exposure (Jones et al., 2002).

Consistent with assertions made by Epstein and Morling (1995), researchers have demonstrated the predictive utility of implicit self-esteem for one’s physical, intrapsychic, and interpersonal well-being. For example, implicit self-esteem predicts persistence in the face of failure (Jordan et al., 2002), positive mood (Bosson et al., 2000), and nonverbal markers of anxiety (Spalding & Hardin, 1999).

*Low (discordant) implicit self-esteem and secure versus fragile high self-esteem.* Most relevant to the present concerns, individuals may have either a high or a low degree of concordance between their explicit and implicit self-esteem. Epstein and Morling (1995) suggest that individuals with discordant implicit and explicit self-esteem will easily be threatened by negative self-relevant information and engage in heightened defensive processing, whereas this is not the case for individuals with congruent implicit and explicit self-esteem. Consistent with this view, Bosson et al. (2003) found that, compared to individuals with high explicit and implicit self-esteem, individuals with high explicit and low implicit self-esteem displayed greater self-enhancement following unflattering feedback, greater unrealistic optimism for the future, and greater stated concordance between their actual and ideal selves. Likewise, Jordan et al. (2003) reported that the possession of discrepant high explicit and low implicit self-esteem significantly related to higher narcissism, greater display of in-group biases, and greater dissonance reduction following choice,

all processes related to defensiveness (see also Zeigler-Hill, 2006). In other research, Kernis et al. (2005) found that after priming positive or negative implicit self-esteem, those whose primed self-esteem was discordant with their trait self-esteem level self-promoted more and exhibited greater out-group derogation.

However, more recent research calls into question the ubiquity of the relationship between discrepant implicit/explicit self-esteem and heightened narcissism and defensiveness. Specifically, to the extent that narcissists possess low implicit self-esteem, findings reported by Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, and Kernis (2007) suggest that it may be limited to self-aspects tied to communion and not to agency. In addition, Olson, Fazio, and Hermann (2007) suggest that discrepancies between implicit and explicit self-esteem may reflect self-presentational effects on explicit self-reports rather than fragile self-esteem per se. Taken together, while considerable research supports the assertion that high explicit self-esteem paired with low implicit self-esteem reflects fragile high self-esteem, other research casts some doubt on its generality.

#### *Interrelations Among These Various Components*

The just-reviewed data and theory support the perspective that self-esteem has multiple components and that to understand fully its place in psychological functioning, we must understand all of them. Although differences exist among these components, research and theory support the contention that each reflects an aspect of self-esteem fragility and/or vulnerability. Consistent with this assertion, researchers have found interrelations among these components. For example, research conducted in our lab indicates that measures of unstable and contingent self-esteem (the Kernis & Paradise measure) correlate significantly,  $r_s = .29, .32, p_s < .01$  ( $N_s = 96, 132$ ). In addition, variability in daily competence self-evaluations relates to variability in daily global self-esteem, especially if individuals' self-esteem is contingent on the domain of competence (Kernis et al., 1993, Study 2). Moreover, negative implicit self-esteem is associated with relatively unstable self-esteem (Jordan et al., 2003; Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

However, what is most needed is research in which each purported "fragility" marker first is assessed within the same set of individuals and then used to predict the same marker of defensiveness. To our

knowledge, the present study represents the first reported in the literature in which all three markers are used to predict the same outcome of defensiveness, in this case, *verbal defensiveness*. Convincing support for our framework would be obtained if the three markers are intercorrelated and if each interacts with self-esteem level to predict heightened verbal defensiveness among individuals with high self-esteem.

### Verbal Defensiveness

Emotions, thoughts, behaviors, or information that are discrepant with one's desired or held self-image often are threatening, capable of producing decreases in self-esteem and/or increases in negative affect. To minimize these threats, individuals may utilize a wide range of defense mechanisms that "can be thought of as motivated cognitive-behavioral strategies that protect the self from perceived threat, maintain or augment self-esteem, reduce negative affect, and maintain positive representations of attachment figures" (Feldman Barrett, Cleveland, Conner, & Williams, 2000, p. 3; see also Shapiro, 1989). Defense mechanisms reflect attempts to reduce threat by altering how the information is represented in conscious thought. When individuals perceive a self-esteem threat, for example, they may attempt to deal with emerging unpleasant affect by limiting the extent to which the threat enters consciousness (awareness) or through the specific content of the thoughts or feelings that enter consciousness (distortion) (Feldman Barrett et al., 2000). Individuals can distance themselves from the threat and their emotional experience to some extent by avoiding thoughts and feelings that threaten their desired or held self-images or self-feelings. The framework presented here suggests that people with secure, but not fragile, high self-esteem have the strength and personal resources to acknowledge potentially threatening self-relevant information without being overly defensive.

To test this assertion, we utilized Feldman Barrett et al.'s (2002) recently reported structured interview technique and sophisticated coding scheme for eliciting threatening experiences and assessing defensiveness (called the Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment or DVBA). Specifically, individuals engaged in a 40- to 60-minute stressful interview about their own life experiences. Respondents first answered five nonstressful items to acclimate them to the interview

context. They then responded to 15 mild to moderately stressful items (e.g., “Tell me about a time when you felt that your parents were really disappointed in you”; “Tell me about a time when you’ve broken the rules”; “Tell me about a time when you’ve done something unethical on an assignment”; “Describe a time when someone has come to you for help and you didn’t want to help them”). The interview concluded with five items designed to gradually restore a nonthreatened self-view.

