The role of unstable self-esteem in the appraisal of romantic relationships

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Abstract

The relationship appraisals of individuals with stable and unstable forms of self-esteem were examined in two studies using undergraduate participants. Study 1 (N = 166) used indicators of relationship closeness and satisfaction whereas Study 2 (N = 125) examined relationship commitment. Across both studies, men with unstable high self-esteem reported more positive views of their relationships than other individuals. We believe that the fragile nature of their feelings of self-worth may have motivated these men to appraise their relationships positively in an effort to maintain and enhance their own tenuous feelings of self-worth. These findings suggest that men with unstable high self-esteem may use their romantic relationships to regulate how they feel about themselves.

1. Introduction

There is a popular belief that "people need to love themselves before they will be capable of loving someone else." This basic idea often makes its way into popular media such that it is common for magazine articles and self-help books to claim that it is necessary for individuals to feel good about themselves before they will be able to experience satisfying romantic relationships. Consistent with this basic idea, there is a body of research demonstrating that individuals with high levels of self-esteem report more positive evaluations of their romantic relationships than individuals with low levels of self-esteem (see Murray, 2006, for a review). Thus, there is at least some support for the notion that people who love themselves may have happier relationships than those who do not have such positive attitudes about themselves.

One reason that individuals with high self-esteem report such positive attitudes about their romantic relationships is that self-esteem appears to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a secure and a fragile form (see Kernis, 2005, for a review). Individuals with secure high self-esteem reflect positive attitudes toward the self that are realistic, well-anchored, and resistant to threat. Individuals with secure high self-esteem base their feelings of self-worth on a solid foundation that does not require constant validation. In contrast, fragile high self-esteem reflects positive attitudes toward the self that are vulnerable to challenge, require constant validation, and rely upon some degree of self-deception. Individuals with fragile high self-esteem appear to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth through strategies such as being highly defensive and establishing their superiority over others.

Kusche, 2002). In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem are often unwilling to assume the risks associated with seeking deeper connections to their partners following self-esteem threat because they are concerned about the possibility of being rejected (e.g., Murray et al., 2002).

The view that possessing high self-esteem leads to better relationship outcomes and the pursuit of connectedness goals following self-esteem threat may be overly simplistic given that high self-esteem appears to be a heterogeneous construct consisting of both a secure and a fragile form (see Kernis, 2005, for a review). Secure high self-esteem reflects positive attitudes toward the self that are vulnerable to challenge, require constant validation, and rely upon some degree of self-deception. Individuals with fragile high self-esteem appear to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth through strategies such as being highly defensive and establishing their superiority over others.

We believe that individuals with secure and fragile forms of high self-esteem may differ in their relationship appraisals. More specifically, we predict that individuals with fragile high self-esteem may adopt especially positive views of their romantic relationships in order to regulate their self-esteem by making themselves feel better. The rationale underlying this prediction is that fragile self-esteem may function in a manner that is similar to a self-esteem threat. That is, the "threat" resulting from the fragile nature of their self-esteem may motivate those with high self-esteem to pursue connections with others by enhancing their...
evaluations of their relationships which may, in turn, have the benefit of helping them bolster and maintain their tenuous feelings of self-worth. The marker of fragile self-esteem that was used in the present study was unstable self-esteem which refers to fluctuations in state self-esteem across repeated measurements (Kernis, 2005). Unstable high self-esteem is considered to be a form of fragile self-esteem because frequent changes in moment-to-moment feelings of self-worth suggest these positive self-evaluations are at least somewhat uncertain.

2. Overview and predictions

Our predictions for the present studies were based on the idea that individuals with unstable high self-esteem may be likely to use their romantic relationships to regulate their self-esteem. More specifically, the fragile nature of their high self-esteem may lead those with unstable high self-esteem to report positive attitudes toward their relationships which could, in turn, be used to bolster their tenuous feelings of self-worth. In essence, the positive relationships they describe could be used as a resource to be drawn upon whenever the person experiences self-doubt. We also believed that gender may further moderate our expected results. This expectation was based on the fact that gender has been found to moderate the association between unstable self-esteem and outcomes such as interpersonal style (Ziegler-Hill, Clark, & Beckman, in press). The fact that stable and unstable forms of self-esteem are sometimes associated with different outcomes for men and women is especially important for the present studies because prescriptive gender norms may influence how men and women evaluate their relationships.

