
Do People's Self-Views Matter?

Self-Concept and Self-Esteem in Everyday Life

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Recent scholars have dismissed the utility of self-esteem as well as programs designed to improve it. The authors challenge these contentions on conceptual, methodological, and empirical grounds. They begin by proposing that the scope of recent analyses has been overly narrow and should be broadened to include specific as well as global self-views. Using this conceptualization, the authors place recent critiques in historical context, recalling that similarly skeptical commentaries on global attitudes and traits inspired theorizing and empirical research that subsequently restored faith in the value of both constructs. Specifically, they point to 3 strategies for attaining more optimistic assessments of the predictive validity of self-views: recognizing the utility of incorporating additional variables in predictive schemes, matching the specificity of predictors and criteria, and using theoretically informed standards for evaluating predictor–criterion relationships. The authors conclude that self-views do matter and that it is worthwhile and important to develop and implement theoretically informed programs to improve them.

Keywords: self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-verification

For most of the past century, a deeply behavioristic field of psychology consigned theory and research on the self-concept and self-esteem to the backwaters of the discipline. Then, in the late 1970s, articles by Kuiper and Rogers (1979), Markus (1977), and others demonstrated that self-views had properties similar to schemas and beliefs—constructs that had recently been championed by cognitive psychologists. In so doing, these researchers legitimized the self-concept as a viable scientific construct. The result was a steep increase in research on the self during the 1980s (Swann & Seyle, 2005).

At about the same time, an independent wave of enthusiasm within the lay community thrust the construct of self-esteem into the national limelight. On the basis of precious little evidence, the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (1989) characterized self-esteem as a panacea whose cultivation would protect people from a host of ills, including welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of high school, and so on. Thousands of laypersons across America were smitten with the hope that in self-esteem they had found a modern-day Holy Grail.

No longer. With ample justification, members of the academic community pointed out that the extravagant claims of the self-esteem movement were nothing more than that (e.g., Dawes, 1996; Swann, 1996). Yet, in very recent years, the pendulum has swung even further, both reflecting—and inspiring—deep doubts about the viability of the self-esteem construct. Several authors (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Scheff & Fearon, 2004) have questioned the utility of self-esteem in predicting important social outcomes, asserting that the effect sizes linking self-esteem to important outcome variables are small and inconsequential. Although some authors have championed more sophisticated strategies for using self-views to predict outcome variables of interest (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Pelham, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), others have thrown up their hands, concluding that the evidentiary basis of self-esteem research is so fundamentally flawed that the entire enterprise should be reexamined (Scheff & Fearon, 2004). Recently, some of the original critics of self-esteem research have added that because self-esteem appears to be inconsequential, “efforts to boost people’s self-esteem are of little value in fostering academic achievement or preventing undesirable behavior” (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2005, p. 84).

In this article, we place this recent wave of pessimism regarding the importance of self-views in theoretical and historical context. Drawing on past research on attitudes and traits, we propose that recent critiques of global self-esteem have framed the issue in an overly narrow manner and that a broader conceptualization that considers other types of self-views as well (i.e., self-concepts) is needed. With such a conceptualization in hand, we identify several strategies for increasing the predictive validity of self-

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views, including the use of additional predictor variables and the implementation of several time-tested methodological and psychometric principles. We conclude that our analysis supports a more optimistic assessment of the predictive validity of self-views that justifies theoretically based efforts to improve self-concepts and self-esteem.

Lessons From Three Decades of Psychological Science

The recent spate of critiques of self-esteem research bears an eerie resemblance to a parallel wave of criticisms of attitudes and traits that appeared during the late 1960s. For example, just as recent commentators have cited small effect sizes as evidence that self-esteem is inconsequential, Mischel (1968) offered a substantively similar indictment of the trait literature. One year later, Wicker (1969) published an equally scathing indictment of the attitude literature.

Given the similarity of the earlier critiques to the recent ones, it is useful to reflect on the impact that they had on the field. Initially, both the Wicker (1969) and Mischel (1968) critiques dealt a severe blow to the confidence of researchers within each subarea. In the final analysis, however, both critiques were instrumental in inspiring a generation of researchers to achieve numerous insights into how, why, when, and for whom attitudes and traits are useful in predicting behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Kenrick & Funder, 1988). The result is that it is now widely acknowledged that both attitudes and traits have an important place in psychological science.

