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Subcultural Influences on Self-attitudes: The Expression of Low Self-esteem in Race/ethnicity-, Age-, Gender-, Social class-, and Generation-differentiated Subgroups

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Self-esteem is conceptualized in terms of self-feelings that are evoked by self-evaluation of self-concept and that motivate self-enhancing or self-protective responses. Since (sub)cultural conventions and the self-esteem motive frequently invalidate self-report measures, it is argued that self-esteem should be measured as the confluence of self-evaluative statements and measures of subjective distress. In support of this, findings are presented from a longitudinal multigeneration study that demonstrate variation in the association between self-evaluative statements and reports of emotional distress between groups differentiated according to race/ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and generation. The results clearly indicate that prevalent self-report measures, whether considering total scores or component items, have differential emotional significance depending on groupings.¹

Comparative research on the antecedents and consequences of self-esteem requires the accomplishment of two related tasks, if the inconsistencies that characterize much of the research in this field are to be avoided: (1) the clarifications of conceptual ambiguities surrounding the construct of self-esteem, and (2) the proper operationalization of the construct in the research enterprise. The problematic nature of these issues is reflected in copious writings on such topics as: cross-cultural differences in self-enhancement (Kurman, 2002; Takata, 2003); cross-national measures of self-esteem (Schmitt & Allik, 2005); (in)variance of measures of self-esteem across the lifespan (Whiteside-Mansell & Corwyn, 2003), and between age, gender, ethnic, and birth cohort groupings (Cheng & Watkins, 2000; Twenge & Campbell, 2001; Yin & Fan, 2003); implicit vs. explicit or secure vs. defensive self-esteem, and their behavioral consequences (Bosson, Swann, & Penebaker, 2000; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003); self-enhancing or self-protective responses to self-threatening circumstances including self-handicapping, narcissism, repression, or other adaptations (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann 2003; Mendolia, 2002; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Thompson & Richardson, 2001).

Informed by this literature and a general theory of behavior (Kaplan, 1986) we identify one of several classes of self-referent responses as most closely identified with the modal use of self-esteem in the research literature –namely, self-feelings that are evoked in response to relatively salient self-evaluations. Further, we argue in favor of a particular method of measuring self-feelings (in terms of the observed association between self-evaluation and self-feelings). Finally, we demonstrate the necessity of employing this procedure by offering findings from a multigenerational longitudinal study of sub-cultural variation in the affective significance of self-evaluating judgments in groupings differentiated according to gender, race/ethnicity, education, developmental stage, and generation.

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Self-Esteem: Concept and Method

Self-esteem is a construct that connotes a variety of self-referent responses. It may imply a subcategory of self-conceptualizing responses whereby a person perceives himself/herself as being more or less proximate to or distant from more or less salient self-evaluative standards that compose the person's internalized hierarchy of self-evaluative criteria. These self-cognitions may or may not have affective significance for the person. He or she may perceive him (her) self as being brave or cowardly without feeling pride or shame, if bravery/cowardice is not a salient criterion for self approval/reproach. Alternatively, self esteem may connote those self-referent responses that comprise self-feeling aroused in response only to salient self-evaluative conceptions. Implicitly, at least, it is this latter conception of self-esteem that appears to drive research on self-esteem. Such research investigates the instigation of, and responses to, the self-esteem *motive*, the *need* to achieve, maintain or restore self-esteem—a need that is exacerbated when the person conceives of him (her) self as approaching emotionally significant disvalued (or being distant from salient valued) standards. The need is reflected in the experience of distressful self-feelings that motivate self-protective or self-enhancing responses that are intended to forestall or assuage these distressful self-feelings. It is not self-esteem that evokes changes in behavior but rather, the self-esteem motive—the need for self-esteem that results from its absence, the imminent threat to its loss, or (worse) self-derogatory states—that effects changes in cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses directed toward the objective of evoking positive self-feelings and/or reducing negative (distressful) self-feelings (Kaplan, 1986). Thus, in this study, self-esteem is conceptualized in terms of self-feelings that are evoked by self-evaluation of one's self-concept, and that motivate self-enhancing or self-protective responses.

