

Chapter 10

The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory

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*True dignity abides with him alone
Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
Can still suspect, and still revere himself,
In lowliness of heart.*

William Wordsworth

Throughout the past few thousand years, historical accounts, philosophical treatises, and works of fiction and poetry have often depicted humans as having a need to perceive themselves as good, and their actions as moral and justified. Within the last hundred years, a number of important figures in the development of modern psychology have also embraced this notion that people need self-esteem (e.g., Adler, 1930; Allport, 1937; Horney, 1937; James, 1890; Maslow, 1970; Murphy, 1947; Rank, 1959; Rogers, 1959; Sullivan, 1953). Of these, Karen Horney most thoroughly discussed the ways people try to attain and maintain a favorable self-image. The clinical writings of Horney, and other psychotherapists as well, document the ways in which people attempt to defend and enhance self-esteem; they also suggest that difficulty maintaining self-esteem, and maladaptive efforts to do so, may be central to a variety of mental health problems. In this chapter, we will first review the research supporting the existence of a need for self-esteem. Then we will present a theory that accounts for this need and specifies the role it plays in a variety of phenomena including self-presentation.

Empirical Support for a Need for Self-Esteem

It was not until the early 1950s that researchers began to obtain quantitative evidence concerning the need for self-esteem. Since then, research on psychopathology has shown low self-esteem to be associated with a variety of psychological problems, including alcoholism, anxiety, depression, neuroticism, and schizophrenia (see Wylie, 1979, for a review). Such findings suggest that people do need self-esteem for healthy psychological functioning; however, this research is correlational and there-

fore subject to a number of alternative explanations. For example, it may be that psychological difficulties lead to low self-esteem, or that whatever factors contribute to such difficulties also cause low self-esteem.

The Self-Serving Bias in Causal Attribution

Clearer support for the existence of a self-esteem need has been found in experimental research, beginning with studies demonstrating a self-serving bias in individuals' causal attributions for their own successes and failures. These studies typically entail randomly assigning subjects to experience either a favorable or unfavorable outcome on a test and then obtaining their estimates of the extent to which potential causal factors such as ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty were responsible for their particular outcomes. The one highly consistent finding has been that individuals who experience success assign greater responsibility to factors within themselves (e.g., internal factors, such as ability) and less responsibility to factors outside themselves (e.g., external factors, such as luck) than do individuals who experience failure (e.g., Johnson, Feigenbaum, & Welby, 1964; Miller, 1976; Stephan, Rosenfield, & Stephan, 1976; also see Bradley, 1978, and Zuckerman, 1979, for reviews). Thus, as would be expected if people do indeed have a need for self-esteem, individuals seem to take credit for success but deny responsibility for failure.

Eliminating cognitive alternative explanations. In the last 10 years, however, a set of alternative explanations for this self-serving bias has received considerable attention. Miller and Ross (1975) proposed a number of cognitive mechanisms that could lead to a self-serving attributional bias in the absence of a self-esteem motive. Despite the fact that the notion of a need for self-esteem was the basis for all of the research on the self-serving bias up to that point in time, it was argued that such cognitive explanations are preferable because they rely only on the widely accepted information-processing framework for understanding human behavior (see also Nisbett & Ross, 1980). The most compelling of these cognitive explanations is that if individuals believe they are generally competent, they are likely to infer that when they perform competently it is because of their abilities, and when they perform poorly it is because of external factors.

However, since 1975, a number of studies have provided support for the self-esteem explanation of the self-serving bias. McFarland and Ross (1982) conducted a study in which subjects were led to attribute success or failure to either their level of ability or the characteristics of the test. Success-internal subjects reported more positive affect, less negative affect, and higher self-esteem than did success-external subjects; failure-internals, on the other hand, reported less positive affect, more negative affect, and lower self-esteem than did failure-external subjects. Correlational research (e.g., Arkin & Maryuma, 1979; Feather, 1969) and research using hypothetical outcomes (e.g., Nicholls, 1976; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978, 1979) have found similar effects. These studies show that the self-serving pattern of attributions does indeed increase the favorability of the consequences of outcomes for affective experience and self-esteem. If people are motivated to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect, a motivational influence on attributions for