This assessment technique is well grounded in research and theory that have focused on defensiveness and defense mechanisms (e.g., Cramer, 2003; Sackeim & Gur, 1979; Schedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993; Shapiro, 1986; Vaillant, 1992; Weinberger, 1990). Importantly, the DVBA does not assess a specific defense mechanism, but the “shared consequences of using these strategies” (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002, p. 777), such that the magnitude of defensiveness reflects the magnitude of threat. As Feldman Barrett et al. (2000) note, a number of verbal markers of defensiveness exist that provide clues to the nature of people’s motivational strategies for protecting the self against threat. Do they rationalize by blaming others? Do they deny awareness of conflicting emotions, choosing only to identify positive affect? When individuals bring these events into conscious awareness, do they verbally convey acceptance of the negative information or do they distort their representations of the information to mitigate their negative psychological impact? The amount of awareness, or distortion, that individuals convey when recollecting and verbally describing the event and its repercussions represent the means by which the DVBA gauges defensiveness. Examining the nature of these motivational strategies has the potential to provide significant insight into differences in the ways that individuals with secure versus fragile high self-esteem deal with self-threatening information and events.

### *The Present Study*

Participants in the current study completed measures of four self-esteem components: *level*, *stability*, *contingency*, and *implicit self-esteem*. Several weeks later, they completed the DVBA. As described earlier, we expected that, among individuals with high self-esteem, verbal defensiveness will be greater the more fragile an individual’s self-esteem. Consistent with past research (Kernis,

Granneman et al., 1989), we anticipated that measures of fragility would have less of an impact among individuals with low self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> In addition, participants completed Ryff's (1989) multicomponent measure of psychological well-being and Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin's (1985) measure of life satisfaction. We included these latter measures to examine the relation between verbal defensiveness and psychological well-being. To the extent that verbal defensiveness is adaptive and reflective of healthy functioning, greater tendencies toward defensiveness should correlate positively with these well-being measures. Our framework predicts the opposite, however. Specifically, we expected to find that greater verbal defensiveness relates to lower psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

## METHOD

### *Participant*

One-hundred one male ( $N = 12$ ) and female ( $N = 89$ ) undergraduate students from a large southeastern university participated in this study in exchange for credit toward fulfilling their course requirements. Eighty-five self-identified as Caucasian, 4 as Asian American, 10 as Black or African American, 1 as Hispanic or Latino, and 1 did not report racial identity. These demographics generally represent the composition of the at-large student population. The small number of men reflects their underrepresentation in the research participant pool and the general difficulty of getting them to participate in research projects. All participants were native English speakers.

### *Procedure and Measures*

This study took place in three phases. Phase 1 consisted of participants completing a basic demographic questionnaire and measures of self-esteem level, contingent self-esteem, and implicit self-esteem (in this order) in small group settings of no more than 15 individuals. In addition, participants received an overview of the study. In Phase 2, which

1. In addition to weaker effects, our previous research on self-esteem stability has yielded inconsistent findings among low self-esteem individuals. In some cases, individuals with unstable low self-esteem seem to fare better than do individuals with stable low self-esteem, whereas in other cases the reverse is true (Paradise & Kernis, 2002; for a review, see Kernis, 1993). Why this has occurred is unclear.

took place the following week, we assessed participants' self-esteem stability through multiple assessments of their current, contextually based, self-esteem. Participants then returned to the lab individually for Phase 3, which consisted of a structured "life experiences interview" to measure defensive verbalization. After all interviews were completed, we fully debriefed all participants and thanked them for their participation.

### *Phase 1*

*Self-esteem level.* Participants completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, a reliable and valid measure of one's overall global feelings of self-worth (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). We instructed participants to base their responses on how they typically, or generally, feel about themselves. Participants responded to 10 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) that we summed so that higher scores reflect higher global self-esteem ( $M = 40.61$ ,  $SD = 5.49$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

*Contingent self-esteem.* Participants completed the Kernis and Paradise (1999) Contingent Self-esteem Scale, a 15-item measure that assesses the extent to which individuals' feelings of self-worth depend on meeting outcomes or standards (e.g., "When my actions do not live up to my expectations, it makes me feel dissatisfied with myself."). Kernis and Goldman (2006) report that this measure possesses adequate internal and test-retest reliability, and several studies attest to its validity (Neighbors et al., 2004; Patrick et al., 2004). Responses were made using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all like me*, 5 = *very much like me*) and summed so that higher scores reflect greater contingent self-esteem ( $M = 49.94$ ,  $SD = 8.14$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Implicit self-esteem.* Participants completed the Name-Letter Task (Nuttin, 1987). Using a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all beautiful*, 9 = *extremely beautiful*), participants rated the extent to which they found each letter of the alphabet aesthetically pleasing. We capitalized the letters and arranged them in three columns, each in 12-point, Times New Roman font. We calculated implicit self-esteem scores by first computing the average of each individual's responses for the first letters in his or her first and last name. Next, we subtracted the mean rating for those same letters from participants who did not have these letters as first or last name initials, so that higher scores reflect higher implicit self-esteem ( $M = -.48$ ,  $SD = 4.67$ ). Calculating scores this way controls for differences in the normative appeal of individual letters. The correlation between first and last initial was  $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ .

*Psychological well-being.* We measured psychological well-being using Ryff's (1989) well-validated multidimensional psychological well-being scale. Participants responded to 18 statements that capture six facets of psychological well-being: autonomy (e.g., "I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are contrary to the general consensus."), self-acceptance (e.g., "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out."), purpose in life (e.g., "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them."), positive relations with others (e.g., "People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others."), mastery (e.g., "I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life."), and growth (e.g., "For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth.") Participants responded using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). We combined responses to the 18 items so that higher scores reflect greater overall psychological well-being ( $M = 85.52$ ,  $SD = 8.83$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Satisfaction with life.* Participants responded to seven face-valid statements (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) that tapped their satisfaction with their lives (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life.") using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). We summed responses so that higher scores reflect higher life satisfaction ( $M = 23.77$ ,  $SD = 5.80$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### *Phase 2*

*Stability of self-esteem.* We computed our measure of stability of self-esteem from multiple assessments of current global self-esteem obtained in naturalistic contexts. These assessments took place during the week following measurement of self-esteem level. We instructed participants to complete a modified version of Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale at 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. each day beginning Monday evening and ending Friday morning. Anchor points of *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* were separated by 10 dots, and we instructed participants to circle the dot that best reflected how they felt about themselves at the particular moment they completed the form (instead of responding with how they typically or generally feel, as they did for the self-esteem level assessment). We intended the different instructional sets and response formats for self-esteem level and stability to reduce any tendencies participants might have merely to mimic their own responses across measures. Participants returned completed forms and received new ones midway throughout the 4-day period. As in prior research, only those individuals who completed at least six of eight possible forms were included in analyses involving

stability. At the completion of the study, we interviewed participants individually about whether they completed only one form at each of the designated times. We removed concurrently completed forms from the data set prior to analyses. If three or more forms were involved, we did not include the participant in any analyses. This resulted in a loss of seven participants. We computed stability of self-esteem as the standard deviation of each participant's total scores from the multiple assessments. The greater the standard deviation, the more unstable the individual's self-esteem ( $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = 3.51$ ).

### *Phase 3*

*Defensive verbal behavior assessment.* Participants returned individually over the next 4 weeks to complete a digitally recorded structured interview administered by one of three highly trained undergraduates. We described this interview as a "life experiences interview"; in reality, it constituted our assessment of defensive verbalizations (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002). Participants answered 25 questions, but the first 5 questions were relatively neutral (e.g., "How accepted did you feel growing up?"), while the last 5 were gradually restoring (e.g., "Tell me about your most enjoyable experience."). The remaining 15 questions were mildly to moderately stressful as they elicited specific instances of unpleasant experiences or actions undertaken by the participant (e.g., "Tell me about a time when you have secretly acted in a self-destructive way"; "Describe a time when you have felt less sexually desirable than a friend.>").

Following Feldman Barrett et al. (2000), each interview followed a structured format. First, the interviewer would pose the question. If the participant did not generate a specific instance, interviewers prompted him or her to recall a specific instance when the event had occurred (e.g., "Can you tell me about a specific time that happened?"). Once a specific event was described, the interviewer assessed the emotional response of the participant (e.g., How did that make you feel?). If the response conveyed discrepant information (e.g., "I was mad, but I did not really care."), the interviewer questioned the participant about these verbal inconsistencies (e.g., "I hear you say you were mad and that you did not really care. Can you tell me how you experienced both of these?"). We trained each interviewer extensively and conducted numerous practice interview sessions to achieve a high level of uniformity across interviewers.

We subsequently transferred these interviews from the digital recorder to compact discs for coding by one or both of two highly trained undergraduates (not the interviewers). Each participant could receive up to 15 possible scores (ranging from 0–3), which we averaged to create a mean level of defensiveness ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Nonscored responses (coded

as 9) were those for which raters could not assess defensiveness. This occurred for one of two reasons. In a few instances, the interviewer inadvertently skipped a question. Of the 1,515 total possible responses, this happened four times (.2%). Alternatively, the participant gave a response that raters could not code for verbal defensiveness (e.g., the participant denied ever experiencing the event in question). Of the 1,515 possible responses, this occurred 45 times (2.9%), 20 times in the interviews rated by both of the coders. In each of these latter instances (100%), the raters agreed that the response could not be coded. Both raters coded 29 of the 101 interviews to assess inter-rater reliability. Following the guidelines of Shrout and Fleiss (1979), we computed a single-measure, one-way random intraclass correlation to assess interrater reliability. For the 435 responses rated by both coders, we obtained high interrater reliability ( $\rho = .91$ ), considering that an intraclass of .60 is considered acceptable for interview based scoring procedures (Suen, 1988). For participants whom both raters coded, we calculated defensiveness scores by averaging the two coders' ratings. We also computed the internal reliability (Cronbach's [1951] alpha) of the DVBA scores, which was quite high ( $\alpha = .86$ ), lending support to the notion that verbal defensiveness scores reflect reliable individual differences in defensiveness.

We trained the raters to consider each response independently from previously answered questions. In addition, we trained raters to code conservatively. That is, if they were uncertain about which of two scores to assign to a response, we instructed them to assign the lower score. Coders assigned responses using a 0–3 defensiveness scale based upon the amount of awareness and distortion that was present in the individual's response. We instructed raters to base their judgments not only on the content of the participant's response but on the manner in which the recollection is verbally conveyed. Using the guidelines stated by Feldman Barrett et al. (2000), raters assigned a score of 0 if the participant were able to recount the experience, along with the congruent emotional experience, in a personalized, self-descriptive, and objective manner. Raters assigned a score of 1 if the participant exhibited moderate awareness along with minimal distortion. For example, the participant was able to discuss aspects of the event in an open and personalized manner but also distanced the self from negative self-relevant information by justifying the behavior through referencing social norms or by remaining somewhat nonspecific despite the interviewer's prompting. Raters assigned a score of 2 if the recollection contained moderate distortion with minimal awareness. For example, the participant might have discussed very little negative self-relevant information, and he or she did so in an impersonal manner. The participant might have also attributed the cause of the event to external sources and employed persuasive speech instead of simple forthright communication.