This conceptualization of self-esteem both highlights limitations of prevalent measures of self-esteem and recommends an alternative procedure for measuring self-esteem than the use of any of a variety self-report measures that ask the respondent to make judgments of the degree to which self-conceptions approximate (presumably salient) self-evaluative criteria. The criteria may be stated in more or less global terms. Such procedures have at least two important limitations. First, the affective significance of the self-evaluative standards tends to be assumed rather than demonstrated. It is taken as a given that a person who avers that she is useless is emotionally distressed by the “admission” when this conclusion is problematic. Second, and not unrelated to the first observation, the agreement or disagreement with a self-statement is itself a behavioral expression that may serve self-enhancing or self-protective functions through purposely communicating misinformation or by misperceiving personal realities and communicating these distortions as realities. The problems posed by these limitations in research implicating self-esteem are multiplied when conducting cross-cultural or other comparative research given the variability that is to be expected in the salience of self-evaluative standards, particularly when some of these standards might relate to normative (pre)proscriptions regarding the experience and expression of positive/negative self-feelings.

The recognition that self-enhancing needs often invalidate self-reports of “self-esteem” frequently has prompted the use of quasi-projective techniques (Bosson et al., 2000; Jordan et al., 2003; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003) to measure “implicit” or “covert” self-esteem. Putting aside the issue of problematic validity of such measures, such techniques are impractical for use in longitudinal survey studies. It is argued that the most face-valid measure of self-esteem, as it is conceptualized here, is the confluence of self-evaluative reports and emotional state, that is, the empirical association of negative self-evaluations with dysphoria and of positive self-evaluations with more euphoric responses. The need to employ such measures is demonstrated by observing the disjunction or conjunction of self-evaluation (using standard self-reports) and reports of distress depending on the specific self-evaluative items and sub-cultural differentiations according to various social roles.

Method

In general, it was hypothesized that the emotional significance of self-evaluative expressions would vary greatly according to the person's generation, developmental stage, race/ethnicity, educational level, and gender, as well as by combinations of these sociocultural differentiations. In order to test this assertion a measure of reports of subjective distress (that is, negative self-feelings) was created by summing questionnaire responses indicating self-attributions of symptoms of anxiety and depression. The correlation between reports of subjective distress and self-evaluative reports were taken to be a measure of the degree to which the self-evaluation was emotionally significant. Self-evaluations, whether as a total score or at the item level, were derived from application of seven items from the Rosenberg (1965) scale that previous analyses (Kaplan & Pokorny, 1969) demonstrated as reflecting one of the two dimensions of self-esteem—the one more closely approximating self-evaluative attitudes (rather than defensive self-presentation). The degree of correlation (Pearson's r in this case) between self-evaluation (whether reflected in the total score or in the component item) and the cumulative subjective distress score (negative self-feelings) was the statistic of interest, operationalizing the emotional significance of expressions of self-evaluation (that is, self-esteem).

The data were derived from a multigenerational study. The data consisted of a cohort (G1) of 7,600 participants tested when they were in the seventh grade (T1, early adolescence), again in their twenties (T2), and finally when they were 35-39 years of age (T3). This cohort (G1) represented fifty percent of the seventh grade population in the Houston Independent School District during 1971. In 1994 we began testing the 7,500 children of the original G1 cohort such that the second generation (G2) was approximately the same age that their parents were when they were first tested in the seventh grade. The first generation subjects at T(ime)1 were tested by a questionnaire administered in group settings at time one, and embedded in personal interviews at T2 and T3. The (G2) subjects also responded to the same questionnaire which was now embedded in a more inclusive personal interview.

Our analyses arrived at correlations of the total seven-item Rosenberg scale score with the subjective distress scale (negative self-feelings) and these were examined and evaluated; this was repeated at the item-level as well (for each of the seven items separately). The magnitude of the Pearson correlations was compared across generations (G1T1, G2T1), within the first generation cohort (G1), by development stage (T1, T2, T3), by race/ethnicity (Caucasian, African American, Mexican-American), by educational level (father's educational level at T1, participant's education level at T2, participant's educational level at T3), and by gender. In all instances, higher magnitudes of correlations signified greater associations between Rosenberg measures of *low* self-esteem and the subjective distress scale.

