The University of Southern Mississippi

Discrepant Self-Esteem and Relationship Satisfaction

By

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Loving oneself is often considered to be necessary in order to love someone else (e.g., Crooks & Baur, 1999). However, there is fairly little research examining this widely accepted concept. Although self-esteem has been a topic of interest in research for quite some time, there have been relatively few studies conducted on romantic dating relationships and self-esteem. Could there be an explanation why some relationships persist over time and others do not? Could self-esteem play a role in relationship behavior and overall satisfaction?

The present study will investigate the role of self-esteem in relationship satisfaction. It will consider the theory of fragile high self-esteem in the context of dating relationships. Specifically, it will focus on the concept of discrepant high self-esteem. Hopefully, a better understanding will be uncovered of the link between an individual’s feelings of self-worth and their self-reported attitudes and behaviors that are relevant for the functioning of their romantic relationships. To discover whether implicit self-esteem moderates the association between explicit self-esteem and relationship satisfaction is of particular interest to this study.

There are three predictions for the present study. First, it is thought that implicit self-esteem will moderate the association between explicit self-esteem and relationship satisfaction such that individuals with congruent high self-esteem will report the highest levels of relationship satisfaction. Second, it is predicted that individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will report the greatest variation in feelings of relationship satisfaction over time. The third prediction is that individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will report the highest levels of self-esteem reactivity in response to daily feelings of relationship satisfaction.
Conceptualizing Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a term that is used quite often, but how should it be conceptualized? Since its introduction, self-esteem has been defined in a variety of ways. One of the earliest definitions of self-esteem was William James’ (1983). James’ description of self-esteem as a ratio of aspirations to successes:

So our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities; a fraction of which our pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our success: thus, self-esteem=successes/pretentions. (James, 1890/1983, p. 296)

Although there are still some disagreements with regard to self-esteem, most scholars concur that self-esteem can be defined as the evaluation that an individual has regarding the self (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Self-esteem is commonly believed to consist of feelings regarding worth and competence (Mruk, 2006) as well as an overall internal evaluation of the self-concept (beliefs one holds about the self; Heatherton & Wyland 2003).

Brown & Marshall (2006) suggest that self-esteem has three major components: global self-esteem, state self-esteem, and domain specific self-esteem. The first of these components is global self-esteem which can be described as a trait that indicates how individuals feel about themselves on the whole (Brown & Marshall, 2006). For example, an individual who generally feels great about himself will be described as having high global self-esteem. This aspect of self-esteem is what most individuals are referring to when they use the term “self-esteem.” It has also been the focus of the vast majority of research concerning self-esteem. The second component is state self-esteem which involves feelings of worth or emotional responses to events that are
significant to the individual (Brown & Marshall, 2006). State self-esteem varies depending on what is happening in one’s life. Therefore, it can be described as how individuals feel at a given moment. For example, a student may feel great about herself after receiving a good grade on a test, but terrible once she discovers her boyfriend wants to break off their relationship. The third component of self-esteem is domain-specific self esteem which refers to how one evaluates the self based on particular skills and characteristics. In this sense, a person can experience high self-esteem in one area (e.g., being athletic) and low self-esteem in another area (e.g., social competency; Brown & Marshall, 2006).

Importance of Studying Self-Esteem

Why is self-esteem so important? For quite some time, theorists have considered self-esteem to play an essential role in behavior. However, empirical findings have provided mixed support. In a recent review of the self-esteem literature, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) found that high self-esteem was only weakly associated with a variety of important outcomes such as such as school performance, job and task performance, happiness, and life satisfaction. Proficient school performance was not consistently associated with high self-esteem. (Baumeister et al., 2003). However, Bowles (1999) uncovered that good school performance serves as a causal factor to high self-esteem. Job and task performance showed a slightly stronger correlation with self-esteem, but the findings display a high level of variability. Individuals with high self-esteem perceive themselves more frequently as having superior social skills and interpersonal successes. Nevertheless, when measures other than self reports are employed, high self-esteem individuals are not necessarily found to be more popular. As one can tell, these findings leave ambiguity regarding self-esteem. Even though, Baumeister et al. (2003) do not believe self-esteem is a significant topic of research, they allude to the idea that self-esteem
should not continue to be measured without assessing other variables by addressing the
drawbacks of research defining and studying self-esteem in homogenous ways.