Raters assigned the most defensive score of 3 in those instances when the participant's response was highly distorted and reflected minimal awareness. This occurred when the individual only discussed positive elements of the experience, completely assigned fault to external sources or social norms, or indicated sentiments about the behavior or experience that distanced the self from any potentially threatening information. Examples of participants' verbatim responses are displayed in the Appendix.

## RESULTS

### *Correlations Among Predictors and Criterion Variable*

The correlation matrix of predictor variables and DVBA scores is displayed in Table 1.

Significant intercorrelations emerged among the fragility measures, ranging from  $-.25$  to  $.46$  (all  $ps < .05$ ). To our knowledge, this is the first reported study to show significant correlations among all three of the fragility markers. In addition, all predictor variables correlated significantly with DVBA scores (all  $ps < .01$ ). Finally, all of the fragility markers correlated significantly with self-esteem level (all  $ps < .05$ ), such that greater contingency, instability, and implicit negativity related to lower self-esteem.

**Table 1**  
Correlations Among Self-Esteem Variables, DVBA Scores, and Well-Being Measures

| <i>Measure</i>              | 1           | 2           | 3           | 4           | 5        | 6          | 7 |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------|------------|---|
| 1. Self-esteem level        | —           |             |             |             |          |            |   |
| 2. Self-esteem lability     | $-.46^{**}$ | —           |             |             |          |            |   |
| 3. Contingent self-esteem   | $-.51^{**}$ | $.44^{**}$  | —           |             |          |            |   |
| 4. Implicit self-esteem     | $.24^*$     | $-.46^{**}$ | $-.25^*$    | —           |          |            |   |
| 5. DVBA score               | $-.26^{**}$ | $.61^{**}$  | $.32^{**}$  | $-.56^{**}$ | —        |            |   |
| 6. Psychological well-being | $.65^{**}$  | $-.44^{**}$ | $-.44^{**}$ | $.24^*$     | $-.25^*$ | —          |   |
| 7. Life satisfaction        | $.57^{**}$  | $-.43^{**}$ | $-.40^{**}$ | $.21^*$     | $-.25^*$ | $.63^{**}$ | — |

*Note:* DVBA Score = Defensive verbal behavior assessment score. Self-esteem stability and contingent self-esteem are scored such that higher numbers reflect more unstable and contingent self-esteem.

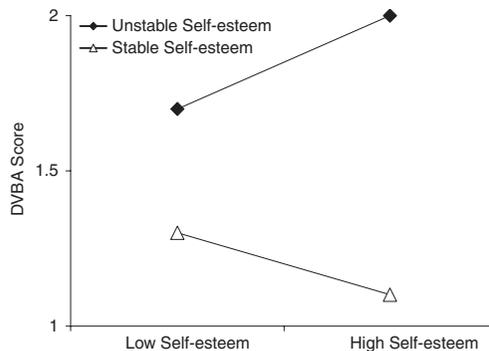
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### *Overview of Regression Analyses*

The framework we presented earlier holds that each fragility marker would moderate the effect of self-esteem level in predicting verbal defensiveness. Therefore, we conducted a series of regression analyses involving self-esteem level and each respective fragility marker. We centered each predictor and entered them as main effects and as part of a product term, the latter to reflect their interaction (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We tested each marker in separate regression equations. To examine significant interactions, we generated predicted values using values one standard deviation above and below the mean. These values are depicted in Figures 1–3. In addition, we tested the significance of the simple slope of each fragility marker at high and low self-esteem level, as discussed in Aiken and West (1991).

### *Verbal Defensiveness as a Function of Stability and Level of Self-Esteem*

A main effect for stability of self-esteem emerged ( $\beta = .63$ ),  $t(98) = 6.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the more stable individuals' self-esteem, the lower their verbal defensiveness. However, this main effect was qualified by a (marginally) significant Self-esteem Level  $\times$  Self-esteem Stability interaction ( $\beta = .15$ ),  $t(97) = 1.92$ ,  $p < .059$ . Predicted values, displayed in Figure 1, indicate that the anticipated effect of self-esteem stability exists among individuals with high self-esteem. In fact, individuals with stable high self-esteem were the least



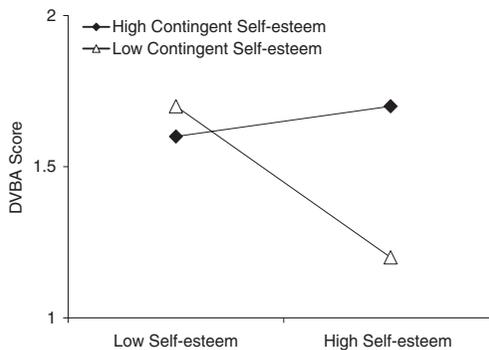
**Figure 1**

Predicted values for defensive verbal behavior as a function of self-esteem level and self-esteem stability.

verbally defensive, whereas individuals with unstable high self-esteem were most verbally defensive. Tests of the simple slopes revealed that for individuals with high self-esteem, the more stable their self-esteem, the less they were defensive, ( $\beta = .84$ ),  $t(97) = 5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, among individuals with low self-esteem, the more stable their self-esteem, the less they were verbally defensive, ( $\beta = .49$ ),  $t(97) = 4.26$ ,  $p < .01$ .