In order to test whether the relation between self-evaluation and distress measures significantly changed over time or across groups, we employed multiple group analysis (stacked/nested models), utilizing the GROUPING option in the M-plus statistical package (Muthén & Muthén, 2004). This entails running a model of interest across different levels or groups (e.g., Time 1 vs. Time 2) to assess potential differences. After an initial stacked model is run, we run the same stacked model again, constraining the path of interest (e.g. self-evaluation and distress) to be equal. We then calculated the χ^2 difference between the two stacked models (the unconstrained and constrained) to assess whether the difference was statistically significant. A significant χ^2 difference indicates that the relation of interest varies significantly depending on the group (Kline, 1998, pp.180-184).

Results

The analyses are informed by the following premises. First, self-evaluative statements have different emotional significance in different subcultures. Second, groups differ by generation, developmental stage, gender, race/ethnicity, and education level. Therefore, it can

be expected that groupings differentiated in such ways would manifest differential associations between self-evaluative statements and measures of subjective distress that would accompany self-evaluation. We will consider these differential correlations between measure of self-evaluation and distressful self-feelings for the total self-evaluation scale and for its components in turn.

Total self-evaluation scores: intergenerational comparison.

As reference to Table 1 will indicate, for subgroups differentiated by gender, race/ethnicity, and father's educational level, second generation adolescents manifested appreciably higher correlations between negative self-evaluation scores and scores purportedly indicating distressful-feelings than their parents at a comparable developmental stage (T1). Apparently, when the later generation expresses negative self-evaluations, they are more expressive of the need for self-esteem as this is reflected in the experience of distressful self-feelings than is the case for parents at the same developmental stage. Whether these intergenerational differences reflect broad social changes in normative expectations governing the legitimacy of dissembling self-attitudes or rather requiring honesty in emotional expression at this developmental stage is problematic. Some insight into the processes that are operating may be gleaned from an examination of specific items that reflect intergenerational changes and subgroup variation in responses to the component items.

Table 1. Correlations between Self Evaluation and Subjective Distress (Negative Self-Feeling) Scales for G1 and G2 Adolescents

	G1T1	G2T1
Gender		
Males	.53	.64
Females	.52	.64
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	.56	.67
African American	.45	.60
Mexican American	.47	.65
Father's Education		
Less than High School	.54	.65
High School Graduate	.50	.63
College Graduate	.55	.64

Selected self-evaluation items: intergenerational comparison.

For the most part, the intergenerational changes in magnitudes of correlations between self-evaluation scores and distressful self-feeling scores are accounted for by two of the items composing the self-evaluation score –those stated in positive terms such that self-devaluation is expressed by disagreeing with the items. As Table 2 indicates, the correlations for each of the items, “I take positive attitudes toward myself” and “On the whole I am satisfied with myself”, tend to be substantially lower in magnitude for the first generation adolescents. Further, for each item, the intergenerational increases in magnitude of correlation are contributed to disproportionately by African American and Mexican American adolescents and by adolescents whose fathers had lower levels of education. For these groupings, in early adolescence, self-devaluing judgments did not appear to reflect an emotionally significant need to restore self-esteem in the first generation. Disagreements with the statement did appear to be more closely associated with distressful self-feelings in the second generation.

Table 2. Correlations of Positive Self-Evaluative Statements with Distressful Self-Feelings in G1 and G2 Adolescents

	Positive Self Attitude		Satisfied with Self	
	G1T1	G2T1	G1T1	G2T1
Gender				
Males	-.18	-.29	-.23	-.31
Females	-.17	-.30	-.24	-.32
Race/Ethnicity				
Caucasian	-.26	-.37	-.29	-.35
African American	-.02	-.17	-.15	-.25
Mexican American	-.04	-.30	-.16	-.32
Father's Education				
Less than High School	-.09	-.33	-.21	-.32
High School Graduate	-.18	-.29	-.23	-.32
College Graduate	-.26	-.29	-.27	-.28

One other item appears to contribute disproportionately to the overall intergenerational increase observed in the correlations between the overall measure of negative self-evaluation and the measure of subjectively distressful self-feelings. For the item, "I wish I had more respect for myself", G2 adolescents manifested appreciably higher correlations between affirmation of the item and higher scores on subjective distress. For all groupings differentiated by gender, race/ethnicity, and father's education, second generation adolescents manifested appreciably higher correlations between the affirmation of the item and higher scores on the index of subjectively distressful self-feelings.