We believe that the past three decades of research on attitudes and traits offer valuable lessons for those attempting to come to grips with recent critiques of the self-esteem literature. In particular, we identify three sets of insights

gained by attitude and trait researchers that we believe could bolster future estimates of the predictive validity of self-views. Some of these insights involve using more nuanced and sophisticated predictive schemes, some involve increasing the degree of match between predictors and criteria, and still others involve improving the fidelity of strategies for evaluating research findings. In what follows, we consider each set of insights in turn.

The Predictors: Enriching Predictive Schemes

Those who responded to critiques of the attitude and trait literatures were quick to recognize that it was simply not enough to measure global attitudes and traits while ignoring the large number of variables that mediate and moderate the links between predictor and outcome variables. To name just one set of examples, attitudes and traits are more apt to predict behavior when they are relatively strong, accessible, and relevant to the outcome variable under scrutiny (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Fazio & Olsen, 2003; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Higgins, 2000; Mischel & Shoda, 1999; Sherman & Fazio, 1983; Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982). Likewise, we propose that it is not enough for researchers interested in predicting socially important outcomes to focus exclusively on global self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003). Instead, researchers should also consider self-concepts and their metacognitive aspects.

To be sure, we are not the first to propose that predictive validity can be enhanced by measuring aspects of self-views other than global self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Marsh, 1990; Pelham, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; for a recent review, see Marsh & Craven, 2006). Why, then, have recent critics focused exclusively on the predictive utility of global self-esteem? One reason is that, until now, the extravagant claims of the California task force have defined the terms of the debate. A second reason is that at least some critics (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003) have assumed that self-esteem is “affective” and self-concepts are merely “cognitive,” with the implication being that if either of the two constructs would predict important outcomes, it would be self-esteem. Although common, such categorical distinctions between self-esteem and self-concepts have received virtually no empirical support (Marsh, 1986; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976).¹ There is a good reason for this. Clearly, both self-esteem and self-concepts have cognitive as well as emotional elements; just as self-esteem is a

¹ Note also that if one examines related domains of social and personality psychology, one is hard pressed to find categorical distinctions between constructs that are conceptually analogous to self-esteem and self-concept. For example, attitude researchers do not have separate categories for “affective attitudes” and “cognitive attitudes;” interpersonal expectancy researchers do not make a hard and fast distinction between “affective expectancies” and “cognitive expectancies;” nor do trait theorists distinguish “affective traits” versus “cognitive traits.” In short, the tradition of lumping self-esteem and self-concepts into qualitatively distinct categories appears to be without parallel in the psychological literature.

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cognition about the self (e.g., a belief about how worthwhile one is) as well as a feeling, so too are self-concepts emotional (e.g., people care enormously about personal attributes they deem important) as well as cognitive. From this vantage point, there is little basis for dismissing self-concepts as merely cognitive or for focusing on the predictive capacity of self-esteem at the expense of self-concepts.

We suggest that a more useful framework for assessing the predictive utility of self-views builds on treating self-esteem and self-concepts as members of a common self-view category. From this perspective, both self-esteem and self-concepts refer to thoughts and feelings about the self. People derive these self-views by observing the reactions others have toward them (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), their own behavior (e.g., Bem, 1972), and the relative performances of others (e.g., Festinger, 1954). Once formed, self-views give meaning to people's experiences, thereby enabling them to make sense of, and react appropriately to, such experiences.

Within this broader scheme, several strategies for bolstering the predictive validity of self-views quickly become apparent. One such strategy involves the assessment of metacognitive characteristics of self-views, such as the strength of the self-view. There are several indices of self-view strength, including certainty (Swann & Ely, 1984), importance (Pelham, 1991), clarity (Campbell, 1990), extremity (Markus, 1977), accessibility (e.g., Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982), temporal stability (Kernis, 2005), and others. Consider, for example, the goal-relatedness or importance of the self-view (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2002; Markus, 1977; Pelham, 1991). Researchers have shown that increments in importance will increase the likelihood that people will act in

ways that are compatible with a self-view (Pelham, 1991). An athlete who regards sports as important, for example, will practice more religiously than an athlete who regards sports as a relatively unimportant pastime. Similarly, people are more apt to resist challenges to self-views that are high in importance (Markus, 1977). Not surprisingly, then, positive self-views that are highly important are more likely to remain stable over time (Pelham, 1991). Furthermore, when people's self-views are high in importance, they are more inclined to plan to remain with roommates who see them as they see themselves (Swann & Pelham, 2002).

