Measuring Self-Esteem in Context: The Importance of Stability of Self-Esteem in Psychological Functioning

Michael H. Kernis
Department of Psychology and Institute for Behavioral Research University of Georgia

ABSTRACT In this article, I report on a research program that has focused on the joint roles of stability and level of self-esteem in various aspects of psychological functioning. Stability of self-esteem refers to the magnitude of short-term fluctuations that people experience in their current, contextually based feelings of self-worth. In contrast, level of self-esteem refers to representations of people’s general, or typical, feelings of self-worth. A considerable amount of research reveals that self-esteem stability has predictive value beyond the predictive value of self-esteem level. Moreover, considering self-esteem stability provides one way to distinguish fragile from secure forms of high self-esteem. Results from a number of studies are presented and theoretical implications are discussed.

Some time ago, I had a dream in which I was shopping for clothes at a department store. Each time that I tried to put an article of clothing on, it would not go up past my knees. Now, I am a big person, so this was fast becoming a very frustrating experience. Soon I concluded that I must be in the wrong department, and I fell back asleep. Imagine my surprise when I awoke in the morning to find my wife’s

Address correspondence to Michael Kernis, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, or to mkernis@uga.edu

Journal of Personality 73:6, December 2005
© Blackwell Publishing 2005
DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00359.x
closet open and, scattered across the floor laid multiple pairs of her shorts. I am not recounting this dream because I want readers to imagine me wearing women’s clothing as they read this article. No, I am recounting it to make an important point. That is, just as I was trying unsuccessfully to cram my big body into my wife’s small shorts, self-esteem researchers have tried unsuccessfully to incorporate all self-esteem processes into one aspect of self-esteem, namely its level (whether it is high or low). This reliance on self-esteem level to account for the role of self-esteem in psychological and interpersonal functioning has produced weak, inconsistent, and sometimes contradictory sets of findings for a wide range of phenomena.

Self-esteem level has been implicated in a vast array of phenomena, including depression and suicidal ideation (Harter, 1993; Rosenberg, 1985), loneliness and peer rejection (Ammerman, Kazdin, & Van Hasselt, 1993; East, Hess, & Lerner, 1987), academic achievement (Hattie, 1992), and life satisfaction (Huebner, 1991) (for a review, see DuBois & Tevendale; 1999). Moreover, self-esteem has been linked to a wide variety of psychopathologies (Silverstone, 1991). A search of the DSM-IV-TR by O’Brien, Bartoletti, and Leitzel (in press) revealed that “the term ‘self-esteem’ appears in 24 different diagnostic contexts, as a criterion for disorders (e.g., dysthymia), as a criterion for disorders being considered for inclusion in future DSM editions (e.g., depressive personality disorder), and as an associated feature of disorders (e.g., social phobia)” (p. 1). This does not include the appearance of over 50 “self” terms that “have meanings that overlap with self-esteem, including arrogant self-appraisal, grandiose sense of self, inflated self-appraisal, low self-worth (dirtiness, worthlessness), self-assured (cocky), self-blame, self-confidence, self-critical, self-deprecation, self-doubts, self-evaluation, and self-reproach. . . . Grandiose high self-esteem is a criterion used to define hypomanic and manic episodes, which are diagnostic when linked to instability of mood in cyclothymic and bipolar disorders (O’Brien et al., in press).”

However, despite this presumed centrality of self-esteem to various aspects of psychological functioning, its precise role, more often than desired, remains unclear. DuBois and Tevendale (1999) noted that researchers have found self-esteem to relate positively (Hattie, 1992), as well as negatively (Skaalvik & Hagtvet, 1990), to academic achievement. In addition, DuBois and Tevendale (1999) noted that
conflicting findings have emerged in studies predicting delinquent behavior and gang involvement (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Wang, 1994). In addition to the fact that inconsistent findings plague self-esteem research, the predictive utility of self-esteem with respect to psychological health, well-being, and (mal)adaptive behavior generally is modest, with the majority of variance in these indices left unaccounted for (DuBois & Tevendale, 1999). A more recent literature review further substantiates the claim that self-esteem level is not a strong predictor of objective outcomes such as school achievement, occupational success, drug abuse, and criminality (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger, & Vohs, 2003). Findings such as these suggest that self-esteem level, when taken alone, provides an incomplete picture of the role of self-esteem in psychological and interpersonal functioning.

Fortunately, in recent years, a growing number of researchers have begun to incorporate additional aspects of self-esteem into their research and theories. These aspects include implicit self-esteem (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002; Pelham, Koole, Hardin, Hetts, Seah, & DeHart, in press), contingent self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Neighbors, Larimer, Geisner, & Knee, 2005) and stability of self-esteem (Kernis & Goldman, 2002; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). In this article, I review a program of research that my students and I have undertaken to examine the joint implications of level and stability of self-esteem for various aspects of psychological and interpersonal functioning. I begin by discussing some definitional and measurement issues concerning these two self-esteem components.

**DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LEVEL AND STABILITY OF SELF-ESTEEM**

Self-esteem level refers to people's representations of their typical, or general, global feelings of self-worth. In our research, we have participants complete a standard measure of global self-esteem—for adults, Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale; for children, either Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale or the global self-worth subscale of Harter’s (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children—under explicit instructions to “base their responses on how they typically, or generally, feel about themselves.” Assessment of self-esteem level usually
takes place in a laboratory or other formal “testing” setting, outside the context of people’s everyday lives. Thus, self-esteem level reflects people’s representations of how they typically feel about themselves across time and context. Although these representations can change, the changes usually occur slowly and over an extended time period (Rosenberg, 1986). Furthermore, self-esteem level exhibits considerable rank-order stability, even over many years (Rosenberg, 1986).

In contrast, self-esteem stability refers to the magnitude of short-term fluctuations that people experience in their contextually based, immediate feelings of self-worth. In our research, we ask people to complete a measure of global self-esteem (either Rosenberg’s or Harter’s) once or twice daily for periods ranging from 5 to 7 days, with instructions to base their responses on how they feel “at the moment” they are completing each form. We then compute the standard deviation of people’s total scores across these multiple assessments: The greater the standard deviation, the more unstable individuals’ self-esteem. On Rosenberg’s measure, the response format is 10 dots, anchored by the labels “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” We did this to reduce the extent to which people linked their responses to specific numbers, presumably making it easier for them to give different responses across the multiple assessments.

The major virtue of obtaining multiple assessments of current self-esteem is that it provides for the measurement of self-esteem stability in the context of everyday events experienced by individuals. Along with this ecological validity, however, comes a relative lack of control over the data collection. Fortunately, our previous research indicates that the quality of data we obtain is high. That is, the vast majority of participants take the task seriously and complete the measures at or close to the times we ask them to (as assessed in extensive individual debriefing sessions).