In contrast to the view of Baumeister and his colleagues (2003), Swann, Chang-
Schneider, and McClarty (2007) contend that self-esteem does, in fact, have significant value.
The argument here is that scope of self-esteem should be widened because self-esteem is an
extremely complex concept. Therefore, it should not just be assessed on only a global level,
rather self-views should be measured in such a way as to incorporate other variables specific to
self-esteem such as domain-specific self-evaluations and their features (Swann et al. 2007). In
addition, Swann and his colleges mention the importance of using the specificity matching
principle. The specificity matching principle basically states that when studying a specific
variable, researchers should use specific self-concept as a predictor, not measure a specific
variable with a large-scale variable such as global self-esteem (Swann et al., 2007). Basically,
self-esteem should be studied in such a way that it pertains to the specific variable of interest.

*Fragile vs. Secure Self-Esteem*

Adding to the ambiguity in previous self-esteem research, high self-esteem has been
associated with both positive and negative behaviors. For example, high self-esteem is associated
with both life happiness and aggression (Baumeister, et al., 2003). In recent years, theorists have
presented a concept that high self-esteem may not be as simple as once believed. Subtypes of
self-esteem are believed to exist such that self-esteem can either be fragile or secure (see Kernis
2003 for a review). These subtypes stemmed from mixed findings in research (e.g. Baumeister et

Secure high self-esteem is defined by what has been previously believed to be high self-
esteem. Individuals with secure high self-esteem believe they feel good about themselves, and
actually do. Overall, they say they feel good about themselves externally, and internally there is no incongruity. Fragile self-esteem, on the other hand, is indicated by a great deal of vulnerability. Individuals with fragile high self-esteem may believe they have high self-esteem, but really they need constant reaffirmation to feel good about themselves. Theorists have developed three identifiable markers of fragile self-esteem: contingent self-esteem (Deci & Ryan 1995), unstable self-esteem (Frank & De Raedt 2007), and discrepant self-esteem (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003). It is important to note that these types of fragile self-esteem are not mutually exclusive (Kernis 2003).

Contingent self-esteem is the inclination of one to base his or her sense of worth on abilities to live up to a standard of success. These individuals are highly susceptible to success and failure (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). They obsess over meeting their expectations of accomplishment in order to confirm themselves as worthwhile. In addition, they also require frequent validation from others. For instance, an individual with contingent self-esteem may think attractiveness to be an important characteristic and only feel worthwhile if he maintains his personal appearance. Neighbors, Larimer, Geisner & Knee (2004) have established that contingent self-esteem individuals are more likely to drink for acceptance or to avoid rejection.

Unstable self-esteem is characterized by unpredictable self-esteem. Rosenberg (1986) claimed that self-esteem instability is indicated by fluctuations in feelings of worthiness and worthlessness. A procedure to assess stability of self-esteem was developed by Kernis, Grannemann, and Barclay (1989). Unstable self-esteem is usually measured by having participants fill out a questionnaire with items inquiring about their current feelings of themselves every day for 4-7 days. The deviation is then calculated to determine whether an individual has unstable self-esteem (Kernis & Goldman 2006). Unstable high self-esteem has
been associated with higher levels of anger and aggression than low self-esteem (Kernis et al., 1989). Foster, Kernis, and Goldman (2007) reveal an association between unstable self-esteem regardless of level (high or low) and high attachment anxiety.

Discrepant self-esteem refers to a discrepancy between implicit and explicit self-esteem levels (Bosson et al., 2003). Explicit self-esteem is one’s conscious level of self-esteem. It can be easily assessed by merely asking about how one feels about oneself. However, implicit self-esteem is more complicated. It is believed to be the nonconscious aspect of self-esteem. Dual-process models have been used to help clarify the concepts of implicit and explicit self-esteem. These models suggest that we have two types of processing, the type of processing of which we are aware and the type that occurs outside of our awareness (Zeigler-Hill & Myers 2008).

Discrepant self-esteem is determined by evaluating both implicit and explicit self-esteem. Discrepant self-esteem, both fragile (high explicit, low implicit) and damaged (high implicit, low explicit), was associated with more repression of anger, a more discouraging attribution style, more anxiety, and a higher frequency of impaired health in comparison to congruent self-esteem individuals (Schroder-Abe, Rudolph, & Schutz, 2007).

As I mentioned, discrepant self-esteem will be the focus of this research. I plan to use past research as a basis. However, I plan to approach the discrepant self-esteem model in a contemporary way, one pertaining specifically to exclusive dating relationships.