Another metacognitive aspect of self-views that may bolster predictive validity is the certainty of the self-view. Pelham (1991) examined the role of self-certainty in testing a prediction derived from self-verification theory (Swann, 1983; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Angulo, in press). The theory assumes that because self-views play a vital role in organizing reality and guiding behavior, people are invested in preserving them. To this end, people seek evaluations that confirm their self-views—even if the self-views (and evaluations that confirm them) happen to be negative (cf. Jones, 1973). Consistent with self-verification theory, Pelham (1991) found that people's self-views were more likely to predict the type of feedback they sought from others insofar as they were certain of those self-views. A follow-up study showed that people's interaction partners were more likely to provide them with support for their relatively certain self-views (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1994). This pattern emerged whether the self-views were positive or negative.

Self-view certainty also influences the manner in which people respond to feedback from others. Swann and Ely (1984), for instance, discovered that people who reported that they were relatively certain of their self-views were especially inclined to resist intimations that they were not the persons that they believed themselves to be. Similarly, Baumgardner (1990) found that self-certainty causes people to resist challenging feedback and behave in a more self-consistent and stable way. Finally, Swann, Pelham, and Chidester (1988) replicated the link between certainty and resistance to self-discrepant evaluations and also showed that such resistance activities tend to shore up people's beliefs about themselves.

Specific combinations of certainty and importance can give rise to a third metacognitive aspect of the self-view, an aspect that is associated with defensive and narcissistic reactions. Attitude researcher Gross and his colleagues (Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995), for example, distinguished true certainty in beliefs from "compensatory confidence," with the latter actually reflecting a lack of certainty in the attitude. People with compensatory confidence about their self-views will theoretically be threatened by information that is inconsistent with self-views of which they are uncertain. These feelings of threat may be compounded when the self-view is important, as perceived importance and high goal commitment may trigger emotional reactivity in response to performance feedback (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus, when people with self-views that are both low

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in certainty and high in importance encounter threats, an emotional, defensive lashing out may result. This idea is reminiscent of discussions of the narcissistic reactions that theoretically occur when people who are highly invested in uncertain, fragile self-views encounter challenges or threats (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Rhodewalt, 2005; Tracy & Robins, 2003; Westen, 1990). All of these perspectives clash sharply with recent efforts to equate the self-protective statements of narcissists with those of people with true high self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Indeed, we believe that conflating narcissism and true high self-esteem is profoundly problematic for the same reasons that it is problematic to mistake for a friend an enemy who is merely masquerading as a friend.

Other metacognitive aspects of self-views that may increase predictive validity are related to, but distinct from, certainty and importance. Three such qualities are the clarity with which people hold self-views (Campbell, 1990), the accessibility of the self-views (Higgins et al., 1982), and the extremity of those self-views (e.g., Markus, 1977). Similarly, the temporal stability of self-views has been shown to be significant, in that highly stable self-views generally have higher predictive validity than unstable self-views (Kernis, 2003). As more is learned about these and other metacognitive aspects of self, researchers interested in the self will steadily expand the number of predictor variables in their conceptual toolbox.

In sum, the growing literature examining metacognitive aspects of self-views (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003; Marsh, 1990; Pelham, 1995; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Marsh & Craven, 2006)

suggests that measuring such variables will yield rich dividends in the form of increments in the predictive power of self-views. In the next section, we suggest that this will be especially true if researchers follow the specificity matching principle.

Predictor–Criterion Relationships: Specificity Matching

A key insight gained by attitude and trait researchers was the specificity or specificity matching principle. This principle was designed to accommodate the fact that in naturally occurring settings, outcomes are typically caused by multiple factors, many of which may be rivals of the particular predictor variable the researcher is studying. To compensate for the influence of such rival predictors, the specificity matching principle holds that the specificity of predictors and criteria should be matched. When the predictor variable is relatively specific, then the impact of rival influences on the predictor–criterion relationship can be minimized by selecting an equally specific behavior (e.g., People's attitudes toward potato chips will predict how many chips they eat in a given year but not the total amount of food they consume that year). When the predictor variable is relatively general, the impact of rival influences can be averaged out by combining numerous behaviors (e.g., General predisposition to eat will predict how much food of all types that one consumes in a given year). In short, specific predictors should be used to predict specific behaviors and general predictors should be used to predict general behaviors. Specificity matching and related principles have received ample support in studies of both attitudes (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005) and traits (e.g., Epstein, 1979; Fleeson, 2004).