A BRIEF HISTORY AND THEORY PRESENTATION (AND DIGRESSION)

I began my research on stability of self-esteem because of what I believed to be a strong contradiction between data and theory that existed in the literature on the nature of high self-esteem and its role in psychological functioning. On the one hand, considerable findings
emerged that purported to demonstrate that individuals with high self-esteem were highly motivated to protect and enhance their positive feelings of self-worth even if it meant being overtly self-serving, self-destructive, or antagonistic toward others. For example, high self-esteem individuals (1) take great pride in their successes (“I am highly intelligent”), but tenaciously deny any responsibility for their failures (“The instructor designed a very poor test”) (Fitch, 1970); (2) criticize out-group members who threaten their (or their group’s) sense of value and worth (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987); and (3) create obstacles to successful performance that can easily backfire (Tice, 1991) just to enhance their sense of competence should they nonetheless succeed. Other research demonstrates that, when threatened, high self-esteem individuals sabotage their own performances in the service of self-esteem protection. For example, high self-esteem individuals whose egos are threatened take excessive risks by overestimating their competence, resulting in unnecessary performance declines (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993). Findings such as these imply that individuals with high self-esteem go around leading their lives with a “defend the fort” mentality, tenaciously warding off any and all potential threats. Importantly, Tennen and Affleck (1993) pointed out the puzzling nature of these findings, noting that routine use of various self-protective and self-enhancing strategies may have negative consequences such as undermining an individual’s personal relationships and the development of skills needed to overcome future adversities.

As I read this research on how individuals with high self-esteem react to evaluative information, I could not help but think that it contradicted my own intuitive sense of what it means to have high self-esteem. If one is truly happy with oneself, being outperformed by others, receiving an unflattering evaluation, or performing poorly should not require excessive self-protection; instead, high self-esteem individuals should roll with the punches so that potentially threatening events would not “stick,” but, instead, roll off like “water off a duck’s back.” As I read more, I found that my intuitive characterization of high self-esteem was also the view of high self-esteem held by clinical psychologists with humanistic leanings (e.g., Rogers, 1959), as well as by some major self-esteem theorists (e.g., Rosenberg, 1986). Note that I am not saying that possessing high self-esteem means that people are impervious to adverse events. What I am
saying is that while they may feel frustrated, disappointed, or sad, people with high self-esteem should not generally revise their feelings of self-worth in the face of adverse occurrences.

It occurred to me that one way out of this potential contradiction between research and theory was to presume that multiple forms of high self-esteem exist that differ in the extent to which they are secure or fragile. The research findings of social-personality psychologists seemed to be tapping aspects of fragile high self-esteem, whereas humanistically oriented theorists seemed to be capturing aspects of secure high self-esteem. If this were true, it would raise the question of how to measure these different forms of high self-esteem. Around that time, I read a paper by Savin-Williams and Demo (1983) that suggested to me one way of doing so. Savin-Williams and Demo used the experience sampling method to obtain multiple assessments of adolescents’ contextually based self-esteem. Specifically, participants in this research completed a self-esteem measure when prompted by a paging device ("beeper") at random time intervals throughout the day as they were going about their everyday activities. Findings indicated significant individual variation in how much participants’ contextually based self-esteem fluctuated; specifically, whereas the self-esteem of some adolescents fluctuated little or not at all, the self-esteem of other adolescents fluctuated substantially.

As it happened, I had also read a chapter by Rosenberg (1986) in which he distinguished between barometric and baseline instability. Baseline instability refers to long-term fluctuations in one’s self-esteem that occur gradually over an extended time period. For example, decreases in self-esteem level are common as children transition from the relatively safe environs of elementary school to the more turbulent middle school environment, often followed by slow but steady increases in self-esteem through the high school years (e.g., Bachman, O’Malley, & Johnston, 1978; Demo & Savin-Williams, 1983; McCarthy & Hoge, 1982; O’Malley & Bachman, 1983; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1984). In contrast, barometric instability reflects short-term fluctuations in one’s contextually based global self-esteem. Through many discussions with one of my graduate students at the time, Bruce Grannemann, we began to develop a conceptualization of the meaning and nature of unstable (barometric) self-esteem (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989; see also Kernis, 2003a; Kernis & Goldman, 2002; Kernis & Paradise, 2002; Kernis &
Waschull, 1995). I turn now to a brief discussion of this conceptualization.

Unstable self-esteem may take numerous forms. Some people may experience dramatic shifts from feeling very positively to very negatively about themselves. Others, however, may primarily fluctuate in the extent to which they feel positively or negatively about themselves. The precise nature of these fluctuations is likely to depend upon a number of factors, including the salience of specific self-aspects and the valence of recently experienced self-relevant events (cf. Markus & Kunda, 1986). The implications of various patterns of fluctuations have yet to be examined, but I believe that, in general, they all will reflect an underlying fragility in feelings of self-worth. Elsewhere (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993), I have argued that the essence of unstable self-esteem is the propensity to experience short-term fluctuations in contextually based feelings of self-worth that interact with situationally based factors to produce specific patterns of fluctuations. Thus, these fluctuations may at times (or for certain people) be primarily unidirectional (e.g., within either a relatively positive or negative range) or bidirectional (between positive and negative ranges) (for a relevant discussion of this issue, see Vallacher & Novak, 2000).

Unstable self-esteem reflects fragile, vulnerable feelings of immediate self-worth that are influenced by the vicissitudes of potentially self-relevant events that either are externally provided (e.g., interpersonal rejection) or self-generated (reflecting on one’s dating prowess). One core characteristic of people with fragile self-esteem is that they are highly responsive to events that have potential relevance to their feelings of self-worth—in fact, they may interpret events as being self-esteem relevant even when they are not (cf. Greenier et al., 1999). For example, a nonreturned smile to a colleague may be viewed as reflective of one’s own shortcomings and not of the other being preoccupied. Individuals with unstable self-esteem may respond by accepting or exaggerating an event’s evaluative implications (e.g., they may feel incompetent and demoralized following a specific failure; Kernis et al., 1998) or by attacking the validity of the threatening information or the credibility of its source (Kernis et al., 1989). In contrast, people with relatively stable self-esteem typically have less extreme reactions to potentially evaluative events, precisely because these events have little impact on their immediate feelings of self-worth. In other words, stable self-esteem reflects immediate feelings
of self-worth that generally are unaffected by everyday positive and negative events. (Although I use the terms stable and unstable self-esteem throughout this article, this is for ease of exposition only. Conceptually and empirically, we treat stability and level of self-esteem as continuous dimensions along which people vary).

