This paper has a rather amusing history. It is a condensation of one chapter from the first draft of my doctoral dissertation (Holt, 1945, 1946a, 1947a). In that research, I had obtained numerous self-evaluations from subjects, including classical levels of aspiration, had intercorrelated them, and had interpreted clusters of interrelated variables as types of defense of self-esteem. I doubt that Ray Cattell, who was working in a nearby office in the Harvard Psychological Clinic, ever mentioned to me his later-published, three-dimensional Covariation Chart (Cattell, 1946) and the idea that the same data might be examined by either Q or R technique. Nevertheless, the thought occurred to me that it would be interesting to see how self-evaluations and defenses of self-esteem were structured in the same group of undergraduates, considered one at a time. I soon found that one such case study was all that I could manage, and it made up a chapter as long as many entire dissertations—in a manuscript that was already far too long.

I had begun work on level of aspiration as a thesis topic under Gordon Allport, had shifted to Murray as my sponsor when I began working at the Harvard Psychological Clinic, but now that I was writing it up, had to return to Allport since Murray had gone off to mysterious war work at the OSS. Allport generously agreed, but to my surprise asked me to take the case study on the grounds that it was “too idiographic for this nomothetic dissertation!” Reluctantly, I did so, and a few months later made it into my contribution to Random Harpoonings, an unpublished volume Bob White put together as a kind of Festschrift/parting gift for Murray.

A few years afterward, after returning to clinical work in Topeka, I dusted it off, boiled it down to the present form, and presented it at the 1947 meeting of the Kansas Academy of Science.

An Inductive Method of Analyzing Defense of Self-Esteem

Clinical psychology today concerns itself to a large extent with defensive functions: the organism’s conscious and unconscious efforts to ward off and nullify threats to all aspects of its psychological integrity, which are analogous to physiological mechanisms of defense against threats to numerous vital...
biochemical equilibria. Psychoanalysts were the first to describe psychological defense "mechanisms" from their intensive clinical observations. More slowly, psychologists who are in a better position to use experimental techniques have followed in their wake, seeking objective empirical demonstration of such strategies as repression and projection, and (what is more important) studying their concrete manifestations in a variety of situations.

There is a level of defensive functioning about which psychiatrists and psychologists are beginning to think and write, but it is still relatively unexplored. Most of the classic psychoanalytic defenses have been conceived of as directed against anxiety, which in turn stems from fears of bodily mutilation, loss of love, or impotence in a catastrophic situation. Psychoanalysts, psychologists, and social workers have lately been paying attention to another important threat to human happiness: the loss of self-esteem (or self-respect). The role played by this factor in mental illness is a vexing problem in psychiatry, but the more seriously ego-psychology is considered, the larger self-esteem bulks, for it refers to the person's basic feeling of being able to live in peace with himself.

Because of methodological difficulties, problems of this sort have long been eschewed by psychologists who strive after scientific rigor. Reports of observations made incidentally to therapeutic contact with patients are unexcelled as stimulating leads but leave something to be desired as scientific data. The method of the case study has been suggested as ideal for work on problems of personal structure and dynamics, and, indeed, it is irreplaceable in the present state of psychological progress. It needs to be refined and sharpened considerably, however, if it is to be an advance over relatively uncontrolled observation. The work reported here is an effort toward the development of an inductive, at least theoretically repeatable method for the preparation of a topical case history of an aspect of psychodynamics. The aspect chosen here is the defense of self-esteem.

The writer of a case study usually faces impalement on one or the other horn of a critical dilemma: either he will be called down for having presented mere facts without conceptualization, or if he fits facts into a preconceived theoretical framework, he will suffer the critical wrath of those who espouse other general theories and say he has chosen facts to fit preexisting ideas of his own. I hoped to bypass this dilemma by developing a set of concepts and a way of ordering the data unique to the case, so that the facts might be arrayed and given implications of wider usefulness, by generalization, and still without recourse to concepts taken over ready-made from preexisting systems. An inductive method was needed, and the fact that the focus of interest was a relatively novel one called all the more for a fresh start without preconceptions.

The method is such a simple one that although I have not been able to

1[This statement is obviously less true today than it was in 1947, when this paper was written.]