For the remaining items no overall increase in the magnitude of correlations between the self-evaluation item and the subjective distress score were observed. However, a number of item by subgroup interaction effects were observed. For the item "I certainly feel useless at times", the magnitude of the intergenerational increase in correlation between endorsement of the item and score on the distressful self-feelings scale was greater for Mexican-American adolescents (.37 for the first generation participants and .48 for the second generation participants), was somewhat smaller for the African-American (.37 for the first generation participants and .45 for the second generation participants), and was virtually non-existent for the non-Mexican-American Caucasians (.41 for the G1 participants and .44 for the G2 participants).

For the item, "At times I think I am no good at all", the magnitude of the intergenerational difference in correlation was a function of gender and race/ethnicity. A substantial intergenerational increase in the correlation between endorsement of the item and the magnitude of the correlation was observed for girls (.27 for the first generation youths and .47 for the G2 youths) but not for boys (.39 for the G1 youths and .43 for the G2 youths). With regard to race/ethnicity, a substantial intergenerational increase in the magnitude of the correlation between endorsement of the item and score on the subjective distress scale was observed for Mexican-American youths (.34 for G1 youths and .48 for G2 youths) and for African-American youths (.35 for G1 youths and .46 for the G2 youths), but not for the Caucasian youths (.42 for the G1 youths and .46 for the G2 youths). These race/ethnicity-specific findings were accounted for by variation in the first generation scores (.34 for Mexican-American subjects, .35 for African-American youths, and .42 for the Caucasian youths) with the second generation correlation magnitudes being quite similar across groups (.46 for the Caucasian participants, .46 for the African-American participants and .48 for the Mexican-American participants).

Total self-evaluation scores: developmental stage.

Reference to Table 3 will indicate that in all subgroups differentiated by gender, race/ethnicity, and education, a linear trend is noted whereby the magnitude of association between self-evaluation scores and distressful self-feelings scores increases with developmental stage. In all instances, the correlations between the scores in early adolescence were lowest, the magnitudes increased during the third decade of life, and increased still further during the fourth decade of life. The magnitudes of increases between early adolescence and the fourth decade of life were appreciable for all but two subgroups. For college educated participants and for Caucasian participants the increases between early adolescence and the fourth decade of life were quite modest, particularly for the college educated group. The increases were most substantial for the Mexican-American participants (increasing from .47 during early adolescence to .70 when the participants were between 35 and 39 years of age) and for participants whose fathers' or they themselves had attained less than a high school education (increasing from .54 during early adolescence to .69 during the fourth decade of life). Thus, in these groupings, there is a particularly noteworthy increase in the affective significance of endorsing self-devaluing statements as a participant proceeds from early adolescence through more mature adulthood. For the less educated and Mexican-American subjects, self-devaluing statements had the greatest affective significance in later years as this is reflected in the correlation between endorsement of the self-devaluing statement and the scores that reflect distressful self-feelings. Perhaps those groups are more vulnerable as adults to stigmatizing attitudes and experiences of failure, and to consequent distressful self-feelings when making such judgments about themselves. Mutually exclusive groups are less emotionally invested in such evaluations, the evaluations representing for them more affectively neutral stock-taking of one's status in life.

Table 3. Correlations between Total Self-(d)Evaluation Scores and Distressed Self-Feeling Scores by Developmental Stage

	G1T1	G1T2	G1T3
Gender			
Males	.53	.55	.62
Females	.52	.60	.64
Race/Ethnicity			
Caucasian	.56	.59	.63
African American	.45	.55	.61
Mexican American	.47	.62	.70
Father's Education			
Less than High School*	.54	.59	.69
High School Graduate*	.50	.57	.63
College Graduate*	.55	.55	.58

* For T1, education level refers to father. For T2 and T3, education refers to participant.

Item-specific patterns: developmental stage.