Applied to research on the self, the specificity matching principle suggests that researchers interested in predicting relatively specific outcomes (e.g., math proficiency) should use a specific self-concept (e.g., self-perceived math ability) as a predictor rather than a global measure such as self-esteem. Similarly, researchers using global self-esteem as a predictor should focus on global outcome measures, such as several outcomes bundled together (see also Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995). From the perspective of the specificity matching principle, then, recent reviews of the self-esteem literature (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003) have violated the specificity matching principle by focusing on the capacity of global measures of self-esteem to predict specific outcomes (e.g., Does self-esteem predict grades in a math class?). It is thus not surprising that researchers have concluded that self-esteem does not predict much of anything.

To determine whether following the specificity matching principle would bolster estimates of the predictive validity of self-views, we examined two research traditions, each of which has approached specificity matching in a distinct way: specific self-views predicting specific behavior and global self-views predicting bundles of behaviors. We attempted to locate meta-analytic reviews (Rosenthal, 1978) that have the advantage of offering explicit criteria for determining which studies to include in a given pool of

studies as well as statistical techniques for estimating the strength of relationships.

Specific self-views (academic self-concepts) predicting specific outcomes (academic performance). In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986, 1989) defined perceptions of self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Theoretically, efficacy self-views influence the choices people make, the effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of challenge, and the degree of anxiety or confidence they bring to the task at hand. Although these perceptions do not alter people’s capabilities, they help determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have. Efficacy self-views thus help explain why performances differ among people who have similar knowledge and skills. Consistent with the specificity notion, Bandura (1986) insisted that self-efficacy judgments should be specifically rather than globally assessed, must correspond directly to the criterion task, and must be measured as closely as possible in time to that task.

Several meta-analyses have now been conducted that have evaluated the ability of measures of self-efficacy to predict academic outcomes (e.g., Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004). In one particularly well-controlled analysis, Robbins et al. (2004) examined 109 prospective studies in which various psychosocial and study skill factors were used to predict college outcomes. The predictors were categorized into nine broad constructs, such as academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, academic-related skills, and academic goals. Two college outcomes were targeted: performance, as measured by cumulative grade point average, and persistence, as measured by the length of time a student remained enrolled at an institution toward completion of a degree. Of all the studies analyzed, 18 studies ($N = 9,598$) met the inclusion criteria of academic self-efficacy predicting grade point average. Only academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation were strong predictors ($\rho = .50$ and $.30$, respectively, where ρ is the estimated true correlation between the predictor construct and the performance criterion, corrected for measurement error in both the predictor and criterion). An additional six studies ($N = 6,930$) met the inclusion criteria of academic self-efficacy predicting persistence. In this case, academic-related skills, academic self-efficacy, and academic goals were all strong predictors ($\rho = .37$, $.36$, and $.34$, respectively).

Other investigators have shown that as the specificity of the predictor and criterion variables increases, so too does the strength of the relationship between them. For example, in their meta-analysis of a large body of prospective studies, Hansford and Hattie (1982) found that relatively specific academic self-concepts offered better predictions of academic ability ($r = .42$) than did global self-esteem ($r = .22$). Similarly, Valentine et al. (2004) reported that predictor–outcome associations were stronger when the researchers assessed self-views specific to the

academic domain and when measures of self-beliefs and achievement were matched according to subject area. Finally, in their review article, Marsh and Craven (2006) concluded that academic self-views predicted several types of academic outcomes, but global self-esteem did not. In one especially striking demonstration of this phenomenon, Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, and Baumert (2006) reported that math self-concept was substantially related to math grades ($r = .71$), math standardized achievement test scores ($r = .59$), and selection of advanced math courses ($r = .51$), but global self-esteem was not systematically related to academic self-concepts ($r_s = -.03$ to $.05$). Such findings provide direct support for the notion that the specificity of predictor and criterion variables systematically determines the strength of the relationships observed between them.

The benefits of matching predictors and criterion is also supported by evidence that the predictive validity of self-esteem measures can be bolstered by breaking self-esteem into two components and matching each component with an appropriate criterion variable. Bosson and Swann (1999) used the distinction between self-liking and self-competence (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001) to bolster their ability to predict the feedback preferences of participants. They found that just as participants’ feelings of self-liking (but not self-competence) predicted choice of feedback that confirmed their sense of self-liking, their feelings of self-competence (but not self-liking) predicted their choice of feedback that confirmed their sense of self-competence. This pattern emerged among people who had negative as well as positive self-views. Thus, in the spirit of the specificity matching principle, predictive validity was maximized insofar as predictors and outcomes referred to the same conceptual variable.

