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“Death of a (Narcissistic) Salesman”:

An Integrative Model of Fragile Self-Esteem

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Arthur Miller's tragic protagonist Willy Loman is the quintessential ordinary man striving to achieve extraordinary dreams. Willy's search for the "American Dream" of fame, fortune, and admiration is the hallmark of his identity, but like many of his generation he is unable to meet the unrealistic goals he has set out for himself. In Death of a Salesman, Miller presents Willy in the final days of his life, and depicts a man who has failed to become a successful, wealthy, or well-liked salesman; who treats his wife with cruelty and disrespect; and who has raised one son to follow in his footsteps by cheating and lying his way towards an illusory dream while his other son, disillusioned with Willy, is homeless, jobless, and aimless at the age of 34. Yet, despite failing to achieve the core goals of his identity, Willy Loman cannot be characterized as having low self-esteem. Indeed, as Kernis' target article wisely demonstrates, reducing self-esteem to a static average level deters a deeper understanding of the intrapsychic processes that produce fluctuations in self-evaluations. Kernis' emphasis on fragile self-esteem, and associated self-regulatory processes, sets the stage for a new understanding of the self-worth dynamics that influence Willy Loman's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Willy Loman, Kernis would no doubt argue, has fragile self-esteem. Willy's self-esteem is defensive: He presents himself to his sons in a deceptively positive light. Willy also has dissociated explicit and implicit self-esteem: He explicitly views himself in an idealized manner as a successful father and salesman, but his suicide attempts, which occur when he is in a semi-conscious dream-state, suggest the presence of deep-seated feelings of self-doubt. Willy's self-esteem is also contingent and highly dependent on feedback from his employer, sons, and mistress (Ribikoff, 2000). Finally, Willy's self-esteem is unstable, ranging from extreme arrogance to, at times, desperate self-pity. These four "forms" of fragile self-esteem provide a compelling way to describe and elaborate on Willy Loman's fragile sense of self, all of which move us beyond the simplistic search for a stable level of high or low self-esteem.

In this commentary, we build on and extend Kernis' model by proposing an overarching explanatory framework that subsumes all four forms of fragile self-esteem, and thus allows us to better understand the self-regulatory dynamics of individuals like Willy Loman. Specifically, we propose that Kernis' four forms of fragile self-esteem represent different manifestations of narcissistic self-esteem regulation (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001a; Robins, Tracy, & Shaver, 2001). Kernis briefly discusses the possible connection between narcissism and fragile self-esteem, but he essentially dismisses the possibility of using narcissism as an alternative framework. Despite Kernis' reservations, we believe that narcissism theory and research can provide insights into the interrelations, developmental roots, and intrapsychic processes associated with the four forms of fragile self-esteem.

#### Reconceptualized Model of Fragile Self-Esteem

One central limitation of Kernis' model is that it does not specify exactly how the four forms of fragile self-esteem relate to each another, and whether, for example, they are intercorrelated facets of a broader latent construct (i.e., fragile self-esteem), comprise an interrelated causal system, or are largely independent constructs. Kernis explains, "readers may have hoped for an all-encompassing perspective that linked the various forms of fragile self-esteem to each other and to authenticity through a set of common processes. Unfortunately, given our present state of knowledge, that is easier said than done" (p. 46). Although we agree that an empirically based model would be premature at this juncture (in part because many of the constructs are not well operationalized), we believe that there is fertile ground for a theoretically based model, and that such a model would be generative and would usefully direct future research. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the different forms of fragile self-esteem could exist or function in isolation; they must be interconnected in some systematic and theoretically coherent manner. We believe that the forms of fragile self-esteem should be viewed as part of a

broader system of personality functioning, and as collectively forming a coherent pattern or type of person, captured by the construct of narcissism.