Interpersonal Nature of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a mechanism that certainly has social implications. Research claims that one’s self-concept could be entrenched in interpersonal relationship schemas (Baldwin, 1992). The sociological approach to self-esteem includes the belief that society and an individual’s self-esteem affect one another constantly. This is based on the assumption that one’s self-esteem
regulates behavior. One’s behavior impacts society in one way or another. Reciprocally, society also influences our behavior which leads to a change or retention of current self-esteem level. (Stets & Burke, 2003). Baldwin, Carrell, and Lopez (1990) validated this idea that society influences our self-evaluation by proving that self-evaluations can be influenced by minimal exposures to interpersonal evaluative stimuli.

Another approach asserts that self-esteem is believed to have evolutionary aspects (Hill & Buss, 2006). It is considered to be dynamic and to be comprised of many components, both cognitive and affective. Generally speaking, cognitive components are the internal representations of the self, and affective components involve our behavior with respect to these internal representations. Six psychological components of self-esteem are: the collection of internal representations and mechanisms for monitoring, updating, evaluating, motivating, and generating behavior (Hill & Buss, 2006). In other words, as we gain experience, we learn to act appropriately with regard to how we perceive ourselves and the world.

The sociometer theory expands on the idea of self-esteem being social in nature. It illustrates self-esteem as an internal gauge or self-regulatory system designed to monitor and react to social cues (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). In particular, one’s “sociometer” observes the degree to which he or she is accepted or rejected from social groups, and motivates appropriate behavior when one’s degree of social inclusion gets too low (Hill & Buss, 2006). The sociometer model (Leary et al., 1995) proposes that self-esteem is an outcome of interpersonal approval and rejection. (Leary, 2004) states that individuals are constantly active participants in social settings, and one’s self-esteem is receptive to social events (Leary et al., 1995) and is affected by past, present, and future perceived relational value (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes 2007).
High global self-esteem is believed to predict aspects of interpersonal behavior (social confidence, conformity, self-presentation, and prosocial behavior; Leary & MacDonald 2003). Individuals with high self-esteem were found to report with greater confidence that being friendly with others would result in affirmative responses from others (Baldwin & Keelan, 1999). Gabriel, Renaud, and Tippin (2007) established that some individuals (those who define themselves in terms of their close relationships) feel more confident about themselves because of strong relationships. Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, and Rose (2001) found that individuals who doubt themselves tend to be less satisfied in their marriage and dating relationships. These findings suggest implications for studies such as mine because they validate the idea that self-esteem is intertwined with interpersonal functioning. I have decided to keep my study somewhat simple in efforts to fill in gaps of uncertainty in previous self-esteem research.

**Value to Academic Discipline**

Romantic relationships have increasingly become a significant topic of interest for research. A large number of previous studies focus merely on marital relationships. These studies have most certainly made noteworthy contributions to the field, but our society is moving in a new direction with regard to relationships. It is important to note that our society has shifted from a traditional lifestyle of young marriage towards more of an independent, liberated lifestyle. This change in American society has brought about a need for research in this area.

Specifically, there has been relatively little research concerning romantic relationship satisfaction and self-esteem. It seems there is a need for expansion on this topic because, as mentioned above, self-esteem is believed to play an essential role in many, if not most of our social responses and behavior.
This study has the potential to provide a great contribution to the understanding of relationship functioning and how relationships contribute to individuals’ self-esteem. It could also potentially shed light on attitudes and behaviors of fragile high self-esteem individuals.

Methodology

Overview and Predictions

The goal of the present study is to investigate whether discrepant high self-esteem is associated with relationship satisfaction. As previously stated, there are three predictions for my study: Implicit self-esteem will moderate the association between explicit self-esteem and relationship satisfaction where individuals with congruent high self-esteem will report the highest levels of relationship satisfaction; individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will report the greatest variation in feelings of relationship satisfaction over time; individuals with discrepant high self-esteem will report the highest levels of self-esteem reactivity in response to daily feelings of relationship satisfaction. To accomplish this goal, participants will complete trait measures of explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction as well as daily measures of state explicit self-esteem and relationship satisfaction at the end of each day for 7 consecutive days. All of the measures will be completed through a secure website. Due to the demands on participants associated with repeatedly completing daily measures of state self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, participants will be contacted each day of the study via e-mail or telephone to remind them to participate each evening.

Participants

This study intends to include approximately 200 undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology courses. The students will participate in exchange for partial course credit. The
population that is to be studied via the sample is college students in an exclusive dating relationship.

Measures

Participants will be asked to complete trait measures of explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction as well as daily measures of state self-esteem and relationship satisfaction (see Appendix for copies of these measures).