Several factors have been implicated in why the immediate feelings of self-worth of some individuals are highly unstable. These factors include overreliance on the evaluations, love, and approval of others, an impoverished self-concept, and excessive dependency needs (Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Kernis, Paradise et al., 2000; Rosenberg, 1986; Tennen & Affleck, 1993). Developmentally, harsh or controlling family environments are thought to promote fragile, unstable feelings of self-worth (Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000; Rogers, 1959). In addition, people with unstable self-esteem may be especially prone to interpret everyday events as having relevance to their feelings of self-worth and to experience their self-esteem as “continually on the line” (i.e., heightened ego involvement). As previously noted, these events may be external, environmentally based (e.g., being turned down for a date) or more internally based, such as reflecting on one’s progress toward an important goal. Greenier et al. (1999) portrayed this heightened ego involvement as an “evaluative set” comprised of several interlocking components. First, an attentional component involves “zeroing in” on information or events that have potentially self-evaluative implications. Second, a bias component involves interpreting ambiguous-ly or non-self-esteem relevant events as self-esteem relevant. Finally, a generalization component involves linking one’s immediate global feelings of self-worth to specific outcomes and events (e.g., a poor math performance is taken to reflect low overall intelligence and worth). Each of these components may operate outside of one’s awareness or be consciously and deliberately invoked (for further discussion, see Kernis & Paradise, 2002).

Although different in their specifics, each of the aforementioned factors implies that people with unstable self-esteem do not have a well-anchored sense of their self-worth. Also they suggest that unstable self-esteem reflects fragile and vulnerable feelings of self-worth that are subject to the vicissitudes of externally provided and internally generated positive and negative experiences. The program of research that I present in this article examines various implications of these assertions.
We conducted this study during the summer of 1988, collaborating with another graduate student, Linda Barclay (now Mathis), with the help of an “army” of undergraduate research assistants. Another graduate student at the time, Victor Bissonnette, wrote a computer program that would “call” participants’ paging devices (beepers) once at a random time within each of five 2-hour periods each day. For the first four time periods, we instructed participants to complete a form that asked for their “current” affect; for the last period, we instructed participants to complete a form that asked for their “current” self-esteem. Specifically, we instructed participants to complete Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale based on “how they were feeling at the moment they were completing the form.” They did this for a period of 7 days. We then computed the standard deviation of individuals’ total scores across these multiple assessments; the greater the standard deviation, the more unstable individuals’ self-esteem. The previous week, participants completed Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale in small group settings based on “how they typically, or generally, felt about themselves” (to measure self-esteem level).

Participants returned to the lab the week following assessment of stability of self-esteem to complete several standard measures of anger and hostility proneness. Importantly, no main effects emerged for self-esteem level. Instead, a number of significant self-esteem stability × self-esteem level interactions emerged. In each instance, predicted values generated from regression equations yielded the same pattern. Whereas individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported the highest tendencies toward anger/hostility proneness, individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the lowest tendencies; individuals with stable or unstable low self-esteem fell between these two extremes. Importantly, variability in daily affect did not predict anger and hostility proneness. These findings support the contention that, whereas unstable high self-esteem reflects positive, but fragile, feelings of self-worth, stable high self-esteem reflects positive and secure feelings of self-worth.

Since then, we have conducted a number of studies to examine the joint roles of stability and level of self-esteem in a variety of
phenomena, including depression, excuse making, intrinsic motivation, reactivity to daily events, psychological well-being, relationship functioning, children's perceptions of parent-child communication, self-regulation, and self-concept clarity. Although the bulk of this research involved college students, a few studies involved children (Kernis, Brown et al., 2000; Waschull & Kernis, 1996). As I will describe, the findings from these studies indicate that a more complete understanding of the nature and functioning of self-esteem requires taking into consideration not only its level but also the extent to which it is stable or unstable.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE UNSTABLE SELF-ESTEEM?

Kernis and Waschull (1995) argued that unstable self-esteem reflects fragile and vulnerable feelings of self-worth that are affected by internally generated and externally provided evaluative information. A core characteristic of people with unstable self-esteem is that they react very strongly to events that they view as self-esteem relevant; in fact, they may even see self-esteem relevance in cases where it does not exist. As in Deci and Ryan’s (1995) conceptualization of contingent self-esteem, we assert that people with unstable self-esteem are highly ego involved in their everyday activities. As noted earlier, Greenier et al. (1999) portrayed this heightened ego involvement as an “evaluative set” comprised of several interlocking components. First, an attentional component involves excessively focusing on information or events that have potentially self-evaluative implications. Second, a bias component involves interpreting ambiguously or non-self-esteem-relevant events as self-esteem relevant. Finally, a generalization component involves linking one’s immediate global feelings of self-worth to specific outcomes and events (e.g., a bad “first date” is taken to reflect one’s poor social skills). I now turn to some recent studies that are relevant to this evaluative set.

Heightened Reactivity to Daily Events

If unstable self-esteem reflects heightened investment of self-esteem in daily activities, the self-feelings of people with unstable as compared to stable self-esteem should be more affected by everyday positive and negative daily events. To test this hypothesis, Greenier et al. (1999) had college students complete measures of self-esteem
level and self-esteem stability (once or twice daily, Monday evening through Friday morning). Participants then provided daily descriptions of their most positive and negative experience Monday through Thursday for two weeks. For each event, participants indicated the extent to which it made them feel better or worse about themselves. Our findings indicated that the more unstable individuals' self-esteem, the worse they reported feeling in response to negative events and the better they reported feelings in response to positive events. Importantly, these effects emerged after controlling for self-esteem level, which related to heightened reactivity only to negative events.

Greenier et al. (1999) also had independent coders rate each event on a number of dimensions, including its relevance to self-esteem. Interestingly, these coders rated the negative (but not the positive) events reported by individuals with unstable self-esteem individuals as more self-esteem relevant than the events reported by individuals with stable self-esteem. Moreover, when we controlled for self-esteem relevance, the relationship between unstable self-esteem and heightened reactivity disappeared for negative events. However, controlling for self-esteem relevance did not substantially alter the relation between unstable self-esteem and heightened reactivity to positive events.