Figure 1 shows a reconceptualization of Kernis' model based on narcissism theory. In this model, the developmental events depicted in the left panel of the figure result in the formation of the intrapsychic system depicted in the right panel. Briefly, particular early childhood experiences and, possibly, temperamental characteristics, contribute to the development of the narcissistic personality, which is characterized by defensive self-esteem and a dissociation between implicit and explicit self-representations (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001b). These defensive processes and dissociated self-representations contribute to contingent self-esteem, which in turn leads to fluctuations in self-esteem over time, that is, to unstable self-esteem. Thus, Figure 1 portrays the four forms of fragile self-esteem as an interrelated causal system embedded within the broader context of a person's life history and personality functioning. This system is fueled by feelings of shame and hubristic pride, or superiority (Lewis, 1993; Tracy & Robins, 2002). Below, we discuss each aspect of this model in greater detail.

In the target article, Kernis notes the importance of considering the developmental origins of fragile and optimal self-esteem, an issue that often is neglected in processing models of the self. By connecting Kernis' model of fragile self-esteem to a stable personality construct such as narcissism, we gain insights into the childhood roots of fragile self-esteem. According to theories of narcissism, the syndrome develops during early childhood when parents over-idealize their young children and place unrealistic demands upon them. The child feels that he or she must be perfect, and is simultaneously made to feel rejected when perfection is not achieved. This rejection may be compounded by certain kinds of social experience, such as being excluded,

ridiculed, and humiliated by others, which accentuate the child's feeling of having failed to meet the ideal standards of his or her parents.

The child may respond to this internal conflict by developing dissociated positive and negative self-representations, so that he or she can be perfect at an explicit level and keep all negative self-images hidden at an implicit level (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971). This corresponds to Kernis' description of a child who ignores or dismisses his or her own internal experiences in favor of those of the parent, thereby dissociating "bad me" self-aspects (p. 34). Similarly, Brown and Bosson (2001) recently argued that narcissists are individuals "whose emotional needs were not met in childhood," and who respond by developing "two sets of knowledge structures that essentially contradict each other" (p. 211). This structural split in the self-representational system—implicit feelings of inadequacy coexisting with explicit feelings of grandiosity—makes the self particularly vulnerable to threats to self-worth. To maintain an inflated sense of self-esteem, the developing narcissist may begin to adopt a highly defensive self-regulatory style, denying negative experiences and overemphasizing positive ones. This defensive self-esteem reflects the self-enhancement motive characterizing narcissistic individuals (John & Robins, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001a). (Note that we are conceptualizing defensive self-esteem in a broader manner than Kernis, who views the construct in the context of impression management and acknowledges that, so conceived, it may bear little relation to other self-esteem processes.)

The self-conscious emotions of shame and hubristic pride play an important role in this developmental process. The dissociation of positive and negative self-representations can make the implicit self globally negative, leading to stable, global attributions following failure (e.g., "I am a bad person, and I'll always be a bad person") as the individual becomes incapable of distinguishing a bad thing done from the bad self as a whole. Studies suggest that these kinds of

stable, global attributions promote feelings of shame (Covington & Omelich, 1981; Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Weiner, 1985), an emotion that has been called the “keystone affect” of the narcissistic personality (Wright, O’Leary, & Balkin, 1989). From this perspective, narcissistic self-esteem regulation can be seen as a defense against excessive shame. Indeed, if narcissists simply felt bad, rather than feeling bad about themselves (i.e., shame), we presumably would not see many of the interpersonal and intrapsychic consequences that characterize narcissism and that make it an apt model for conceptualizing fragile self-esteem. For example, narcissistic hostility and rage might not be so common or virulent if the underlying pain were due to something other than shame following threats to self-worth.

In fact, viewing the hostility associated with fragile self-esteem as an outcome of narcissistic self-esteem regulation clarifies our understanding of the underlying causal mechanism. Why, for example, do highly contingent women and narcissistic college students respond to threats to their self-worth with anger (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Paradise & Kernis, 1999), instead of sadness or shame? If individuals with contingent self-esteem base their feelings of self-worth on feedback from others, then insults should reduce self-esteem and promote shame. The fact that anger occurs instead implies a regulatory process, demanding further explanation. We believe that instead of blaming themselves for the insult and consciously experiencing shame, narcissists blame the offender and feel the anger and hostility that follow from an external attribution.<sup>1</sup> The fact that adolescents with contingent self-esteem do respond to insults with sadness and even depression (Harter, 1993) may be due to their underdeveloped emotion-regulation skills. Incapable of the automatic cognitive reappraisals necessary to externalize blame, contingent adolescents may respond to negative feedback with conscious shame, and consequently become depressed (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). This idea fits with the finding that self-esteem is at a nadir during adolescence, but rises by the

time individuals reach college-age (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling, & Potter, in press), perhaps because adolescence is a time of heightened self-evaluation, fueled by shame which cannot yet be regulated. In summary, for young narcissists, the implicit negative self-representation is more than a cold cognitive schema; it is an object of shame.