Trait Measures

Explicit Self-Esteem. Explicit self-esteem will be measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES is a well-validated measure of global self-regard (Blaskovich & Tomaka, 1991; Demo, 1985) that has displayed adequate psychometric properties in past research (e.g., test-retest correlations greater than .80; Rosenberg, 1965; Silber & Tippett, 1965). Participants will be instructed to complete the scale according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses will be made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Implicit Self-Esteem. Two measures of implicit self-esteem will be included in the present study based on their demonstrated utility in the existing literature. The first measure of implicit self-esteem will be the Name-Letter Task which is based on the procedure developed by Nuttin (1985, 1987). For the Name-Letter Task, participants will be asked to evaluate all letters of the alphabet using response scales ranging from 1 (I dislike this letter very much) to 7 (I like this letter very much). Scores for the Name-Letter Task will be calculated by subtracting the normative rating of each participant’s first and last initial (will take the average across participants whose names did not contain that letter) from each participant’s rating of his or her
own initials (see Koole et al., 2001 for further details on the calculation of initials-preferences). Scores on this measure depict the extent to which participants consider their initials to be more positive than other participants’ evaluations these letters. Many studies have provided reliability and validity of initials-preferences (Bosson et al., 2000; Jones, Pellham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002; Koole et al., 2001; Koole & Pelham, 2003; Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999).

The second measure of implicit self-esteem will be the Implicit Self-Evaluation Survey (ISES; Pelham & Hetts, 1999). This measure assesses participants’ tendency to generate pleasant versus unpleasant words following a self-priming task. This will be accomplished by alternating self-priming items and word completion tasks. For the self-priming items, participants will be asked to specify their level of agreement with statements concerning the self such as “I am very sensitive to my inner thoughts and feelings” on scales ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). Following each priming statement, participants will complete three word fragments by providing a different beginning letter for each word fragment. The word fragments are intended to generate four pairs of pleasant-unpleasant antonyms: love-hate, good-bad, nice-mean, and fair-poor. Scores for the ISES are determined by the successive arrangement of the target word and control words. The position of the target word signifies ones implicit self-esteem. For example, if the target word is formed first, then it will be given a score of 1. On those occasions when the target word is not listed for a particular word fragment, it will be assigned a score of 4. Scores will be determined by subtracting the value associated with the serial positions of the pleasant target word completions from the values associated with the serial positions of the unpleasant target word completions. Higher scores reflect greater accessibility of pleasant than unpleasant words following the priming statement.
I plan to form a composite implicit self-esteem score by standardizing both of these measures and taking their average. I am adopting this approach because there is little consensus concerning the best measure of implicit self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Jordan, in press).

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction will be measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS has been shown to be a reliable and valid seven-item measure of global relationship satisfaction. Responses will be made on a 5-point scale (Vaughn & Matyastik 1999). The average score across these items will serve as an index of relationship satisfaction such that higher scores will signify greater relationship satisfaction.

State Measures

State Self-Esteem. Following the general procedure outlined by Kernis and his colleagues for measuring state self-esteem and self-esteem instability (e.g., Kernis et al., 1989), participants will be asked to complete a modified version of the RSES at the end of each day (at approximately 10pm) for 7 consecutive days. The RSES will be modified so that participants will give the response that best reflects how they feel at the moment they complete the form. Responses will be made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

Daily Relationship Satisfaction. A modification of a three-item global satisfaction scale to measure participants' daily evaluation of their relationships will be used. Participants will be asked to respond to the following items taken from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996): “I am extremely happy with my relationship,” “I have a very strong relationship with my partner,” and “I do not feel that my relationship is successful” (reverse scored). Participants will be instructed to answer each item with regard to how they feel about their relationship “right now at this moment” on scales ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 9 (completely true).
Daily Relationship Closeness. In order to evaluate relationship closeness, the Inclusion of Other in the Self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) measure will be included. This measure consists of seven Venn diagrams in which participants will indicate how close one feels to his or her significant other. The more an individual indicates unity between themselves and their partner, the higher level of closeness the relationship is considered to have.

I believe this methodology to be appropriate because it captures items such as global self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, as well as daily levels of self-esteem, satisfaction, and closeness. I believe both global and daily measures are necessary for my study. Also, the measures that I intend to use are well-validated in assessing what I plan to measure. I chose an internet-based study in attempts to have a high participation rate.

Statistical Analysis

The data to address Hypothesis 1 will be analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. For Hypothesis 2, I will use multilevel random coefficient models because of the nested structure of the data.