3. Study 1: Unstable self-esteem and relationship satisfaction

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine whether self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and relationship satisfaction. To accomplish this goal we included two indicators of relationship appraisals in the present study: satisfaction and closeness.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 328 undergraduates (105 men and 223 women) at a university in the southern region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in psychology courses and participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The only criterion for participation was that individuals had to identify themselves as currently being involved in a romantic relationship for a period of at least 30 days with the average length of these relationships being 30.90 months (SD = 39.46). The mean age of the participants was 19.50 years (SD = 2.59) and their racial/ethnic composition was 57% White, 30% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 10% Other. Participants completed measures of self-esteem level, relationship satisfaction, and relationship closeness through a secure website. After completing these measures, participants were offered additional research credit in exchange for completing a measure of state self-esteem via the internet each evening at the end of each day for 7 consecutive days. Responses to these items were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The internal consistency of this measure for the present study was $\alpha = .90$.

3.1.2. Measures

3.1.2.1. Self-esteem level. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is a well-validated and reliable 10-item measure of global self-esteem (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”). Participants were instructed to complete the instrument according to how they typically or generally feel about themselves. Responses were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency of this measure for the present study was $\alpha = .88$.

3.1.2.2. Self-esteem instability. The method for measuring self-esteem instability was adapted from the procedure developed by Kernis (2005). Participants were asked to complete a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale that was designed to capture state self-esteem (i.e., how do you feel about yourself at this moment?) via the internet at the end of each day for 7 consecutive days. Responses to these items were made on scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The within-subject standard deviation across these repeated assessments of state self-esteem served as the index of self-esteem instability such that higher standard deviations indicated self-esteem that was more unstable. For the present study, the internal consistency of state self-esteem (averaged across the 7 days) was $\alpha = .88$.

3.1.2.3. Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) which is a 7-item inventory that assesses general relationship satisfaction (e.g., “How good is your relationship compared to most?”). Responses were made on 5-point scales with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction with the relationship. The Relationship Assessment Scale has been found to demonstrate high test–retest reliability and to correlate in the expected direction with other measures of relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1988). The internal consistency of this measure for the present study was $\alpha = .88$.

3.1.2.4. Relationship closeness. Relationship closeness was evaluated using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This single-item pictorial measure uses seven overlapping pairs of circles – much like Venn diagrams – that vary in their degree of overlap. Respondents are asked to select the diagram that best represents the level of closeness in their romantic relationship. Relationship closeness scores increase as respondents select circles that have a greater degree of overlap. The Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale has been found to be correlated with other measures of relationship closeness (Aron et al., 1992).

3.2. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in Study 1. Moderational analyses were conducted to determine whether self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and relationship appraisals. This was accomplished by conducting hierarchical multiple regression analyses for relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness. For both analyses, the relationship appraisal was regressed onto self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender. The continuous predictor variables were centered for the purpose of testing interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). For these analyses, the main effect terms for self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender were entered on Step 1. The two-way interactions of the main effect terms were entered on Step 2 and the
three-way interaction was entered on Step 3. These regression analyses were followed by the simple slopes tests recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to describe the interaction of continuous variables. These simple slopes were conducted using values that were one standard deviation above and below the mean to represent those with high self-esteem and one standard deviation below the mean to represent those with low self-esteem.