Just as the implicit self becomes globally negative, the narcissist's dissociated, explicit self becomes globally positive and idealized, leading to stable, global attributions following success ("I am a perfect person, I'm always perfect") with no distinction made between a good thing done and the good self doing it. The positive self becomes an object of pride, but not simply pride in achievement. For the narcissist, positive self-representations are too essential to leave to the whim of actual accomplishments, for they are the only self-representations that prevent the individual from being overwhelmed by shame and low self-esteem. Instead, narcissistic individuals come to experience a generalized, global pride characterized by conscious feelings of superiority, or "hubris" (Lewis, 1993; Tracy & Robins, 2002).

Over the course of development, narcissists increasingly adopt a defensive self-regulatory style: They minimize experiences of shame by keeping their negative self-representations implicit, and maximize experiences of hubris by maintaining and inflating their positive self-representations. By adulthood, the narcissist's positive and negative self-representations may be highly dissociated, such that the positive self is the only representation within the narcissist's body of explicit self-knowledge. This dissociation may promote high scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), a measure of explicit self-aggrandizement (e.g., "If I ruled the world, it would be a better place."), as well as low scores on measures on implicit self-esteem (Brown, Bosson, & Swann, 2002; Jordan, 2002).

The discrepancy between implicit and explicit self-representations may promote an unstable situation, much like water about to boil, causing negative self-representations and

associated shame to bubble towards the surface of awareness. Narcissists may regulate this shame by seeking external indicators of their self-worth (e.g., parental or partner approval, good grades, or even a compliment from a stranger), which are taken as “proof” of the veracity of their positive self-representations. As Kernis notes, these external indicators typically have been studied as “contingencies” that become the basis of global self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Thus, in our model, contingent self-esteem derives from dissociated implicit/explicit self-esteem and defensive regulation.

Contingent self-esteem, in turn, leads to unstable self-esteem over time. Kernis argues that the two constructs are dissimilar because contingent self-esteem can be stable self-esteem if contingencies are continually met. However, contingencies can never be completely stable, so, eventually, contingent self-esteem always will result in unstable self-esteem. When contingencies are present, hubristic pride is experienced and self-esteem rises; when contingencies are absent, shame is experienced and self-esteem falls. In other words, contingent self-esteem causes unstable self-esteem because self-esteem levels fluctuate in response to external contingencies (Crocker & Park, in press), which elicit experiences of hubris and shame. Thus, in our model, defensive, dissociated, contingent, and unstable self-esteem form an interrelated system of cognitive-affective regulatory processes and outcomes.

In summary, our reconceptualization places the four forms of fragile self-esteem within the broader context of personality functioning and development. However, many of the ideas presented above are speculative and require empirical support, such as longitudinal research on the potentially overlapping developmental antecedents of narcissism and fragile self-esteem, and experimental research on the intrapsychic processes depicted in Figure 1. For example, one promising avenue of research could test whether manipulations of implicit self-esteem (e.g., Abend, Kernis, & Hampton, 2000) influence participants’ tendency to seek contingencies.

