SELF-ESTEEM AND RESILIENCY TO SELF-IMAGE THREATS

I have wondered why it is that some people are less affected and torn by the verities of life and death than others. Una's death cut the earth from under Samuels's feet and opened his defended keep and let in old age. On the other hand Liza, who surely loved her family as deeply as did her husband, was not destroyed or warped. Her life continued evenly. She felt sorrow but she survived it. (Steinbeck, 1952, p. 258)

Like Steinbeck, we have wondered why some people are more resilient to the vicissitudes of life than others, that is, why their sense of worth and the psychological states that vary with it (e.g., defensiveness, efficacy, positive affect) are less affected by particular threats to their self-image. They have “thicker skins.” Clearly all of us fluctuate in this
respect; sometimes and in some settings, we are more resilient than at other times or in other settings. But personal experience suggests there are reliable individual differences in this capacity. For example, one of the authors was presented with an option to buy a particularly risky stock by his brother. Like most such stocks, there was a good chance of a high payoff, coupled with a good chance of a big loss. The author's brother, thick of skin, was eager to buy. If the stock failed, he may have calculated, he had lots of esteem cushioning, a happy family, a good career as a lawyer, and so on. But the author, who had a thinner skin (perhaps because he was a poor graduate student at the time), was wary of the gamble. He focused on the possibility that the stock might lose value, and how foolish he would feel if he gambled away his tenuous financial security.

We would like to set forth a theory of individual differences in resiliency to self-image threat based on the idea that such resiliency may be related to self-esteem. We reason that high self-esteem people have more resources (i.e., positive aspects of their self-concepts) with which to affirm their overall sense of self-integrity, and therefore, like Steinbeck's Liza and the author's brother, are less disturbed when a particular threat arises. Conversely, low self-esteem people with fewer such resources are, like Samuel and the author, more distraught by and wary of each threat.

This theory is derived from theories of self-esteem maintenance (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Rosenblatt, 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski, 1989; Tesser, 1988) and particularly from self-affirmation theory (Liu & Steele, 1986; Steele, 1988; Steele & Liu, 1983), which assumes a self-system for maintaining an image of self-integrity, that is, overall moral and adaptive adequacy. This theory assumes that the process of self-affirmation is begun by a threat to this image. Such threats can arise form negative life events, negative judgments of others, or even one's own behavior (e.g., a contradiction of one's values or a failure). In response, this system interprets and reinterprets one's experience and the world so as to restore this image. Importantly, the goal of the system is a global sense of self-integrity, not necessarily refutation of each specific threat. A particular threatening event, even an important one, might be left unrationaized if one could affirm a valued aspect of the self that reinforces one's overall image of self-adequacy, even when that self-aspect is unrelated to the threat. The individual thus has substantial flexibility in responding to specific self-image threats. For example, the college student who fails a test may deal with the inherent self-image threat by arguing herself into a higher grade or derogating the test. Or she might do something that does