3.2.1. Relationship satisfaction

A main effect for self-esteem level ($\beta = .28, t = 3.48, p < .001$) emerged from the analysis concerning relationship satisfaction. In addition to the main effect for self-esteem level, the interaction of self-esteem instability and gender also emerged ($\beta = .20, t = 1.98, p < .05$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Panel A of Fig. 1. Simple slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between self-esteem instability and relationship satisfaction was positive for men ($\beta = .19, t = 2.02, p < .05$) but negative for women ($\beta = -.24, t = -2.13, p < .05$). Taken together, these results show that the highest levels of relationship satisfaction were reported by men with unstable self-esteem, whereas the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction were reported by women with unstable self-esteem. In contrast, individuals with stable self-esteem reported moderate levels of relationship satisfaction regardless of their gender.

3.2.2. Relationship closeness

The results of the analysis concerning relationship closeness revealed the two-way interaction of self-esteem instability and gender ($\beta = .32, t = 3.02, p < .01$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Panel B of Fig. 1. Simple slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between self-esteem instability and relationship satisfaction was positive for men ($\beta = .27, t = 2.84, p < .05$) but was not significant for women ($\beta = -.05, t < 1, ns$). These results show that men with unstable self-esteem reported the highest levels of relationship closeness, whereas men with stable self-esteem reported the lowest levels of closeness. In contrast, women reported moderate levels of relationship closeness regardless of the stability of their self-esteem.

3.3. Discussion

Our hypotheses received partial support in Study 1. More specifically, we found that self-esteem instability was associated with relationship appraisals among men such that those with unstable self-esteem reported more positive evaluations of their relationships than those with stable self-esteem. A very different pattern emerged for women such that self-esteem instability was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction but had no association with relationship closeness. This suggests that our prediction about unstable self-esteem may only emerge for men but may apply to men regardless of the level of their self-esteem.

4. Study 2: Unstable self-esteem and relationship commitment

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 by examining the association between self-esteem instability and the relationship investment model (Rusbult, 1980). The relationship investment model is one of the leading theoretical frameworks for understanding relationship commitment and is derived from interdependence theory which employs economic models to understand how individuals develop a sense of commitment to their relationships. According to the investment model, commitment is largely a function of three interrelated components: level of satisfaction with the relationship (i.e., the extent to which a relationship is worthwhile), size of the investment in

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Table 1

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$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.**

***$p < .001$.***
the relationship (i.e., resources committed to the relationship that are not recoverable if the relationship ends), and the quality of alternative relationship partners in the social environment (i.e., the desirability of other potential relationship partners; Rusby, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). That is, individuals tend to report higher levels of commitment to their current relationship when they experience a combination of high satisfaction, high investment, and low perceived quality of alternatives. Our predictions for Study 2 were consistent with our hypotheses for Study 1 such that we expected individuals with unstable self-esteem to report the most positive appraisals of their current romantic relationships (i.e., high commitment, high satisfaction, high investment, and low quality of alternatives).

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 364 undergraduates (95 men and 269 women). The only criterion for participation was that individuals had to identify themselves as currently being involved in a romantic relationship for a period of at least 30 days with the mean length of these relationships being 26.77 months ($SD = 30.67$). The mean age of the participants was 20.93 years ($SD = 4.56$) and their racial/ethnic composition was 59% White, 31% Black, 2% Asian, and 8% Other.

As in Study 1, participants were offered additional research credit in exchange for completing a measure of state self-esteem via the internet each evening at approximately 10 pm for seven consecutive days. Of the 364 participants who completed the initial questionnaires, 125 participants completed these additional daily measures for 3 or more days (34% of the initial sample with 44% of our final sample completing daily measures for all 7 days). These 125 participants did not differ from those who did not complete the daily measures in terms of gender, self-esteem level, or relationship appraisals ($t(362) < 1.63$, ns). Analyses were conducted using these 125 participants (42 men, 83 women) who contributed a total of 778 daily reports (i.e., an average of 6.22 reports for each participant).

4.1.2. Measures

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in Study 2 are presented in Table 1. The association between unstable self-esteem and the relationship investment model was examined by conducting a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which relationship evaluations were regressed onto self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender as in Study 1.

4.2. Results

The means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the measures in Study 2 are presented in Table 1. The association between unstable self-esteem and the relationship investment model was examined by conducting a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which relationship evaluations were regressed onto self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender as in Study 1.