Greenier et al. (1999) suggested that one implication of these ratings is that individuals with unstable self-esteem encounter more frequent negative self-esteem-relevant events than do individuals with stable self-esteem. Alternatively, these authors suggested that the ratings might reflect a heightened tendency of individuals with unstable self-esteem to attend to negative events that are self-esteem relevant or to bias their event descriptions to emphasize aspects potentially implicating self-esteem concerns. Stated differently, the ratings made by these coders may either reflect "objective" differences in the actual events reported or "subjective" differences associated with the way that participants attended to and described particular events (i.e., components of the evaluative set described earlier). Unfortunately, given that participants only recorded one event each day, these data do not address the frequency with which different individuals experience self-esteem-threatening events. However, data that I will present later do indicate that, compared to people with stable self-esteem, people with unstable self-esteem are more responsive to the self-esteem-threatening aspects of aversive interpersonal events (Waschull & Kernis, 1996). Therefore, while the frequency,
type, and magnitude of evaluative events that people experience in
everyday lives may affect their degree of unstable self-esteem,
this does not fully explain why people possess unstable self-esteem.
Instead, we also must consider the inner psychological worlds of
people with unstable self-esteem to account for the heightened reac-
tivity and defensiveness they exhibit in response to evaluative events.
This heightened reactivity often has adverse consequences, as dem-
onstrated by a study on fragile self-esteem and depressive symptoms
conducted by Kernis et al. (1998).

**DAILY HASSLES AND STABILITY OF SELF-ESTEEM AS
PREDICTORS OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS**

Clinical theory and observation suggest that people who are vulner-
able to depression are susceptible to substantial downward fluctua-
tions in their feelings of self-worth, particularly in response to
negative events (e.g., Chodoff, 1973; Jacobson, 1975; for a review,
see Tennen & Affleck, 1993). Consistent with this contention, several
studies have shown that aversive events exacerbate depressive symp-
toms, especially among people with unstable self-esteem. Roberts
and Monroe (1992) reported that among initially nondepressed in-
dividuals, failure on a college examination predicted increases in de-
pression only among individuals with unstable self-esteem. Butler,
Hokanson, & Flynn (1994) found that, as major life stressors in-
creased, unstable self-esteem predicted greater depression among
low-, but not among high-, self-esteem individuals. Roberts and
Gotlib (1997) reported that day-to-day variability in either global
self-esteem or specific self-evaluations, in combination with stressful
life events, predicted increases in depressive symptoms over a 6-week
period, particularly in individuals who had a history of depressive
episodes. These findings emerged after controlling for other variables
such as Neuroticism and self-concept certainty. Importantly, neither
variability in day-to-day affect nor any of the other predictor vari-
ables interacted with life stressors to predict depression. Finally,
none of the predictor variables (including self-esteem stability) in-
teracted with life stressors to predict increases in anxiety.

Kernis et al. (1998) examined the extent to which stability of self-
esteeem, level of self-esteem, and daily hassles (e.g., not having
enough time to do things, money shortages, interpersonal conflicts,
etc.) predicted increases in depressive symptoms among college students across a 4-week period. Participants first completed Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (to measure self-esteem level) and two measures of depressive symptoms (the Beck Depression Inventory and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale). The following week they completed multiple measures of current self-esteem to assess stability of self-esteem. Three weeks later, participants returned to the lab to complete a measure of daily hassles (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981), calibrated for the intervening time period, and the same measures of depressive symptoms. Regression analyses indicated that self-esteem level did not predict increases in depressive symptoms, either as a main effect or when interacting with daily hassles experienced. With respect to self-esteem stability, increases in depressive symptoms were most evident among individuals who reported experiencing considerable daily hassles and whose self-esteem was unstable (as reflected in significant self-esteem stability × hassles interactions).

Additional findings from this study pertained to the links between unstable self-esteem and overgeneralization following failure (Carver & Ganellen, 1983) and depressive attributional styles. First, unstable self-esteem significantly correlated with tendencies to overgeneralize the negative implications of failure. That is, whereas people with unstable self-esteem react to a specific failure by feeling incompetent and stupid (the generalization component of the evaluative set described earlier), people with stable self-esteem have more localized reactions (i.e., if they question anything, it may be their ability to succeed at the task at hand). Second, compared to participants with stable self-esteem, participants with unstable self-esteem reported greater tendencies to explain negative events in terms of factors that were internal, stable, and global.

Interestingly, additional analyses indicated that overgeneralization tendencies and depressive attributional styles each interacted with daily hassles in predicting increases in depressive symptoms. That is, in separate analyses, increases in depressive symptoms were highest among individuals who experienced considerable daily hassles and who were high overgeneralizers or who reported depressive attributional styles. When we entered self-esteem stability and either overgeneralization or attributional styles along with daily hassles in regression models predicting change in depressive symptoms, the overgeneralization × hassles (or attributional styles × hassles)
interaction became nonsignificant, but the self-esteem stability × hassles interaction remained significant (on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale). Kernis et al. (1998) speculated that depressive attributional styles or negative overgeneralization tendencies exacerbate the adverse implications of daily hassles for depressive symptoms to the extent that they contribute to experiencing short-term shifts in feelings of self-worth (for a similar view, see Kuiper’s self-worth contingency model of depression; Kuiper & Olinger, 1986). In other words, experiencing downward self-esteem fluctuations in response to negative events may account for why overgeneralization tendencies and depressive attributional styles are associated with heightened depressive symptoms in the face of aversive daily events (for a more extensive discussion, see Kernis et al., 1998).

Although there are some differences in findings across studies that have examined the role of unstable self-esteem in depressive symptoms, they support the general conclusion that unstable self-esteem, in combination with aversive events, precipitates or promotes depressive symptoms. However, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, researchers have not definitively established the precise mechanism by which this occurs. Some research (Roberts & Monroe, 1992) demonstrates that threats to self-esteem interact with unstable self-esteem to promote depressive symptoms. These studies suggest that the particular vulnerability exhibited by individuals with unstable self-esteem pertains to the way they react to self-esteem threats, perhaps involving internalization, attributional, or overgeneralization processes. However, other studies (e.g., Kernis et al., 1998; Roberts & Gotlib, 1997) show that daily hassles, which may or may not have direct self-relevant implications, interact with unstable self-esteem to exacerbate depressive symptoms. At least two explanations of these latter findings exist. First, people with unstable self-esteem may interpret non-self-relevant events as relevant to their self-esteem, as suggested by the “evaluative set” described earlier. Second, unstable self-esteem may relate more generally to a variety of suboptimal coping strategies or personal characteristics that are associated with susceptibility to depression or poor psychological adjustment. Kernis and Paradise et al. (2000) obtained findings supporting the latter supposition in a study that focused on self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990) and self-regulatory styles (Ryan & Connell, 1989), to which I now turn.
Kernis, Paradise, et al. (2000) theorized that stability of self-esteem is one aspect of the self-system that reflects whether a person has a strong (vs. weak) sense of self. Whereas someone who has a strong sense of self is confident about his self-knowledge, makes active choices that reflect her likes and dislikes, and has secure feelings of self-worth, someone who has a weak sense of self is plagued by self-doubt and confusion and acts to comply with internally and externally based pressures and controls. Technically speaking, we hypothesized that stable (and high) self-esteem would be associated with self-regulatory styles (Ryan & Connell, 1989) that reflect agency and self-determination and with self-concepts that are clearly and confidently defined (Campbell et al., 1996).