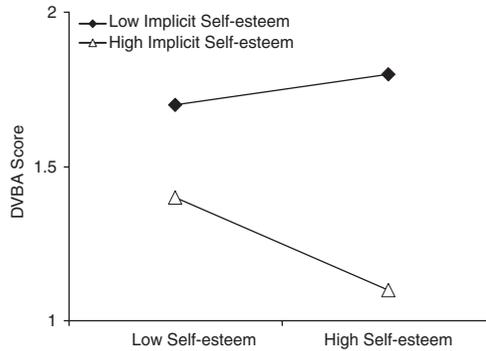
*Verbal Defensiveness as a Function of Contingency and Level of Self-Esteem*

A main effect for contingent self-esteem emerged ( $\beta = .25$ ),  $t(98) = 2.23$ ,  $p < .03$ , indicating that the less contingent individuals' self-esteem, the lower their verbal defensiveness. However, this main effect was qualified by a Self-esteem Level  $\times$  Contingent Self-esteem interaction ( $\beta = .29$ ),  $t(97) = 2.99$ ,  $p < .01$ . Predicted values, displayed in Figure 2, indicate that the anticipated effect of contingent self-esteem exists among individuals with high, but not low, self-esteem. In fact, individuals with high and noncontingent self-esteem report the lowest amount of verbal defensiveness. Tests of the simple slopes revealed that for individuals with high self-esteem, the less contingent their self-esteem, the less they were defensive, ( $\beta = .40$ ),  $t(97) = 3.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, among individuals with low self-esteem, no relation existed between contingent self-esteem and verbal defensiveness, ( $\beta = -.09$ ),  $t(97) = -.60$ ,  $p > .55$ .



**Figure 2**

Predicted values for defensive verbal behavior as a function of self-esteem level and contingent self-esteem.



**Figure 3**

Predicted values for defensive verbal behavior as a function of self-esteem level and implicit self-esteem.

*Verbal Defensiveness as a Function of Implicit and Explicit (Level of) Self-Esteem*

A significant main effect emerged for Implicit Self-esteem ( $\beta = -.54$ ),  $t(98) = -6.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the higher individuals' implicit self-esteem, the lower their verbal defensiveness. However, this main effect was qualified by a significant Self-esteem Level  $\times$  Implicit Self-esteem interaction ( $\beta = -.17$ ),  $t(97) = -2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ . Predicted values, displayed in Figure 3, indicated that the anticipated effect of implicit self-esteem is greater among individuals with high as opposed to low self-esteem. Moreover, individuals with congruent high explicit and high implicit self-esteem report the lowest amount of verbal defensiveness. Tests of the simple slopes revealed that for individuals with high explicit self-esteem, the higher their implicit self-esteem, the less they were defensive, ( $\beta = -.65$ ),  $t(97) = -6.45$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, among individuals with low explicit self-esteem, the higher their implicit self-esteem, the less they were defensive, ( $\beta = -.33$ ),  $t(97) = -2.44$ ,  $p < .02$ .<sup>2</sup>

2. For the sake of completeness, we also conducted analyses in which we included all three markers of self-esteem fragility along with self-esteem level. In Step 1, we examined each of their unique main effect contributions. In Step 2, we included the three Fragility  $\times$  Level product terms. The findings were as follows: In Step 1, nonsignificant main effects emerged for Self-esteem Level ( $\beta = .07$ ),  $t(96) = .80$ ,  $p < .43$ , and Contingent Self-esteem ( $\beta = .06$ ),  $t(96) = .68$ ,  $p < .51$ , whereas significant effects emerged for Self-esteem Stability ( $\beta = .45$ ),  $t(96) = 4.88$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Implicit Self-esteem ( $\beta = -.36$ ),  $t(96) = -4.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . In Step 2, significant

*Verbal Defensiveness and Psychological Well-Being*

To the extent that defensiveness is adaptive and reflective of optimal functioning, greater tendencies toward defensiveness should correlate positively with these measures of well-being. However, this clearly was not the case. Verbal defensiveness correlated negatively with total scores on Ryff's (1989) multicomponent measure of psychological functioning ( $r = -.25, p < .02$ ), as well as on the Life Satisfaction Scale ( $r = -.25, p < .02$ ).

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings offer strong support for a multicomponent conceptualization of self-esteem that highlights the distinction between fragile and secure forms of high self-esteem. In the present study, individuals with secure high self-esteem exhibited considerably less verbal defensiveness than did individuals with fragile high self-esteem. This was true regardless of which marker of self-esteem fragility/security we used. Specifically, among individuals with high self-esteem, the more their self-esteem was (a) stable, (b) not contingent, and (c) concordant with high implicit self-esteem, the less they were verbally defensive. In fact, verbal defensiveness was lowest among individuals with secure high self-esteem and was considerably higher among individuals with high self-esteem whose self-esteem was unstable, contingent, or incongruent with low implicit self-esteem. Among individuals with low self-esteem, their standing on the fragility markers had less of an impact on their degree of verbal defensiveness. In general, individuals with low self-esteem exhibited degrees of verbal defensiveness similar to those of individuals with fragile high self-esteem.

Individuals with fragile high self-esteem presumably are not entirely convinced of their own value and worth and tend, therefore, to compensate for their self-doubts by engaging in exaggerated tendencies to defend, protect, and enhance their feelings of self-worth. One means of protecting against self-threat is through verbal communication, where individuals in essence "talk through" the distress.