4.2.1. Commitment

Main effects for self-esteem level ($\beta = .27, t = 3.08, p < .01$) and gender ($\beta = -.27, t = -3.05, p < .01$) emerged from the analysis concerning commitment but these main effects were qualified by the three-way interaction of self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender ($\beta = .57, t = 5.27, p < .001$). The predicted values for the three-way interaction are presented in Panel A of Fig. 2. As suggested by Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), this interaction was probed by first examining whether the two-way interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability was significant for men and women separately. These analyses found that this two-
way interaction emerged for men ($\beta = .73, t = 4.25, p < .001$) but not women ($\beta = -.14, t = -.108, ns$). Simple slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between self-esteem instability and commitment was positive for men with high levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .64, t = 6.13, p < .001$) but not for men with low self-esteem ($\beta = -.17, t = -1.73, ns$), women with high self-esteem ($\beta = .08, t = 1.12, ns$), or women with low self-esteem ($\beta = .13, t = 1.60, ns$). Taken together, these results suggest that unstable self-esteem was associated with greater relationship commitment for men.

4.2.2. Satisfaction

The results of the analysis concerning satisfaction revealed a main effect for self-esteem level ($\beta = .30, t = 3.31, p < .001$) that was qualified by the three-way interaction of self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender ($\beta = .43, t = 3.62, p < .001$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Panel B of Fig. 2. This interaction was initially probed by examining whether the two-way interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability was significant for men and women separately. These analyses found that this two-way interaction emerged for men ($\beta = .61, t = 3.03, p < .01$) but not women ($\beta = -.22, t = -1.47, ns$). Simple slopes tests showed that the association between self-esteem instability and satisfaction was positive for men with high levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .52, t = 5.99, p < .001$) but this association was not significant for women with high self-esteem ($\beta = -.12, t = 1.17, ns$) or individuals with low self-esteem ($|\beta| < .01, ts < 1.37, ns$). These results suggest that self-esteem instability is associated with greater relationship satisfaction for men with high self-esteem but not for other individuals.

4.2.3. Quality of alternatives

Main effects for self-esteem instability ($\beta = .19, t = 2.16, p < .05$) and gender ($\beta = .30, t = 3.21, p < .01$) emerged from the analysis concerning the quality of alternative partners such that individuals with unstable self-esteem and men perceived more desirable alternative partners than other individuals. No other main effects or interactions emerged from this analysis.

4.2.4. Investment

The analysis concerning investment revealed a main effect for self-esteem level ($\beta = .19, t = 2.07, p < .05$) that was qualified by the three-way interaction of self-esteem level, self-esteem instability, and gender ($\beta = .51, t = 4.22, p < .001$). The predicted values for this interaction are presented in Panel C of Fig. 2. This interaction was initially probed by examining whether the two-way interaction of self-esteem level and self-esteem instability was significant for men and women separately. These analyses found that this two-way interaction emerged for men ($\beta = .74, t = 3.86, p < .001$) but not women ($\beta = -.01, t < 1, ns$). Simple slopes tests found that the slope of the line representing the association between self-esteem instability and investment was positive for men with high levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .65, t = 6.85, p < .001$) but not for other individuals ($|\beta| < .09, ts < 1.95, ns$). Taken together, these results suggest that unstable self-esteem is associated with higher levels of reported investment for men with high levels of self-esteem.

4.3. Discussion

The results of Study 2 were similar to those of Study 1. The primary difference was that there was a tendency for the effects of Study 2 to be moderated by self-esteem level. That is, self-esteem instability was associated with more positive relationship evaluations for men with high self-esteem but not for those with low self-esteem. This suggests that men with unstable high self-esteem may be especially likely to view their romantic relationships in a positive manner. This tendency may allow them to use their positive views of their romantic relationships as a means for regulating their feelings of self-worth. The difference in terms of the results being moderated by self-esteem level may have been due to differences in the outcome variables being assessed across the two studies. For example, beliefs about higher levels of investment in relationships may be limited to men with unstable high self-esteem whereas beliefs about relationship closeness may apply to men with unstable self-esteem whether they have high or low self-esteem.