The overall pattern relating to the moderating influence of developmental stage observed for total scores is primarily accounted for by the two positively worded items, "On the whole I am satisfied with myself" and "I take a positive attitude toward myself". As reference to Table 4 will indicate, for each of these items, for all subgroups differentiated by gender, race/ethnicity and education level, the magnitude of correlations between the item score and distressful self-feelings scores increases in a linear fashion between early adolescence, the third decade of life, and the fourth decade of life when the participants were between 35 and 39 years of age. In all instances the overall increase between adolescence and the fourth decade of life is substantial.

No consistent increase in the magnitude of correlation for all subgroups was noted for any of the other items.

It is tempting to speculate that with increasing maturity a person loses the ability to distort reality and to defend against the emotional significance of self-devaluing judgments. However, these processes play out particularly with regard to the inability to endorse positive statements about oneself as opposed to endorsing negative statements about oneself. Perhaps, as one progresses through life, it becomes apparent that approximation to salient life goals will not occur and, in the absence of hope that it will occur, self-dissatisfaction becomes increasingly a distressful state. As long as one has the expectation that approximation of salient self-evaluative standards will occur in the future, recognition that it has not yet occurred will not be considered as much an occasion for distress.

Table 4. Correlations between Selected Self-Evaluation Scores and Distressed Self-Feeling Scores by Developmental Stage

	Positive Self Attitude			Satisfied with Self		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Gender						
Males	-.18	-.29	-.41	-.23	-.34	-.36
Females	-.17	-.39	-.43	-.24	-.26	-.43
Race/Ethnicity						
Caucasian	-.26	-.40	-.46	-.29	-.37	-.44
African American	-.02	-.26	-.35	-.15	-.29	-.35
Mexican American	-.04	-.35	-.45	-.16	-.40	-.35
Father's Education						
Less than High School*	-.09	-.32	-.34	-.21	-.32	-.36
High School Graduate*	-.18	-.36	-.44	-.23	-.35	-.41
College Graduate*	-.26	-.39	-.47	-.27	-.35	-.39

* For T1, education level refers to father. For T2 and T3, education refers to participant.

Subgroup by item interaction.

A number of subgroups by item interactions are considered noteworthy. First, regarding race/ethnicity, it may be observed that the linear increase in magnitude of correlation between self-evaluative statements and subjective distress scores, as observed for all subgroups with regard to the positively worded self-evaluative items, was uniquely observed for the Mexican-American participants for the negatively worded items as well. For each of these five items an appreciable linear increase was observed for Mexican-American participants between early adolescence and the fourth decade of life. The most appreciable increase was observed for the "I certainly feel useless at times" item reflecting a correlation of .37 during early adolescence, .47 during young adult hood, and .57 during the fourth decade of life, although similar linear increases were observed for the other negatively worded items as well. Similar linear increases were not observed for the other groups in the case of the negatively worded items.

Depending upon which development stage was being examined, the groups differentiated by race/ethnicity manifested distinctive patterns. During the fourth decade of life, the Mexican-Americans manifested appreciably higher correlations between endorsement of the self-evaluative item and the subjective distress scores than the other two groups for the items "I certainly feel useless at times" and "At times I think I am no good at all." The Mexican-Americans manifested a correlation of .57 compared to .46 for the Caucasian and African Americans during the fourth decade of life for the former item, and for the latter item they manifested a correlation of .53, compared to .35 for the African Americans and .41 for the Caucasian participants. During early adolescence, Caucasians manifested appreciably higher correlations between the self-devaluing response and subjective distress for three items: "I wish

I had more respect for myself”, “On the whole I am satisfied with myself” and “I take a positive attitude toward myself”. For the last case, the correlation was not significant for the African-American and the Mexican-American samples.

With regard to education-related differences, during the fourth decade of life the magnitude of correlations was appreciably greater for subjects who had less than a high school education in the case of only 3 items: “I certainly feel useless at times,” “At times I feel I am no good at all,” “All in all I am inclined to feel I am a failure.” For one of the items, “I take a positive attitude toward myself”, at this developmental stage it was the college educated participants who manifested the highest correlation between self-devaluation and subjective distress. For the remaining items, there were no marked relationship between educational level and subjective distress. During early adolescence, the only remarkable relationship between magnitude of correlation and educational level observed was for the item “I take a positive attitude toward myself.” For this item, college educated participants were more likely to display a stronger negative association between taking a positive attitude towards self and subjective distress score, with college educated participants manifesting a correlation of $-.26$, high school educated subjects manifesting a correlation of $-.18$, and less than high school educated subjects manifesting a correlation of $-.09$.