Contingent  $\times$  Level ( $\beta = .16$ )  $t(93) = 2.01, p < .05$ , and Implicit  $\times$  Level ( $\beta = -.21$ )  $t(93) = -2.60, p < .02$ , interactions emerged, but the Stability  $\times$  Level ( $\beta = -.01$ )  $t(93) = -.13, p < .90$ , interaction was not significant.

Thus, the manner in which potentially threatening self-relevant information is verbally conveyed provides a window into deeper motivational dynamics potentiated by the threat. In one case, individuals can address the experience “head on” by accurately and objectively communicating about it and their feelings. Here, speech serves as a largely unfiltered window into the experience itself as well as the individual’s emotional reaction. Alternatively, individuals can distort information through denial of responsibility and negative affect, rationalization, excessive attempts to persuade, or vague and evasive responses. In this instance, speech is a means of psychological defense against unwanted, negative self-relevant information that the individual attempts to convey in a manner to fit a held or desired self-view or to soothe him- or herself (Feldman Barrett et al., 2000, 2002; A. Freud, 1937; Shapiro, 1989).

Why should low self-esteem and self-esteem fragility activate such exaggerated verbal defensiveness? One reason is that potential threats are in fact more threatening to people with low self-esteem or fragile rather than secure high self-esteem and so they activate more intensive efforts to counteract them. Consistent with this assertion, prior research indicates that, compared to people with secure high self-esteem, people with fragile high self-esteem or low self-esteem overgeneralize the negative self-relevant implications of self-esteem threats and experience more distressful negative emotions (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Kernis, Brockner, & Frankel, 1989; Kernis & Paradise, 2002). Conversely, individuals with secure high self-esteem are accepting of themselves “warts and all,” and, therefore, negative self-relevant information and experiences are less threatening than they are to individuals with fragile high self-esteem (or low self-esteem). Moreover, individuals with fragile high self-esteem appear to be highly ego involved in everyday events and, consequently, it is especially important for them to direct resources toward maintaining their positive (yet fragile) feelings of self-worth (Kernis, 1993).

As noted earlier, Feldman Barrett et al. (2002) argue that the content of speech and the manner in which it is represented provides a window into the underlying motivational processes active within the individual. Furthermore, Feldman Barrett et al. (2002) argue that observable and verifiable “traces” of self-protective processes are imbued in speech that reflects efforts to modify or rationalize disturbing thoughts or feelings. Therefore, it is revealing to analyze

both *what* is said, and *how* it is said, especially when an individual is discussing negative self-relevant behaviors that are contrary to the maintenance of a positive self-view. In the present study, raters coded participants' verbal recollections in terms of two intertwined aspects: awareness and distortion. Awareness is present to the extent that participants are able to convey potentially self-threatening information in a personalized manner. Thus, being highly aware allows for an open admission of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a way that is unbiased and freely given. Distortion, on the other hand, represents an active concealment of negative or distressing self-relevant information that is used to distance the self from any potentially damning information that may have occurred in moments of disappointment or failure. For example, distortion can manifest itself as minimizing, justifying, denying responsibility and externalizing blame, or self-censoring.

Although we have focused on the fragile/secure high self-esteem distinction, our findings also have implications for individuals with low self-esteem who displayed levels of verbal defensiveness that were very similar to those exhibited by individuals with fragile high self-esteem. Rather than being primarily directed toward maintaining positive self-views, however, we believe that the verbal defensiveness exhibited by low self-esteem individuals may largely reflect the pain that they experience when having to confront behaviors and experiences that may substantiate their negative self-views. In other words, some amount of ruminative psychic energy remains "stuck" on those events and perhaps perpetuates their negative self-feelings (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). When individuals have fully worked through negative occurrences, or are completely comfortable with their imperfections, little need for defensiveness exists.

#### *Interrelations Among the Fragile/Secure Self-Esteem Markers*

Several aspects of our findings suggest that the broad construct of self-esteem fragility/security has multiple markers (Kernis, 2003). First, the markers were moderately intercorrelated, indicating that unstable self-esteem, contingent self-esteem, and low implicit self-esteem tended to covary within individuals. Importantly, the magnitude of these interrelations indicates that these constructs are not redundant with each other. Accordingly, some individuals may have fragile self-esteem that manifests itself as unstable, others may have

fragile self-esteem that manifests itself as contingent, and still others may have fragile self-esteem that manifests itself as negative implicit self-esteem. Although unstable and contingent self-esteem both covary with more negative implicit self-esteem, it is important to note that they do not reflect negative self-esteem per se. Instead, they reflect heightened responsiveness to, or dependency on, specific evaluative events that include evaluative feedback, standards of worthiness, and the like (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2005). In some contexts, this greater responsiveness may result in heightened positive feelings of self-worth (Greenier et al., 2000). However, these positive feelings are tenuous as they rely on continually experiencing positive events or on meeting standards of worthiness (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Second, our findings revealed comparable predictive relationships for these markers of fragile/secure self-esteem with verbal defensiveness. A growing number of other studies have shown comparable effects for stability of self-esteem (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998) and discrepant implicit/explicit self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, 2006) across samples, but to our knowledge the research we report in this article is the first to demonstrate comparable effects for all three markers in the same sample. Contingent self-esteem is inherently fragile because for it to remain high across time, individuals must continually succeed at satisfying relevant criteria. These successes may create the appearance that high self-esteem is secure and well anchored, but it is not. Its vulnerability is unearthed when failures replace successes or negative self-relevant information becomes conscious since contingent self-esteem likely will plummet unless individuals take defensive measures (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