5. General discussion

The purpose of the present studies was to examine whether self-esteem instability moderated the association between self-esteem level and appraisals of romantic relationships. We expected that unstable self-esteem would motivate individuals with high self-esteem to bolster their tenuous feelings of self-worth by providing especially positive evaluations of their relationships. This prediction was only partially supported by the results of the present studies because this effect only emerged for men. These findings suggest that – at least for men – truly loving oneself may not be necessary for individuals to love others. In fact, the potential threat and uncertainty that accompanies unstable self-esteem may be associated with men seeking stronger connections to their partners. That is, men who were not sure if they loved themselves actually seemed to love others more than men who were more certain about their self-esteem.

Men with unstable high self-esteem reported more positive views of their relationships than other individuals with high self-esteem. The fact that men with unstable high self-esteem reported such positive attitudes toward their relationships is interesting given that their hostile interpersonal styles would suggest that their relationships should be less satisfying than those of other individuals (Zeigler-Hill et al., in press). It is possible that the positive romantic relationships of men with unstable high self-esteem may be explained by these individuals behaving differently with their romantic partners than they do with others (i.e., exhibiting less hostility toward them). One interpretation of this finding is that men with unstable high self-esteem may actually have better romantic relationships than other people but it is also possible that the positive relationship appraisals reported by men with unstable high self-esteem may not capture the views of their partners. That is, men with unstable high self-esteem may be happy with their relationships – or at least report they are happy with them – even if this is not an accurate appraisal of their actual relationships. For example, the partners of men with unstable high self-esteem may be quite dissatisfied with the same relationships that these men say they find so satisfying. Future research should collect relationship evaluations from the partners of individuals with various forms of self-esteem to determine which forms tend to be associated with having the happiest partners rather than focusing exclusively on the appraisals of only one partner.

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the present studies. First, we were unable to determine the causal link between unstable self-esteem and relationship appraisals due to the correlational nature of the data. As a result, it is unclear whether men with unstable high self-esteem developed positive views of their romantic relationships in order to bolster their tenuous feelings of self-worth as we believed or if the direction of causation was reversed such that their positive attitudes about their relationships led them to develop unstable self-esteem. Further research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the causal link between unstable self-esteem and relationship appraisals. Second, the present studies relied exclusively on self-report measures.
which make it possible that the relationship appraisals reported by individuals with various forms of self-esteem may have more to do with their perceptions and motivations than the actual quality of their relationships. Thus, the results of these studies should not be interpreted as men with unstable high self-esteem having especially good relationships. Rather, men with unstable high self-esteem reported more positive views of their relationships than other individuals but these reports may have been motivated by their desire to maintain and enhance their self-esteem resources. Third, the generalizability of the present findings may be limited due to our reliance on undergraduate participants. The relative youth of our participants places an upper-limit on the length of their romantic relationships with many of these relationships being relatively new (e.g., average relationship length for the present studies was less than 2.5 years). As a result, it is unclear whether similar patterns would emerge for relationships that were of greater duration (e.g., women with unstable high self-esteem may be more likely to provide especially positive evaluations of more established relationships). It may be important for future researchers to extend the present findings by examining a broader array of relationships (e.g., longer-duration relationships, married individuals).

6. Conclusion

The findings of the present studies suggest that various forms of self-esteem are associated with different relationship appraisals. That is, stable and unstable forms of self-esteem were associated with different views of relationships depending on the self-esteem level and gender of the individual. These findings show that men with unstable self-esteem report especially positive attitudes toward their romantic relationships. This suggests the intriguing possibility that men with unstable self-esteem may view their partners in a highly positive way in an effort to bolster their own feelings of self-worth. These results extend our understanding of the link between self-esteem and relationship appraisals and provide support for the possibility that individuals may adopt views of their romantic relationships that are intended to help them regulate their feelings of self-worth.

References