As described by Ryan and Connell, self-regulatory styles refer to individual differences in the extent to which people engage in goal-directed activities for reasons that reflect varying degrees of choicefulness, self-determination, and integration with one’s core self. At one extreme, external regulation reflects the absence of self-determination wherein the impetus for action is external to the actor (e.g., another person’s request tied implicitly or explicitly to reward or punishment). Introjected regulation involves minimal self-determination and is “an internally controlling state in which affective and self-esteem contingencies are applied to enforce or motivate an adopted value or set of actions” (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993, p. 587). Gaining the approval of self and others promotes behaviors that “are performed because one ‘should’ do them, or because not doing so might engender anxiety, guilt, or loss of self-esteem” (1993, p. 587). Introjected regulation goes hand-in-hand with heightened ego involvement. Identified regulation involves considerably more self-determination, as the individual personally and freely identifies with the activity’s importance for his or her functioning and growth. At the other extreme, intrinsic regulation reflects maximal self-determination as an individual chooses to engage in actions purely for the pleasure and enjoyment they provide.

Self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1991) holds that the self-regulatory styles of optimally functioning individuals consist
primarily of identified and intrinsic regulation, rather than introjected and external regulation. Consistent with this assertion, Sheldon and Kasser (1995) found that the more self-determined individuals’ self-regulatory styles, the higher their life satisfaction, vitality, daily positive affect, and self-esteem level. Given that individuals with unstable self-esteem are especially likely to link their immediate feelings of self-worth to specific outcomes and experiences (heightened ego involvement), we anticipated that the more unstable (or lower) individuals’ self-esteem, the more they would engage in external and introjected regulation and the less they would engage in identified and intrinsic regulation.

Possessing a well-developed self-concept also is implicated in optimal psychological functioning (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). When self-knowledge is confused and conflicted, it will fail to provide meaningful input into people’s behaviors and reactions and instead promote heightened responsiveness to immediately salient situational cues and outcomes (Brockner, 1983). When these cues and outcomes are negative, this heightened responsiveness can be particularly detrimental. Campbell and her colleagues (1990, 1996) introduced the construct of self-concept clarity, which they define as “the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). Importantly, findings indicate that high self-concept clarity relates to a variety of indices of psychological health and well-being, including high self-esteem and low neuroticism (Campbell et al., 1996). Having a poorly developed self-concept may lead individuals to rely on and be more affected by specific evaluative information, thereby enhancing unstable self-esteem (Kernis & Waschull, 1995). Consequently, we anticipated that the more unstable (or lower) individuals’ self-esteem, the lower their self-concept clarity.

To test these hypotheses, Kernis, Paradise, et al. (2000) had participants complete measures of stability and level of self-esteem along with measures of self-regulatory styles and self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Specifically, participants completed the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996) that contains 12 items (e.g., “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another”; “In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.”). In addition, participants generated a list of eight personal strivings
(recurrent goals), and they indicated the extent to which they engaged in each striving because of reasons reflecting external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic self-regulatory processes. Approximately 4 weeks later, participants returned to the lab and indicated the intensity with which they experienced various emotions while engaged in each striving during the intervening time period. Although the retrospective nature of these emotion accounts limits their definitiveness, we included them because of their potential to provide interesting information that can be pursued in future research.

We conducted simultaneous regression analyses separately for each self-regulatory style by entering level and stability of self-esteem in the same step. Our findings indicated that, compared to individuals with unstable (or low) self-esteem, individuals with stable (or high) self-esteem regulated their goal strivings more in terms of external and introjected regulations and less in terms of identified and intrinsic (marginally, for self-esteem stability) regulations. Analyses of the retrospective emotion accounts indicated that, compared to individuals with stable self-esteem, individuals with unstable self-esteem felt more tense and pressured when pursuing their strivings. This last finding provides indirect support for our contention that individuals with unstable self-esteem are chronically ego involved as they go about their everyday activities. Finally, regression analyses indicated that, compared to individuals with unstable (or low) self-esteem, individuals with stable (or high) self-esteem were higher in self-concept clarity.

Kernis, Paradise, et al. (2000) suggested that self-esteem stability and level, self-regulatory styles and self-concept clarity are components of an interlocking system that are likely to have reciprocal influences upon one another. Our theoretical interests led us to enter the system at the self-esteem variables to determine their associations with other variables in the system. In most cases, the two self-esteem variables had additive effects. Thus, individuals with stable high self-esteem were the most self-determining in their self-regulatory styles, were highest in self-concept clarity, and were most favorable in their goal-related affect (high interest and low tension). As Kernis, Paradise, et al. (2000) stated, “[Individuals with stable high self-esteem] . . . are the masters of their psychological domain” (p. 1304).
STA\L E\TITY OF SELF-ESTEEM AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Waschull and Kernis (1996) obtained findings conceptually similar to those of Kernis, Paradise, et al. (2000) in a study that focused on fifth-grade children’s intrinsic motivation in the classroom. Research indicates that situational factors that emphasize the link between specific outcomes and self-esteem often undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan, 1993). Stated differently, heightened concerns about one’s self-esteem may undermine the desire to take on challenges and instead promote a more cautious, but safer, route to positive outcomes. Given that unstable self-esteem reflects a heightened tendency to link one’s self-esteem to specific events and outcomes, we expected that it would relate to lower levels of intrinsic motivation in children. We administered Harter’s Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Orientation in the Classroom Scale as well as Harter’s Perceived Competence Scale for Children (using the global self-worth subscale to measure stability and level of self-esteem). To assess self-esteem stability, experimenters went to children’s classrooms twice daily over the course of 1 week to administer measures of “current” self-esteem. Our findings indicated that, the more unstable children’s self-esteem, the lower their Preference for Challenge (Does the child prefer challenging tasks or those that are easy?) and Curiosity/Interest scores (Is the child motivated by curiosity or to get good grades and please the teacher?). These effects emerged with self-esteem level controlled. Thus, it appears that unstable self-esteem in children is linked to a learning orientation that is directed toward self-esteem protection rather than toward enhancing learning and growth.