Global self-views (self-esteem) predicting bundled outcomes (various indices of adjustment). Let us preface this section by acknowledging some important nuances in applying the specificity matching principle. One such nuance involves the proper identification of global outcomes. Consider the well-documented finding that low self-esteem predicts subsequent depression (Reinherz, Giaconia, Pakiz, & Silverman, 1993; Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996).² At first glance, this finding may seem to violate the specificity matching principle, as it involves an instance in which a global predictor (self-esteem) is linked to a single criterion (depression). Nevertheless, in reality, clinically diagnosed depression actually represents a global behavior. That is, a diagnosis of clinical depression is typically based on detection of at least five symptoms, including, but not limited to, depressed or irritable mood, diminished interest in activities, insomnia or hypersomnia, fatigue or loss of energy, recurrent thoughts of death, and feelings of worthlessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Much the same argument applies

² Critics of self-esteem research have acknowledged this evidence but attribute it to the overlap between the measures of self-esteem and depression that render ambiguous the causal status of self-esteem.

to most indices of psychological adjustment. In such instances, although a single variable may be used to describe the outcome measure, the fact that the outcome is a summary assessment based on multiple behavioral observations means that it should be considered a global outcome.

With this caveat in hand, we shall discuss a few investigations in which the researchers used measures of global self-esteem to predict global or bundled behaviors. One of the earliest studies that met this criterion was reported by Werner and Smith (1992). These researchers focused on a sample of extremely impoverished youth in the Kauai Longitudinal Study. Self-esteem was assessed using interviews at age 18. When participants were 32 years old, the investigators collected a global measure of quality of adult adaptation. The findings indicate that the self-esteem ratings of teenagers significantly predicted their adaptation 14 years later ($r = .24$ for men, $r = .41$ for women).

More recently, a second team of researchers (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Trzesniewski et al., 2006) also reported that self-esteem significantly but weakly predicted specific outcomes and more strongly predicted global outcomes. The initial article (Donnellan et al., 2005) reported that low self-esteem predicted externalizing problems two years later. This finding emerged whether they examined self-, teacher-, parent-, or interviewer-based measures of self-esteem and externalizing problems, and for participants from different nationalities (United States and New Zealand) and age groups (adolescents and college students). Moreover, this relation held when the investigators controlled for potential confounding variables such as supportive parenting, parent and peer relationships, socioeconomic status, and IQ. In a follow-up study that built on the methodological strengths of the earlier work, Trzesniewski et al. (2006) followed a group of adolescents for 11 years into adulthood. Even after controlling for numerous rival predictors of the outcome measures, the investigators found that self-esteem was a significant predictor of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, tobacco dependence, criminal convictions, school dropout, and money and work problems. Once again, these relations held whether the outcome measures were reports by the participants or observers.

Skeptics might point out that most of the effect sizes reported by Donnellan et al. (2005) and Trzesniewski et al. (2006) seemed small using conventional criteria. Additional findings, however, indicate that the predictive validity of self-esteem was bolstered when outcomes were aggregated. That is, when self-esteem was used to predict global outcomes, teenagers with low self-esteem ran an elevated risk for developing difficulties as adults. For example, among adults with five or more problems during adulthood, 63% had low self-esteem during adolescence and only 15% had high self-esteem during adolescence. Similarly, among problem-free adults, 50% had high self-esteem when they were adolescents and only 16% had low self-esteem during adolescence.

This evidence of the capacity of global self-esteem to predict global outcomes suggests that it may be limiting to

frame questions regarding the predictive validity of self-concept and self-esteem in either—or terms as some scholars have (e.g., Marsh & Craven, 2006). Rather, both types of self-views offer useful predictions as long as the criterion variables are defined at the appropriate level of specificity.

More generally, the findings reported by Donnellan et al. (2005) and Trzesniewski et al. (2006) are noteworthy in at least three more respects. First, the range and social significance of the outcomes predicted by self-esteem (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, criminal convictions, school dropout, money and work problems, etc.) are impressive by any standard. Second, numerous potential confounding variables (e.g., depression, neuroticism) were appropriately controlled for, and objective outcome measures were examined. Third, the 11-year time lag between the measure of the predictor and criterion in Trzesniewski et al.'s study was substantial. The fact that self-esteem scores predicted outcomes over such a long period supports the idea that self-esteem can have enduring effects on people. As critics of past research on the predictive validity of self-esteem disparaged the lack of studies using objective measures, longitudinal designs, large representative samples, and appropriate controls to test the predictive utility of self-esteem indices (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003), the methodological features of Donnellan et al. and Trzesniewski et al. counter critics who have claimed that measures of self-esteem predict outcome variables only because they happen to be correlated with variables that are causally related to these outcome variables (e.g., Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002). In short, although the Donnellan–Trzesniewski team's research was correlational, its methodological features help make the case that self-esteem exerted a causal impact on the outcome variables.