As has been noted elsewhere (Kernis & Paradise, 2002), the constructs of unstable and contingent self-esteem share a number of features. First, both emphasize the link between feelings of self-worth and specific outcomes. Second, both involve increased tendencies to be caught up in the processes of defending, maintaining, and (in the case of unstable or contingent *high* self-esteem) maximizing one's positive, though tenuous, feelings of self-worth. Likewise, stable and true high self-esteem both reflect secure, well-anchored feelings of self-worth that do not need continual validation. Pleasure following success and disappointment following failure characterizes people with either stable or true self-esteem, but these reactions are not colored with defensiveness or self-aggrandizement (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis et al., 1997). However, one major difference in these constructs, at least

as reflected in how they are operationalized, involves individuals' degree of awareness. Whereas the assessment of contingent self-esteem seems to necessitate awareness that one's self-esteem is dependent on certain outcomes or self-evaluations (as measured by Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003, and Paradise & Kernis, 1999), the same is not true for unstable self-esteem. In fact, previous research indicates that people are not very aware of how unstable their self-esteem is from day to day (Kernis et al., 1992). Thus, whereas contingent self-esteem reflects individuals' phenomenal awareness that their self-esteem is dependent on matching certain criteria, unstable self-esteem reflects substantial short-term fluctuations in immediate feelings of self-worth that may or may not be within people's awareness.

Another implication of our findings is that differences in the overall degree to which individuals' self-esteem is contingent have important implications for individuals' psychological functioning. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) asserted that (nearly) everyone has contingent self-esteem and that people only differ in the specific domains in which they are contingent. In contrast, we (as do Deci & Ryan, 1995) assert that individuals meaningfully differ in the overall extent to which their self-esteem is contingent. Paradise and Kernis (1999) specifically designed the Contingent Self-Esteem Scale to assess the overall extent to which individuals' self-esteem is contingent on matching standards and attaining certain outcomes, regardless of content domain. The fact that the more contingent overall our participants' high self-esteem, the more they were verbally defensive, supports the contention that meaningful differences do exist in the overall extent to which people's self-esteem is contingent. That is not to say that focusing on specific domains of contingency does not have value. Rather, our view is that both a between-persons approach that focuses on overall degrees of contingency and a within-persons approach that focuses on specific domains of contingency have value and that they offer complementary, not antagonistic, approaches.

The fact that we found converging findings across different markers of self-esteem security/fragility also provides convergent validity evidence for each. This is especially important for the name-letter task (Nuttin, 1987), whose use as a measure of implicit self-esteem remains somewhat controversial. However, it is essential to note that in addition to findings supporting its reliability (Bosson et al., 2000), researchers increasingly are finding support for theoretically derived hypotheses using this measure (Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999;

Pelham, Caravallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005; for a recent review, see Koole & Pelham, 2003). Nonetheless, an important avenue of future research is the replication of the current findings using a different measure of implicit self-esteem.

Taken as a whole, our findings offer strong support for Kernis's (2003; Kernis et al., 1989; Kernis & Paradise, 2002; see also Deci & Ryan, 1995; Jordan et al., 2002) distinction between secure and fragile forms of high self-esteem. Indeed, when markers of this distinction are included in regression analyses, no overall differences in verbal defensiveness emerged as a function of self-esteem level per se. (Although a zero-order relation existed between self-esteem level and verbal defensiveness, the overlap between self-esteem level and the markers of secure/fragile self-esteem can account for this relation. When we controlled for this overlap in all regression analyses, the main effect for self-esteem level was nonsignificant.) Importantly, we would have obscured meaningful differences in the extent to which individuals are verbally defensive had we not incorporated these markers into our analyses. The present findings are important because they provide a window into the psychological makeup of individuals with secure as opposed to fragile high self-esteem. Moreover, they extend other findings linking fragile high self-esteem to heightened forms of interpersonal defensiveness (e.g., Bosson et al., 2003; Jordan et al., 2002; Kernis et al., 1989, 1993; Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

### *Defensiveness and Psychological Functioning*

Our findings also have implications for the relation between defensiveness and psychological adjustment. Some researchers claim that defensive and self-promoting strategies are markers of healthy psychological functioning (Taylor & Brown, 1988; but see Tennen & Affleck, 1993). Contrary to this view, however, our findings indicated that fragile and not secure high self-esteem is associated with greater verbal defensiveness. Moreover, other findings indicated that verbal defensiveness related to lower psychological well-being (as measured by Ryff's (1989) multi-component measure of psychological well-being) and life satisfaction. In combination, these findings support the view that heightened defensiveness reflects insecurity, fragility, and suboptimal functioning, rather than healthy psychological functioning (see also Deci & Ryan, 2000). We are not suggesting that something is wrong with individuals when they want to

feel good about themselves. Instead, we are suggesting that when feeling good about themselves becomes a prime directive, excessive defensiveness and self-promotion are likely to follow, the accompanying self-esteem is likely to be fragile rather than secure, and any benefits to psychological health will be transient.

### *Measuring Defensiveness With the DVBA*

It is worth noting that the measure of verbal defensiveness we employed has a number of strengths. First, participants cannot readily control and thereby reduce the extent to which they exhibit verbal defensiveness during the interview. Indeed, attempts to control or carefully construct one's response would likely be coded as greater, and not lesser, defensiveness. Second, verbal defensiveness reflects individuals' verbal behaviors rather than self-reports of their defense mechanisms, which would themselves be subject to defensiveness. Moreover, while the DVBA provides no information about the particular defense mechanisms that individuals commonly use either in the lab setting or in their everyday lives, it is particularly powerful at capturing the common underlying, perhaps nonconscious, motivations and outcomes of defensive processes (Feldman Barrett et al., 2002).