Another aspect of this study focused on children’s reasons for becoming angry with their peers. Participants read five vignettes depicting aversive interpersonal events, each of which constituted an instrumental thwarting as well as a potential self-esteem threat (e.g., “You are really thirsty after playing outside with your classmates. Just when you are next in line to get a drink from the fountain, another boy (girl) pushes ahead of you, making you wait”). The results (controlling for self-esteem level) indicated that the more unstable children’s self-esteem, the more likely they were to indicate that they would become angry because of the events’ self-esteem-threatening aspects (“because you would feel or appear weak”).
A final aspect of this study involved examining whether fluctuations in children’s daily global feelings of self-worth related to fluctuations in their daily appraisals of competence and social acceptance. To the extent that unstable self-esteem is associated with generalizing the implications of domain-specific evaluative information to global feelings of self-worth, the magnitude of day-to-day fluctuations in perceived competence and social acceptance should relate to the magnitude of fluctuations in global feelings of self-worth. To examine this issue, we asked participants to rate their current felt competence and social acceptance each time they rated their current self-esteem. As anticipated, the magnitude of daily fluctuations in perceived competence and social acceptance each correlated with the magnitude of daily fluctuations in global self-esteem ($r = .59, .62$, respectively).

In related research involving college students, Kernis et al. (1993, Study 2) tested the hypothesis that variability in specific evaluations and global self-esteem would relate more strongly if the self-evaluative dimension were high rather than low in importance. In addition to daily ratings of current self-evaluations and global self-esteem, participants also rated how important each domain (competence, social acceptance, physical attractiveness) was to their feelings of self-worth. A number of interesting findings emerged. First, replicating Waschull and Kernis (1996), day-to-day variability along each dimension significantly correlated with global self-esteem variability. Second, the relation between greater variability in perceived competence and unstable self-esteem was especially strong among people who viewed competence as an important determinant of their overall self-worth. Third, the same pattern emerged for physical attractiveness and social acceptance, but only among people who rated themselves relatively favorably along these dimensions. For people who rated themselves unfavorably on these dimensions, high daily variability related to highly unstable self-esteem regardless of the dimension’s importance. Kernis et al. (1993) speculated that the substantial interpersonal consequences associated with low social acceptance and physical attractiveness may have overshadowed the impact of personal importance.

Summary. Our program of research has revealed that stability of self-esteem relates to a variety of aspects of psychological functioning. Among the findings reviewed so far, compared to individuals
with stable self-esteem, individuals with unstable self-esteem (a) have self-feelings that are more affected by everyday negative and positive events (Greenier et al., 1999); (b) experience greater increases in depressive symptoms when faced with daily hassles (Kernis et al., 1998); (c) report greater tendencies to overgeneralize the negative implications of specific failures and to attribute negative outcomes to internal, stable, and global factors (Kernis, Paradise, et al., 1998); (d) have more impoverished self-concepts (Kernis, Paradise, et al., 2000); (e) regulate goal-directed behaviors suboptimally (Kernis, Paradise, et al., 2000) and (f) adopt a cautious, self-esteem-protective orientation toward learning as opposed to curiosity and challenge seeking (fifth-grade children; Waschull & Kernis, 1996).

Very little is known about the developmental factors that are responsible for individual differences in stability of self-esteem. In the next section, I discuss our research that addressed this issue.

**FRAGILE SELF-ESTEEM AND CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION**

Kernis, Brown, and Brody (2000) examined how stability of self-esteem in children relates to their perceptions of how their parents communicate with them. Participants in this study consisted of 11- to 12-year-old boys and girls who resided with both of their biological parents. Seventy-nine percent of participants self-identified as Caucasian and the remainder as African American. Ninety-five percent of mothers and 91 percent of fathers had graduated from high school, and the majority had pursued further education.

Experimenters collected the data in two home visits. At the end of the first home visit, the interviewer provided the child and his or her parents with instructions for completing the stability of self-esteem measure. A packet of self-esteem measures (Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale, with added instructions to base their responses on how they feel “right at this moment”) were left with the child. Participants were asked to complete one form before bedtime and one before leaving for school in the morning for a period of 5 consecutive days. Analyses indicated that children’s perceptions of many aspects of parent-child communication patterns (especially fathers’) were linked to the degree to which they possessed unstable or low self-esteem. Children who perceived their fathers to be highly critical, to
engage in insulting name calling, and to use guilt arousal and love withdrawal as control techniques had more unstable (as well as lower) self-esteem than did children who did not perceive their fathers in this manner. In addition, compared to children with stable self-esteem, children with unstable self-esteem indicated that their fathers less frequently talked about the good things that they (the children) had done and were less likely to use value-affirming methods when they did show their approval. Still other findings indicated that, compared to fathers of children with low self-esteem, fathers of children with stable but not unstable high self-esteem were perceived as using better problem-solving methods to solve disagreements with their children. Interestingly, perceptions of mothers’ communication styles were more consistently related to children’s self-esteem level than to their self-esteem stability. The findings for self-esteem stability that did emerge, however, were largely consistent with those that emerged for fathers.

Although disconcerting, it is not surprising that derogatory name calling and criticism by parents is associated with lower and more unstable self-esteem in children. Children generally are sensitive to evaluative information conveyed to them by their parents and other significant adults (Dweck & Goetz, 1978; Rosenberg, 1986). Unfortunately, when this information is clearly and frequently negative, it is very difficult for children to avoid questioning their own value and worth (Harter, 1993). Receiving substantial overt criticism as a child may promote the overgeneralizing tendencies and detrimental attributional styles that we have observed among college students with unstable (or low) self-esteem. When fathers attempt to control children’s unwanted behaviors by arousing guilt or by withdrawing their love, they unwittingly create contingencies wherein children feel worthy and valuable when they act appropriately, but unlovable and unworthy when they act inappropriately. Such contingencies or conditions of worth (Rogers, 1959) can foster the type of non-self-determined self-regulatory styles that we observed in college students (external and introjected rather than identified and intrinsic; Kernis, Paradise, et al., 2000).

On a more positive note, the more that fathers were reputed to show their approval of their children in value-affirming ways, the higher and more stable was their children’s self-esteem. Spending time together and displaying physical affection signals to children that they are valued provide opportunities to deepen affective bonds.
Instead of promoting an external or introjected self-regulatory style in children, value-affirming methods promote identified and intrinsic self-regulation (Ryan, 1993) as they encourage children to trust and utilize their own internal states as guides for action. In addition, fathers of children with stable (but not unstable) high self-esteem were perceived as being especially high in positive problem-solving behaviors (e.g., considering child’s feelings, listening to child’s viewpoint) and especially low in negative problem-solving behaviors (e.g., getting angry and criticizing the child’s ideas, insisting on getting his way). These fathers’ problem-solving styles are very similar to the authoritative parenting style described by Baumrind (1971) that previous research has linked to high self-esteem in children (Buri et al., 1988; Coopersmith, 1967). Kernis, Brown et al.’s (2000) findings that children with unstable high self-esteem did not differ from children with (stable or unstable) low self-esteem in how they characterized their fathers’ problem solving styles suggest that this relationship may be limited to promoting stable high self-esteem.