Preliminary Outline of Thesis

I. Introduction/Problem Statement-brief overview of study

II. Literature Review

A. Conceptualizing Self-Esteem

B. Importance of Studying Self-Esteem

C. Fragile vs. Secure Self-Esteem
D. Interpersonal Nature of Self-Esteem-relating self-esteem specifically to dating relationships

III. Methodology

A. Overview

B. Participants

C. Measures

1. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

2. Name-Letter Task

3. Implicit Self-Esteem Survey

4. Relationship Assessment Scale

5. Rosentberg State Self-Esteem Scale

6. Daily Relationship Satisfaction

7. Inclusion of Other in the Self

IV. Results- will use hierarchical multiple regression and multilevel random coefficient models

V. Discussion-will explain the results that I find and will retain or reject my hypotheses

VI. References

VII. Appendix- includes surveys that I intend to use
References


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Appendix

ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE

Directions: Indicate how much you agree with each of the statements **IN GENERAL** by darkening the appropriate circle on your answer sheet.

1..................2..................3..................4..................5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

1. I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. I certainly feel useless at times.
10. At times, I think I am no good at all.
Below, you are presented with all the letters of the alphabet. Please consider how much you like each letter and then, darken the appropriate circle on the scantron. Please give your honest response for each item. There are no right or wrong answers.

1 ............2 ............3 ............4 ............5 ............6 ............7
I dislike this
letter very much

I like this
letter very much

1. 'A'
2. 'B'
3. 'C'
4. 'D'
5. 'E'
6. 'F'
7. 'G'
8. 'H'
9. 'I'
10. 'J'
11. 'K'
12. 'L'
13. 'M'
14. 'N'
15. 'O'
16. 'P'
17. 'Q'
18. 'R'
19. 'S'
20. 'T'
21. 'U'
22. 'V'
23. 'W'
24. 'X'
25. 'Y'
26. 'Z'
In this survey, you are asked to do two different tasks: (1) to answer some attitude items, and (2) to complete a series of word fragments. To gain experimental control over the two tasks, we have alternated them. In this way, we can make sure that the two separate tasks are completed at the same time (while people are in the same frame of mind).

Your job is to answer each attitude item using the 7-point scale provided, and to complete the “word completion” task that follows each attitude item by providing a series of missing letters. Please make three DIFFERENT words for each word completion task, listing your words in the order in which you thought of them.

Here is a concrete example of how someone might fill out a word completion:

Word completions: 1. _M_OAT 2. _C_OAT 3. _B_OAT

Summary: (1) Complete the items in the order presented (an attitude item THEN a word completion THEN an attitude item...)

(2) Circle one number for each attitude or personality item.

(3) Printing carefully, fill in three different missing letters for each word completion item.

1. It’s important to me to understand myself as well as possible.

1...........2...........3...........4...........5...........6...........7

Not at Very
all true true

2. Word completions: 1. ___INE 2. ___INE 3. ___INE

3. Other people value my abilities and opinions.
4. Word completions: 1. ___ATE   2. ___ATE   3. ___ATE

5. The way other people treat me has a lot to do with my own unique personality.

6. Word completions: 1. ___OOD   2. ___OOD   3. ___OOD

7. I am very sensitive to my own inner thoughts and feelings.

8. Word completions: 1. ___EAN   2. ___EAN   3. ___EAN
RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE

Please mark the letter for each item that best answers that item for you.

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?
   
   (Poorly) 1………2………3………4………5  (Extremely well)

2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
   
   (Unsatisfied) 1………2………3………4………5  (Extremely satisfied)

3. How good is your relationship compared to most?
   
   (Poor) 1………2………3………4………5  (Excellent)

4. How often do you wish you hadn’t gotten in this relationship?
   
   (Never) 1………2………3………4………5  (Very often)

5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
   
   (Hardly at all) 1………2………3………4………5  (Completely)

6. How much do you love your partner?
   
   (Not much) 1………2………3………4………5  (Very much)

7. How many problems are there in your relationship?
   
   (Very few) 1………2………3………4………5  (Very many)
STATE ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE

Directions: Indicate how much you agree with each of the statements AT THIS MOMENT by darkening the appropriate circle on your answer sheet.

1. I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. I certainly feel useless at times.
10. At times, I think I am no good at all.
DAILY RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

1 = not at all true, 9 = completely true

1. I am extremely happy with my relationship.  
2. I have a very strong relationship with my partner.  
3. I do not feel that my relationship is successful.

INCLUSION OF OTHER IN THE SELF SCALE

Please circle the picture below which best describes your relationship.