Other research and theory indicate that specific defense mechanisms vary in the extent to which they are adaptive or maladaptive (Cramer, 2001, 2003; Davidson, MacGregor, Johnson, Woody, & Chaplin, 2004; Shapiro, 1986; Vaillant, 1992; Weinberger, 1990). A number of self-report and interview techniques exist to measure individuals' use of specific defense mechanisms (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Cramer, 2001, 2003; Davidson & MacGregor, 1998; Paulhus, 1990; Paulhus, Fridhandler, & Hayes, 1997; Vaillant, 1992; Weinberger, 1990). Given the present findings, we would expect that individuals with secure high self-esteem would be most likely to report using adaptive defense mechanisms and least likely to report using maladaptive defense mechanisms. Research examining these issues would be a valuable addition to the literature.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present findings indicate that with respect to self-esteem more is not necessarily better (see also Deci & Ryan, 1995). Among our high

self-esteem participants, only those whose self-esteem was secure were appreciably less verbally defensive than were low self-esteem participants. These findings indicate that a complete understanding of self-esteem processes requires that we incorporate components of self-esteem that assess whether it is secure or fragile. Reliable and valid measures of these components are now readily available and we encourage researchers to utilize them in their research.

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## Appendix

The following are participants' actual verbatim responses to two questions. For each question, one response was rated 0 (*little or no verbal defensiveness*) and the other was rated 3 (*high verbal defensiveness*). Participants' responses are in italics; Q = Defensive Verbal Behavior Assessment question; P = participant's response; I = interviewer's prompt.

**Q:** "Describe a time when somebody has come to you for help and you didn't want to help them."

**Score = 0**

**P:** *A couple of nights ago, my boyfriend walked into his room and his roommate was in there with his girlfriend. He called me and wanted to come over and sleep in my room, but I didn't want to help him by*

*doing that because I didn't know how my roommate would feel about it. So, I told him to find somebody else.*

**I:** And how did you feel about not helping him?

**P:** *I felt guilty. It actually kept me up some of the night trying to figure out what I should have said or should have done.*

**Score = 3**

**P:** *High school, math class, my freshman geometry class. There was this guy, who didn't . . . well, who did . . . well, he was average, he did moderately well . . . did average. And I was always above average, so I always did well. And he, umm, I didn't feel like there was any gain for me. Even if that sounds selfish, it was really justified, because I was a better student and he was not a good student, and I felt like my answers . . . umm. And he only wanted answers, so I felt like my giving him some of my knowledge would have been . . . it really would have been altruistic. I would have just been giving and not receiving. And I didn't want to give this guy any help because he could have done it himself, and he probably wouldn't have gained from it either, he would have just had my answers.*

**I:** So how did you feel about not wanting to help him?

**P:** *Umm, I felt b . . . (cut herself off), well, I felt good about not wanting to help him. Umm, how I felt about not wanting to help him?*

**I:** Right.

**P:** *Umm, I guess . . . I guess I felt fine. I was (stuttering) . . . There was no need . . . I had no remorse, you know? There is no remorse . . . You know? I wasn't jumping for joy for not wanting to help him, but there was no, "I'm so sorry!" There was none of that. I just chose to move on (long pause) . . . I just had to tell him, "Sorry. Do it yourself." And I wasn't really sorry. So yeah, that's how I felt.*

**Q:** "Tell me about a time when you've broken the rules."

**Score = 0**

**P:** *In third grade, my teacher told us that we had to be nice to this guy. He wasn't an exchange student, but he came from a place where*

*the people don't speak English very well. So she told us we were all supposed to be nice to him, and I tried to, but he started to get on my nerves very bad. So I shoved him, and got into trouble. She called me out in front of the whole class.*

**I:** And how did you feel about doing that and breaking her rule.

**P:** *I felt horrible, both because I hurt this guy's feelings and I got called out. I was mean, and I didn't like that.*

### Score = 3

**P:** *Um, well, I have honestly never done anything bad. Like the worst thing I do is burn CDs, and I know that that's like, illegal. But, I don't really . . . well I've really . . . (long pause). I've honestly never drank anything. The only time I have drank anything was in Mexico and I was 18 at the time so that was legal. Um . . . I've never smoked. I've never, um . . . (another pause). I'm kind of a loser. I've never like broken any rules, and I guess its cause my brother didn't either and he was kind of like a role model for me, and he never did anything bad. And I really didn't want to mess up any chances I had because I usually get caught when I do things because I'm a really bad liar. So, I just decided to just steer clear of that and I think my friends helped, too, because I was involved in marching band and stuff like that and none of them did anything bad. So since the people I hung out with didn't do anything, I didn't do anything. I just kept myself away from all that stuff.*

**I:** Well, how does it make you feel then when you burn CDs?

**P:** *I feel kind of bad when I'm doing it. And I kind of worry that, I know it sounds dumb, but I worry that if I ever get pulled over for a ticket, then the policeman would be like "Oh, she's burned CDs." And like, I don't know, I would get in trouble for that. I know that's really dumb, but I, like, worry a lot when I do something dumb and it keeps eating at me because I know I did something. So that's usually why I don't break any rules is because I feel horrible about it. But I don't think of burning CDs as, like, the hugest deal ever. And my roommate makes me feel kind of bad because she doesn't do it. But, um, I don't really . . . it's not like a huge deal to me.*