**IMPLICATIONS OF STABILITY OF SELF-ESTEEM FOR DISTINGUISHING FRAGILE FROM SECURE HIGH SELF-ESTEEM**

A considerable amount of research on stability of self-esteem illuminates the distinction between fragile and secure high self-esteem. Secure high self-esteem reflects positive feelings of self-worth that are well anchored and secure and that are positively associated with a wide range of psychological health and well-being indices. Individuals with secure high self-esteem like, value, and accept themselves, “warts and all.” They do not frequently need to bolster their feelings of worth through self-promoting or self-protective strategies because their feelings of self-worth are not challenged easily. In short, individuals with secure high self-esteem typically experience everyday positive and negative outcomes in ways that do not implicate their global feelings of worth or value. In contrast, fragile high self-esteem reflects positive feelings of self-worth that are vulnerable to threat, as they require continual bolstering, protection, and validation through various self-protective or self-enhancement strategies. Individuals with fragile high self-esteem do not like to see any weaknesses in themselves, and they work very hard to avoid doing so (for more extensive discussion of the secure versus fragile high self-esteem
distinction, see Kernis, 2003a; Kernis & Paradise, 2002). As I will discuss, research demonstrates that, compared to individuals with stable high self-esteem, individuals with unstable high self-esteem engage in greater self-protection and self-enhancement strategies, yet they are lower in psychological adjustment.

**FRAGILE VERSUS SECURE HIGH SELF-ESTEEM AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING**

Lydon, Jamieson, and Holmes (1997) distinguished between being in a relationship and the time period when a relationship is desired but not yet formed. During this so-called pre-unit phase, seemingly innocuous events (e.g., not returning a phone call) are imbued with a great deal of meaning and implications for the perceived fate of the relationship and the desired partner’s view of oneself. Rather than focus on relationship stage, Kernis et al. (2003) focused on the degree to which individuals’ high self-esteem is secure versus fragile. We reasoned that individuals with secure high self-esteem would interpret and react to ambiguously negative actions by their partner by treating them as innocuous, either by minimizing their negative aspects or by offering a benign interpretation of them. In contrast, we surmised that, just as individuals in the pre-unit phase of relationship development, individuals with fragile high self-esteem would imbue these events with negative implications, in this instance either by “internalizing” their negative implications or by resolving to reciprocate in kind to get even with their partner.

Approximately 120 male and female undergraduates currently in a relationship for 3 or more months read nine scenarios that depicted ambiguously negative events in which their partner might engage. Each event had multiple plausible causes and implications for self, partner, and the relationship. Participants rated the likelihood that they would respond in each of four different ways designed to capture this multiplicity of potential causes and implications. Two response options signaled overinvestment of the self and implied that the self somehow was threatened by the event. Of these, one (personalizing) involved magnifying the event’s negative implications for the self. The other (reciprocating) involved resolving to “get even” with one’s partner as a way to deal with the self-esteem threat. The
two remaining response options captured reactions or interpretations that did not involve overinvestment of the self. One of these (benign) involved a transient, externally based (usually partner-related) explanation, and the other (minimize) involved taking the event at “face value,” i.e., not making a big deal of it. An example scenario with response options is as follows:

Your partner does not look up from what he or she is doing when you first enter the room and begin talking. You ask several questions and still your partner answers without looking up. To what extent would you . . .

(a) not think very much about it (Minimize)?
(b) think that your partner is engrossed in something very interesting or important (Benign)?
(c) think that your partner does not care, value, or respect you enough (Personalize)?
(d) go about your business, but treat your partner that very same way when he/she later approaches you (Get even)?

Regression analyses indicated that whereas unstable high self-esteem individuals reported being most likely to engage in personalizing and get-even reactions, stable high self-esteem individuals reported being least likely (low self-esteem individuals fell between). Conversely, whereas stable high self-esteem individuals reported being most likely to engage in benign and minimizing reactions, unstable high self-esteem individuals reported being least likely (again, low self-esteem individuals fell between). These findings are important because they point to the operation of dynamics associated with fragile high self-esteem that until now have been ascribed to low self-esteem individuals (Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998), or to those highly sensitive to rejection (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

To the extent that participants’ responses reflected their actual responses to partner behaviors, the defensive and hostile reactions reported by unstable high self-esteem individuals may have had cumulative, adverse effects on the development of intimacy and relationship quality. To investigate this possibility, participants completed Spanier’s (1976) Relationship Quality scale twice, once at the session when they completed the scenario measure and again
approximately 4–6 weeks later. Predicted values generated from significant self-esteem stability × self-esteem level interactions indicated that whereas individuals with stable high self-esteem reported the highest relationship quality, individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported the lowest (and individuals with either stable or unstable low self-esteem fell between these two extremes). We then examined the potential mediating role of responses to the scenario measure by repeating the regression analyses adding each of the response types individually. These analyses indicated that when we added either personalizing or get-even responses, the self-esteem stability × self-esteem level interaction no longer was significant (while the responses continued to exert significant main effects).

Earlier evidence regarding the heightened defensiveness associated with unstable high self-esteem came from Kernis et al.’s (1989) examination of anger and hostility proneness. Defensiveness often manifests itself in outbursts of anger and hostility that are aimed at restoring damaged self-feelings (Felson, 1984; Feshbach, 1970). Kernis et al. (1989) reported that 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. As evidence of self-aggrandizing tendencies, compared with stable high self-esteem individuals, people with unstable high self-esteem reported being more likely to boast about a success to their friends (Kernis, Greenier, Herlocker, Whisenhunt, & Abend, 1997); after an actual success, they were more likely to claim that they did so in spite of the operation of performance-inhibiting factors (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1992).

Importantly, the enhanced tendencies toward self-enhancement and self-protection exhibited by unstable high self-esteem individuals do not translate into greater psychological adjustment and well-being. Indeed, this is what we (Paradise & Kernis, 2002) expected given our characterization of unstable high self-esteem as reflecting fragile high self-esteem. College student participants completed Ryff’s (1989) psychological well-being measure as well as measures of level and stability of self-esteem. Ryff’s measure assesses six core components of psychological well-being, as follows: (1) self-acceptance (“I like most aspects of my personality”); (2) positive relations with others (“I have not experienced many warm and trusting
relationships with others” [reversed]); (3) autonomy (“I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important’’); (4) environmental mastery (“I am quite good at managing the many responsibilities of my daily life’’); (5) purpose in life (“Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them’’); and (6) personal growth (“I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world’’).