### Can Narcissism and Fragile Self-Esteem Be Explained by Temperament?

Although narcissism provides a theoretically compelling account of the self-regulatory processes responsible for fragile self-esteem, a more parsimonious alternative account warrants attention as well: Outcomes associated with narcissism, and the concomitant fragile self-esteem process, might be explained by individual differences in temperament (for a similar argument, see Paulhus, 2001). For example, individuals who are biologically “wired” to be chronically anxious and irritable are more likely to be highly sensitive to negative feedback, so failure will have a stronger impact on their self-esteem. Similarly, individuals wired to be sensitive to rewards may respond more strongly to success. Thus, narcissists may be high on both the biologically based avoidance system (i.e., sensitivity to punishment) and the biologically based approach system (i.e., sensitivity to reward) (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Pickering & Gray, 1999). Together, these two tendencies may accentuate the hubris accompanying the thrill of victory and intensify the shame associated with the agony of defeat. It is easy to see how the combination of high approach and avoidance could create the uniquely narcissistic pattern of aggrandizement, exhibitionism, and attention seeking, combined with excessive defensiveness, sensitivity to criticism, and a low threshold for experiencing negative emotions. In contrast, we can imagine that an individual high only on avoidance would simply be prone to shame and low self-esteem. It thus seems plausible that a co-activation of the two biologically based systems could contribute to the development of the four forms of fragile self-esteem.

Consistent with this interpretation, self-esteem, narcissism, and even unstable self-worth have a substantial genetic component; studies comparing twins, full siblings, and step-siblings suggest that: (a) about 30% of the variance in self-esteem is heritable (Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1998; McGuire, Neiderhiser, Reiss, Hetherington, & Plomin, 1994); (b) narcissism has

the highest heritability of all the personality disorders (Livesley, Jang, Jackson, & Vernon, 1993); and (c) unstable self-esteem is heritable even when its overlap with self-esteem level is taken into account (Sedikides, Neiss, & Stevenson, 2002). These findings are consistent with the idea that a genetic predisposition towards negative emotionality and approach-oriented behavioral tendencies may be at the core of all three constructs. The reverse possibility—that self-evaluative processes cause personality—seems unlikely given that temperamental traits are early emerging, highly heritable, highly stable over long periods of time, and linked to neural and biological substrates (Caspi, 1998; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999).

One way to reconcile this perspective with our earlier developmental account is by speculating that temperament serves as a diathesis, which combines with the environmental stressors previously described to produce a narcissistic personality. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine narcissism developing solely from environmental experiences, in the absence of dispositions to be aggressive, approach-oriented, and prone to intense negative affect. Under these genetic and environmental constraints, individuals may have little choice other than to adopt a narcissistic style.

This analysis raises an important question: Can the correlates and consequences of various forms of fragile self-esteem be explained by individual differences in temperament? Although we believe the answer is no, this question merits empirical attention. For example, studies could assess whether fragile self-esteem predicts hostile reactions to negative feedback independently of trait neuroticism; whether the relation between fragile self-esteem and hostility is entirely due to shared variance with negative emotionality; or, whether the heritability of unstable self-esteem can be explained by the heritability of temperament. To properly address these questions, researchers will need to examine non-self-report outcomes of fragile self-esteem, as well as use non-self-report measures of temperament.

#### Concluding Thoughts

In summary, we believe that narcissism provides a compelling theoretical account of the processes and outcomes associated with fragile self-esteem. Our reconceptualization places fragile self-esteem within a life history context, generating hypotheses about the developmental origins of these complex regulatory dynamics, and providing an explanatory causal model of the interrelations among the various forms of fragile self-esteem. Without the overarching framework of narcissism, each form of self-esteem remains an intriguing but isolated phenomenon, and researchers are left with little guidance about how to conceptualize and test causal relations among them.

Our reconceptualized model also provides several insights into Willy Loman's narcissistic personality and fragile self-esteem. From a life history perspective, we can formulate hypotheses about Willy's childhood: the fact that his older brother Ben was likely his parents' favorite, and that young Willy viewed Ben in idealized terms but could never achieve the same kind of acceptance because his parents died too early to watch him struggle towards his unrealistic self-goals. These high ideals may have combined with social rejection during Willy's

childhood to promote the development of dissociated positive and negative self-representations, and Willy's lifelong need to suppress his shame.