Despite the numerous strengths of Donnellan et al.'s (2005) and Trzesniewski et al.'s (2006) research and their evidence for the usefulness of specificity matching in their data set, some skeptics may still protest that according to the criteria typically used in psychological research, the effect sizes associated with any single predictor–outcome relationship were small. We believe that the problem here may be with the criteria rather than the empirical evidence. That is, complaints about small effect sizes routinely overlook the fact that when studies are conducted in naturally occurring settings rather than relatively impoverished laboratory settings, the number of causes that influence outcome variables increase dramatically. As a result, researchers' standards for what constitutes an impressive effect size should be lowered accordingly. We expand on this argument in the section that follows.

The Criterion: Interpreting Effect Sizes

In the tradition of the influential reviews of attitudes and traits literatures, recent reviewers of the self-esteem literature have asserted that correlations under .30 are “quite weak,” using such claims to bolster their contention that the predictive validity of measures of self-esteem is minimal (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 24). During the past couple of decades, researchers have begun to question the appropri-

ateness of using effect sizes in this manner to draw such conclusions. One group of researchers has pointed out that the predictive validity of psychological tests (in the .20–.50 range) compares favorably with the predictive validity of highly regarded medical tests (Meyer et al., 2001). Other work has suggested that the relatively modest effect sizes of both medical and psychological tests are expected and reasonable if one recognizes that psychological outcomes, like medical outcomes, are multiply determined. That is, Monte Carlo simulations conducted by Ahadi and Diener (1989) have shown that as the number of variables that cause a behavior increases, the maximum possible correlation between any single predictor and the outcome drops precipitously (see also Strube, 1991). From this perspective, the relationships that reviewers have dismissed as unimpressive ($r = .30$) actually approach the upper limit of what might be expected when outcomes are multiply determined—as they often are in research on self-views.

Other theorists and researchers have argued that even small effect sizes are noteworthy if they have clear implications for a significant theoretical or practical issue (Abelson, 1995; Rosenthal, 1994). This argument is highly relevant to research on self-esteem, as the social importance of the outcome variables with which it has been associated (e.g., academic performance, marital satisfaction, criminal convictions, depression) is indisputable. Consider, for example, Rosenthal's (1994) discussion of the physician's aspirin study, which fomented a dramatic upsurge in the recommended use of aspirin to forestall cardiac events. Rosenthal (1994) noted that the effect size of aspirin was "tiny"— $r = .034$ or $r^2 = .0012$ —an effect size comparable with one that Baumeister et al. (2003) dubbed "negligible" (p. 8). Yet this effect size translates roughly to a 4% decrease in heart attacks, which cardiologists agreed was impressive enough to recommend aspirin regimes to all patients considered to be cardiac risks.

In short, developments within psychometric theory over the past two decades suggest that recent reviewers have set the bar much too high when evaluating the effect sizes of the research they reviewed. As such, convincing arguments can be made that even the relatively modest relationships that past researchers have already uncovered between self-views and outcome variables are important.

Is It Worthwhile to Try to Improve Self-Views?

If self-views are meaningfully related to socially significant outcomes, does this mean that it makes sense to take steps to improve those self-views? We believe that it does. Furthermore, contrary to the critics of self-esteem research who "have not found evidence that boosting self-esteem (by therapeutic interventions or school programs) causes benefits" (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 1), we have encountered evidence that programs designed to improve self-esteem improve standardized test scores, reduce school disciplinary reports, and reduce use of drugs and alcohol (e.g., DuBois & Flay, 2004; Haney & Durlak, 1998).