Compared to the moderating influence of race/ethnicity and educational status, gender exercises relatively little influence on the affective significance of a self-devaluing statement. The only noteworthy effects were observed with regard to the appreciably greater correlation between self-devaluing endorsement and subjective distress scores during the 20s for women in the case of the items “I wish I had more respect for myself” and “I take a positive attitude toward myself.” For these items, at this development stage, women manifested a correlation of $.40$ and $-.39$, respectively, compared to correlations for the men of $.31$ and $-.29$ respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

When a person expresses a positive or negative self-evaluation, that expression may or may not reflect a veridical belief regarding one’s own worth. A person may actually believe that he or she is better or worse than the statement implies, but feel constrained from overly asserting his/her true beliefs because of conventions regarding humility, self-protection, presentation of self, or other normatively prescribed/prohibited requirements. In short, what the person says about himself may not reflect his/her true self-evaluation. If it does not reflect what the person really believes about his/her own worth, then we cannot expect support for theoretically informed hypotheses regarding the antecedents and consequences of self-esteem motivated responses. However, even if it could be taken as given that the person’s assertions about himself completely reflect the person’s self-evaluation, the self-evaluative judgments might not reflect *salient* self-attitudes. That is, the self-judgments about one’s approximation to (or distance from) self-evaluative criteria might not be emotionally significant. If that is the case, then self-esteem of an individual would not be threatened, and the absence of self-esteem would not occasion self-esteem motivated responses to forestall or assuage negative self-feelings associated with the perception that one has failed to approximate valued standards or is approximating disvalued standards.

Depending upon the cultural meanings assigned to symbolic expressions, individuals will be highly variable in how they express emotionally significant self-evaluation (when they in fact express how they feel about themselves). The question arises as to whether or not we can trust apparently relevant self-evaluative judgments as truly reflecting emotionally significant self-evaluative judgments. The present study was intended to suggest at the same time both the need to consider, and to offer a solution to, the problem of how to determine that self-expressions reflect emotionally significant self-evaluative judgments. It was argued that the emotional significance of self-evaluations, and therefore the exacerbation of the self-esteem motive, may be measured by the degree of association between self-devaluing judgments and

expressions of subjective distress (that is, negative self-feelings). It was asserted that the variable expression of emotionally meaningful self-evaluations would be associated with sub-cultural differences based upon differentiation according to generation, developmental stage, race/ethnicity, educational level, and gender. The results clearly support the expectations that the degree of association (correlation) between self-evaluative judgments and the expression of negative self-feelings indeed would vary according to these differentiations. Presumably, the ability to measure the emotional significance of self-evaluative judgment would more easily express activation of the self-esteem motive and facilitate valid tests of theoretically informed hypotheses relating to the antecedents and consequences of an exacerbated self-esteem motive.

Nevertheless, the correlation of expressions of subjective distress with self-evaluative judgments is a less than perfect way of demonstrating emotional significance of self-perceptions of being proximate to or distant from salient self-evaluative standards. Just as expressions of self-evaluations have different meanings according to sub-cultural differentiations, so may expressions regarding emotional experience vary by these same sub-cultural differentiations. One might be on far surer grounds if one were to measure the emotional significance of symbolic statements (particularly self-evaluative judgments) by directly measuring the physiological substrate presumed to underlie the subjective experience of affect. Certainly, current developments in theory and technologies relating to investigation of the interface between subjective experiences of affect and its central nervous system and autonomic nervous system correlates increase confidence that the linking of verbal expressions of self-evaluation with physiological measures of emotions hold promise of resolving ambiguities in the research literature regarding antecedents and consequences of exacerbation of the self-esteem motives across (sub)cultures. For the moment, however, the confluence of (negative) self-evaluation and reported subjective distress appears to be the most valid of available measures of self-esteem, as conceptualized in terms of self-feelings evoked in response to salient self-evaluations of self-concept that motivate self-enhancing or self-protective responses.

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