From a systemic perspective, we can view Willy's narcissistic personality as contributing to the particular cognitive-affective processes that influence his words and actions throughout the play. Willy never acknowledges feelings of shame, but shame seems to motivate his major decisions, behaviors, and life pursuits (Ribikoff, 2000). To suppress his shame and his somewhat implicit negative self-representation, Willy self-aggrandizes and self-promotes, striving desperately to attain successes that promote feelings of hubris. He teaches his sons that they should be proud of global, stable elements of themselves, such as "being well-liked" (e.g., p. 23), but not of specific accomplishments such as passing the necessary exams to graduate from high school. Similarly, he refuses to accept or even explicitly acknowledge his sons' shame, even when Biff is reduced to stealing a pen from a former employer who no longer remembers him.

Willy regulates his shame and enhances his hubris through defensive self-promotion whenever his own self-worth is called into question. When he is unable to delude himself, Willy's self-worth suffers, and this pattern results in overall fluctuating (unstable) self-esteem. In fact, Willy's final act of suicide is the result of a powerful confrontation with Biff, which forces Willy to see that his own life is a lie—thereby shattering his illusory contingencies. Willy's implicit shame can no longer be suppressed, and, never having developed any means of integrating his positive and negative self-representations, he is left with no choice but to sacrifice one self for the other.<sup>2</sup>

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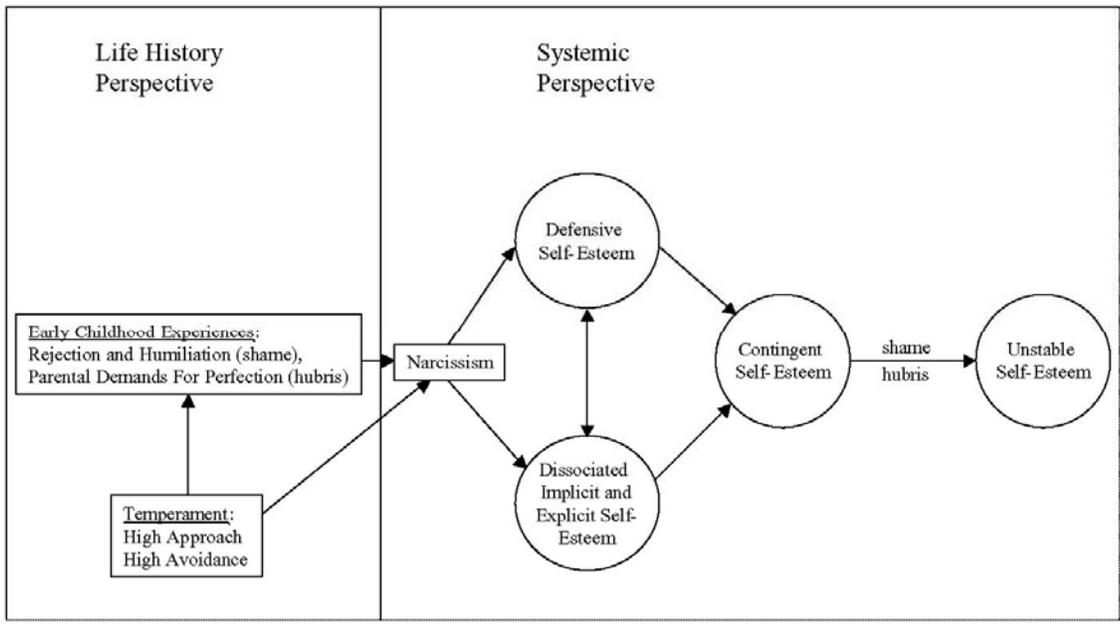
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Figure 1. Narcissism-oriented Reconceptualization of Fragile Self-esteem



<sup>1</sup> The idea that implicit shame is the cause of narcissistic rage is supported by studies of “Type A” heart attack survivors. These patients have been found to “harbor insecurities and in most cases insufficient self-esteem . . . not immediately apparent to the therapists or the participants themselves.” (Friedman & Ulmer, 1984, p. 167).

<sup>2</sup> Although this analysis of Willy Loman as a narcissist is compelling, Willy’s behaviors and actions also can be attributed to temperamental negative emotionality, combined with a hyperactive approach system. That is, it is possible that Willy is simply a highly neurotic and aggressive salesman who suffers from repeated bouts of depression, which ultimately lead to his demise from suicide.