In acknowledging empirical support for the efficacy of programs designed to improve self-esteem, we must emphasize that such evidence should be treated cautiously because little is known about the precise mediators of these effects. Indeed, at this juncture, what is needed is careful, theory-driven research designed to specify how effective self-esteem programs work. Such mediational research is vitally important for two reasons. First, of the effective programs of which we are aware, all are multifaceted schemes that include efforts to improve self-efficacy and interpersonal relationships as well as self-esteem. Because the effectiveness of the individual components (focus on changing self-views, modifying social skills, academic achievement, or other behaviors, etc.) of these programs is rarely, if ever, documented, it is quite possible that such programs include a mix of effective and ineffective strategies (or strategies that are effective for some people but ineffective for others). If so, the effectiveness of such programs could be enhanced still further by bolstering the effective components and eliminating the ineffective ones (e.g., DuBois & Tevendale, 1999).

Identifying the effective components of such programs could also help silence critics by distinguishing treatments based on nonsense from those based on sound psychological principles. Consider the caricatures of self-esteem programs occasionally supplied by the media. Perhaps the best known example is satirist Al Franken's parody of self-esteem enhancement programs in which his character on *Saturday Night Live* (Stuart Smalley) gazed tentatively into the mirror, smiled, and then carefully recited, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like me" (Michaels, 1995). The newly esteemed Smalley then beamed triumphantly. This scenario was amusing because it was so obvious to everyone (except Stuart) that such affirmation procedures are hopelessly misguided.

Clearly, people cannot magically affirm their way into possessing high self-esteem. For this reason, any program organized around such affirmation procedures will (at best) produce positive self-images that are fanciful and ephemeral (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004; Swann, 1996). Note, however, that although some self-esteem enhancement programs indeed are based on such simple-minded strategies, these Panglossian strategies are a far cry from the demonstrably effective ones reviewed in the recent literature (e.g., DuBois & Flay, 2004; Haney & Durlak, 1998). Instead of focusing exclusively on people's momentary self-esteem, the effective programs emphasize procedures that are also designed to alter the raw materials that provide a basis for healthy, sustainable self-esteem. Ideally, these programs cultivate behaviors that produce self-views that are both realistic (i.e., based on objective evidence) and adaptive (i.e., emphasizing activities that are predictive of long-term adjustment in society). Therefore, the principles that underlie such programs make sound theoretical sense, and it is misleading and unfortunate to confuse them with programs that do not. Furthermore, these programs are effective; although the effect sizes are modest, they compare favorably with other types of interventions that are de-

signed to change similar behaviors, self-reported personality functioning, and academic performance (see, e.g., Haney & Durlak, 1998, p. 429).

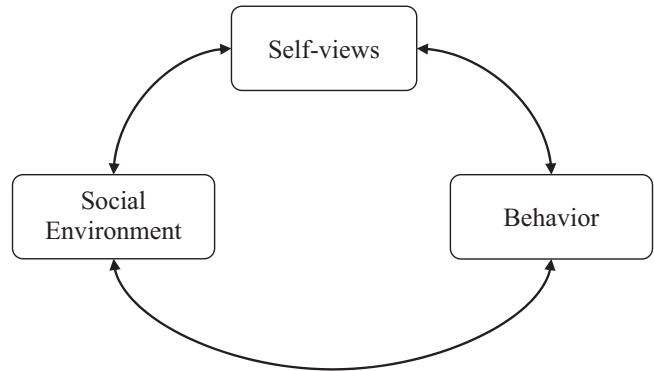
Skeptics could hypothetically object: "If the active ingredients in self-esteem change programs involve changing people's behaviors and life circumstances as well as their self-views, then perhaps improved self-esteem is an effect of such programs rather than a key ingredient in such programs. Indeed, calling these programs 'Self-esteem enhancement programs' is a misnomer because they do so much more than that."

We believe that it is legitimate to point out that although self-esteem enhancement is the overarching goal of such programs, the strategies through which this end is pursued often involve changing the behaviors and situations that feed into people's self-views rather than the self-views per se. That said, we also believe that it is misguided to underestimate the critically important role that changing self-views ultimately plays in such programs. Rather, just as it is not enough to change self-views only, so too is it not enough to change people's behaviors and life circumstances only.