Our findings indicated that individuals with high self-esteem reported higher scores on each of the subscales than did individuals with low self-esteem. In addition, on all subscales except personal growth, individuals with unstable high self-esteem reported lower scores than did individuals with stable high self-esteem. This difference was reflected in either self-esteem stability × self-esteem level interactions or in two main effects. Thus, whereas individuals with stable high self-esteem reported that they functioned autonomously, 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.

**New Directions**

Recently, we have examined how stability of self-esteem relates to authenticity, variability in daily need satisfaction, and attachment styles.

**Authenticity. A multicomponent conceptualization.** Goldman and Kernis (2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2004, 2005; Kernis, 2003a) recently introduced a conceptualization of authenticity, which we define as the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise. In our view, authenticity that has four interrelated, but distinct, components: awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and relational orientation. Brian Goldman and I developed the Authenticity Inventory (AI) to assess each of these four components: awareness (“For better or for worse, I am aware of who I truly am’’); unbiased processing (“I find it easy to pretend I don’t have faults”) (reversed); behavior (“I find it easy to pretend to be something other than my true self”) (reversed); and relational orientation (“My openness and honesty in relationships are essential for their development’’). Confirmatory factor analyses indicate that items in our
latest version (AI, Version 3) do tap four discriminable components of authenticity that comprise a general authenticity construct (Goldman, Kernis, & Lance, 2004).

Goldman and Kernis (2002) administered the AI and measures of life satisfaction, affect, self-esteem level, and contingent self-esteem to approximately 70 individuals. The findings indicated that total authenticity scores positively related to life satisfaction and high self-esteem and negatively related to contingent self-esteem and negative affect. In other research (described in Kernis & Goldman, 2004, 2005), we have found robust relationships between authenticity and its components and various aspects of psychological health and well-being, including Ryff’s (1989) measure. As part of a larger study, Herrmann, Kernis, and Goldman (2004) correlated stability and level of self-esteem with overall authenticity and each of its components. As displayed in Table 1, stability of self-esteem correlated negatively with awareness, unbiased processing, behavior, and total authenticity; level of self-esteem correlated positively with awareness, behavior, relational orientation, and total authenticity. Thus, individuals with high and stable self-esteem obtained the highest authenticity scores, supporting the view that stable high self-esteem reflects a healthier form of high self-esteem than does unstable high self-esteem.

Attachment styles. Mikiluncer and Shaver (in press) review a considerable amount of research showing that the defensiveness and self-aggrandizing tendencies that we have found associated with unstable (in particular, high) self-esteem is absent in people with secure attachment representations. For example, in a series of four studies,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlations Between Components of Authenticity and Stability and Level of Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbiased Processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational Orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Authenticity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Mikiluncer (1998) found that avoidant individuals were especially likely to engage in defensive self-inflation when threatened but that secure individuals were unaffected by these same threats. They state, “In our view, interactions with available, caring, and loving attachment figures in times of need constitute the most important form of personal protection and the primary source of an authentic, stable sense of self-worth. Accordingly, we view the activation of representations of attachment security as a default inner resource that supercedes self-enhancement needs and renders self-enhancement maneuvers less necessary” (Mikiluncer & Shaver, in press, p. 13). These considerations suggest that the higher and more stable individuals’ self-esteem, the more secure and less insecure their attachment representations.

Foster, Kernis, and Goldman (2004) had approximately 100 male and female undergraduate students complete measures of attachment representations and stability and level of self-esteem. The correlations are displayed in Table 2, where it can be seen that self-esteem level correlates positively with secure representations and negatively with preoccupied, fearful, and (marginally) dismissive representations. Self-esteem level also correlates negatively with rejection sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998). On the other hand, self-esteem stability correlates negatively with secure representations and positively with preoccupied and fearful representations, and rejection sensitivity. These data are consistent with Mikiluncer and Shaver’s contentions, given that stable high self-esteem related to the most secure and least insecure attachment representations. Moreover, the fact that unstable self-esteem was associated with more preoccupied and less secure attachments is consistent with sociometer

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment</th>
<th>Self-Esteem Level</th>
<th>Self-Esteem Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>−.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td>−.21*</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>−.29**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissive</td>
<td>−.19†</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection Sensitivity</td>
<td>−.40**</td>
<td>.22*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p < .07. *p < .05. **p < .01.
theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which holds that people’s state self-esteem is responsive to feelings of acceptance and rejection. According to sociometer theory, the roller-coaster-like relationships—extreme highs (acceptance) and extreme lows (rejection)—of those with preoccupied attachments may promote unstable self-esteem, whereas the relatively harmonious relationships associated with secure attachment may promote stable self-esteem.

Stability of self-esteem and variability in daily need satisfaction. Foster, Kernis, Heppner, Lakey, and Goldman (2004) recently completed a study that focused on the relationship between satisfaction of various psychological needs and individual differences in stability of self-esteem. Theory and research link some psychological needs to self-esteem (competence, autonomy, relatedness, authenticity, self-actualization) but not others (money, security, physical well-being, pleasure, influencing others). Accordingly, we expected variability in satisfaction of the former, but not the latter, set of needs to relate to stability of self-esteem. We assessed stability of self-esteem in the usual manner. The next two weeks, Sunday through Thursday, participants rated the extent to which they fulfilled each of eleven psychological needs (those just mentioned, plus self-esteem). Two sets of preliminary findings corroborated our expectations. First, factor analysis revealed two factors, the first of which represented variability in the self-esteem-relevant needs (all loadings .70 or greater) and the second of which represented variability in the non-self-esteem-relevant needs (all loadings .61 or higher). Physical pleasure was the only need that loaded on both factors (.51 on the first factor, .55 on the second factor). Thus, variability in daily self-esteem coincided with variability in the self-esteem-relevant needs. Second, when we regressed stability of self-esteem on to composite self-esteem-relevant and non-self-esteem-relevant variability indexes, only the composite self-esteem-relevant index was significant. These initial findings link daily fulfillment of certain psychological needs to variability in people’s day-to-day feelings of self-worth.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I reviewed the major findings from our research program that has focused on the joint roles of self-esteem level and
self-esteem stability in various aspects of psychological functioning and well-being. In numerous studies, important findings would have gone undetected had we not measured people’s contextually based current feelings of self-worth. The findings that emerged indicate that a full understanding of self-esteem processes will require taking into consideration multiple components of self-esteem. These components include stability of self-esteem, implicit self-esteem, and the extent to which self-esteem is contingent (for discussion of these other components, see Kernis, 2003a, 2003b).

REFERENCES


Mikiluncer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (in press) Mental representations of attachment security: Theoretical foundation for a positive social psychology. In M. Baldwin (Ed.), *Interpersonal Cognition*.