Imagine, for example, a school boy who has a negative self-view that leads him to be hostile to his classmates. Thinking that a new environment might improve matters, the school counselor arranges to have the boy transferred to a new classroom in which the boy is unknown. Although the boy's new environment may be more benign initially, his self-view may inspire behaviors that quickly bring his classmates to see him just as negatively as he sees himself (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982). And even if his classmates are slow to reciprocate the boy's hostile overtures, his negative self-views may nevertheless cause him to "see" their behaviors as more negative than they actually are (e.g., Swann & Read, 1981). Moreover, should he experience failure in this new setting, the research literature suggests that his negative self-views will hamper his coping ability. That is, research suggests that in the wake of failure experiences, people with negative self-views are more likely to suffer emotional trauma and impaired motivation than are people with positive self-views (e.g., Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Greenberg et al., 1992; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002). For example, Greenberg et al. (1992) showed that whereas people whose self-views had been bolstered by personality feedback displayed relatively little anxiety in response to the threat of a shock, those whose self-views had not been bolstered suffered considerable anxiety. In these and other ways, negative self-views may sabotage people's ability to cope successfully with events in their lives.

Furthermore, in naturally occurring settings in which people can exert control over the nature of their social environments, research suggests that people will exercise such control by seeking self-verifying partners. That is, just as people with positive self-views display a preference for interaction partners who appraise them positively, people with negative self-views display a preference for partners who perceive them negatively (e.g., Hixon & Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-

Figure 1
The Cyclical Interplay of Self-Views, Behavior, and the Social Environment



Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Furthermore, if people with negative self-views happen to find themselves in relationships with partners who appraise them positively, they will tend to withdraw from such partners. That is, when college students with negative self-views find themselves with roommates who think well of them, they make plans to find a new roommate (Swann & Pelham, 2002). Similarly, when married people with negative self-views find themselves with partners who see them more positively than they see themselves, they withdraw by becoming less intimate with their partners (e.g., Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994)³ or by separating from them or divorcing them (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002). Hence, this work suggests that if a therapist were to coach clients with negative self-views to marry spouses who see them more favorably than they see themselves, as long as such clients retain their negative self-views, they might fail to engage in the relationship fully or leave it altogether.

From this perspective, people's self-esteem, self-concepts, behaviors, and social conditions are embedded in cycles in which each element influences and constrains the other elements in profound ways. As shown in Figure 1, because each node in the model is mutually influenced by adjacent nodes, changes in any given node must be rein-

³ Although Murray et al. (2000) reported that they found evidence of self-enhancement but not self-verification in their married participants in Footnote 15, S. L. Murray (personal communication, August 22, 2005) subsequently acknowledged that a substantial number of the "married" participants were actually cohabiting. This is important because (a) there is compelling evidence that cohabiting couples resemble dating couples rather than married couples (e.g., Manning & Smock, 2005), (b) dating couples do not display self-verification strivings (e.g., Swann et al., 1994), and (c) when cohabiting couples were eliminated from Murray et al.'s sample, a self-verification effect ($p < .07$) emerged among male participants (S. L. Murray, personal communication, August 22, 2005).

forced by corresponding changes in the other nodes (for a parallel analysis of producing changes in self-efficacy, see Bandura, 1989). For this reason, just as producing lasting changes in self-views requires corresponding changes in the behaviors and social conditions that nourish those self-views, producing lasting changes in people's behaviors and social conditions requires corresponding changes in their self-views.

Summary and Conclusions

Recent contentions that self-esteem does not predict important social outcomes (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Crocker & Park, 2004; Scheff & Fearon, 2004) are strikingly similar to earlier critiques of related constructs such as attitudes and traits. We believe that many of the rebuttals to these early critiques also apply to the recent indictments of self-esteem.

Drawing on rebuttals to these early critiques as well as our own theorizing, we began by suggesting that the scope of analysis should be broadened to incorporate self-concepts and self-esteem within a superordinate self-view category. We then discussed several strategies for improving assessments of the predictive validity of self-views. One set of strategies focused on identifying multiple aspects of self-views in fashioning predictions. Another involved matching the level of specificity of the predictor and criterion variables. Yet a third included procedures for evaluating predictor–criterion relationships appropriately.

To demonstrate the implications of some of the issues we raised, we selected some research that followed the specificity matching principle developed in the attitudes and traits literature (i.e., specific predictors should be used to predict specific behaviors, and global predictors should be used to predict global outcomes). When we examined research that followed this principle, we discovered impressive relationships between self-views and important social outcomes. These findings thus provide preliminary evidence that a more conceptually and methodologically sophisticated assessment of the predictive validity of self-views may yield rich dividends.

From this vantage point, people's self-views do matter, and the task of future researchers is to determine how, when, and with what consequences. This conclusion has direct implications for programs designed to change self-views. That is, given that people with negative self-views think and behave in ways that diminish their quality of life, it is incumbent on behavioral scientists to develop and refine strategies for improving these negative self-views.

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