

## **On Claiming the Good and Denying the Bad: Self-Presentation Styles and Self-Esteem**

**Anthony D. Hermann\***

*Bradley University*

**Robert M. Arkin**

*Ohio State University*

*\*Anthony Hermann; Dept. of Psychology; Bradley University; 1501 W. Bradley Avenue; Peoria, IL, 61625; USA. ahermann@bradley.edu (e-mail).*

---

**ABSTRACT** - Two studies investigated the relationship between self-esteem and two forms of active, favorable self-presentation: attributive (claiming desirable characteristics) and repudiative (denying negative characteristics). In a pilot study, participants ( $N=122$ ) lower in self-esteem were equally likely to deny possessing negative personality characteristics to a new acquaintance as those higher in self-esteem, but were less likely to claim possessing desirable characteristics. In the main study ( $N=52$ ), participants lower in self-esteem were equally likely to compensate for a negative public image by denying they possessed negative characteristics unrelated to that image as those higher in self-esteem (i.e., compensatory self-protection). However, only those very high in self-esteem compensated for the negative public image by claiming unrelated desirable characteristics.

---

A primary goal of self-presentation is to foster a favorable image of the self, either to obtain a specific outcome or to elicit a favorable evaluation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). However, many have argued that those low and high in self-esteem differ in their self-presentation strategies (e.g., Arkin, 1981; Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989), noting that the style of those high in self-esteem is active, confident, and self-enhancing, while the style of those lower in self-esteem seems more passive, cautious, and self-protective. Those high in self-esteem are more likely to make self-serving attributions in public (Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990), compensate for a negative image by bolstering their presentation publicly on unrelated traits (Baumeister, 1982), seek self-enhancing social comparisons after threat (Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994), and strategically distance themselves from upward social comparison targets (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). In short, those higher in self-esteem actively cope with threat (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Boney-McCoy, Gibbons, & Gerrard, 1999).

Yet there is evidence that those low in self-esteem also possess the self-enhancement motive (both at baseline and when facing psychological threat). Those low in self-esteem report an equally strong desire to succeed as those high in self-esteem (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981) and are often mislabeled in that they actually have predominantly positive self-evaluations in the absolute sense (i.e., score well above the midpoint of the

scale; Baumeister et al., 1989), and are only “low” in self-esteem relative to those very high in self-regard. In addition, those lower in self-esteem will engage in public self-enhancement, at least indirectly. Baumgardner, Kaufman, and Levy (1989) gave participants negative personality feedback and then manipulated whether their evaluation of the feedback source was expressed publically or privately. Those lower in self-esteem rated the source more negatively in public -but not in private- while those high in self-esteem showed the reverse. This finding is consistent with the self-protective style of those lower in self-esteem in that rating the source negatively reflects positively on oneself, but avoids directly characterizing the self. It also shows that those lower in self-esteem do not necessarily “roll over” and accept negative feedback in public settings.

If individuals lower in self-esteem are motivated to present themselves favorably in public, they may use different strategies than their high self-esteem counterparts. Those higher in self-esteem seem to adopt a promotion regulatory focus (Higgins, 1999); they are motivated by the presence or absence of positive outcomes (e.g., social approval). Accordingly, they portray themselves positively, with an eye toward securing social approval (e.g., Arkin, 1981; Jones & Pittman, 1982). Those lower in self-esteem, however, seem to adopt a prevention focus; they are more sensitive to the presence or absence of negative outcomes (e.g., social disapproval) and their strategies are likely to be aimed at avoiding disapproval. This is consistent with an intriguing distinction between two general types of favorable self-presentation: attributive (i.e., crediting the self with desirable characteristics) and repudiative (i.e., denying undesirable characteristics; Roth, Snyder, & Pace, 1986). Although those lower in self-esteem may avoid favorable self-presentation in the attributive form, they may embrace the repudiative form.

Ordinarily, measures of self-presentation behavior (e.g., making self-ratings for others to read) obscure whether participants are engaging in attributive or repudiative self-presentation. Bipolar scales (e.g., sincere- insincere) require that attributive and repudiative self-presentation be linked reciprocally (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Scherneck, 1999; Schlenker & Wowra, 2003). Low self-esteem participants may be motivated to deny undesirable traits on such measures, but may not be comfortable claiming the opposite desirable trait. The result may be a response in the neutral portion of the scale, and consequently, the self-enhancing presentation is observed only among those higher in self-esteem. Likewise, reverse-coding and averaging across desirable and undesirable items can also obscure repudiative self-presentation. If measured separately, an individual would be able to deny undesirable traits and, thus, present a favorable face without having to claim positive qualities. Measures of self-presentation constructed this way would both allow for a self-protective response and would also reflect better self-presentation in daily life (i.e., desirable and undesirable qualities can be addressed separately).

The following studies were designed to investigate the degree to which self-esteem is related to these forms of favorable portrayals of the self. In the pilot study, we placed participants in a situation requiring self-presentation and examined the degree to which those low in self-esteem engaged in both types of self-presentation relative to those high in self-esteem. In the second study, we tested the hypothesis that individuals lower in

self-esteem would engage in repudiative self-presentation strategically to compensate for a negative public image.

## Pilot Study

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred two participants (71 females) at a small liberal arts college were recruited for an acquaintanceship study and received course credit in a sophomore-level psychology course for their participation.

#### Procedures

On arrival, participants (in groups of 6-12) were told that they would meet another participant of the same sex that they did not know well, swap information about each other, and then work on a decision task together. Participants listed the names of all other participants in the room whom they knew and rated them (1= *hardly know at all*; 7= *know extremely well*). Participants then completed a packet for another researcher, including the self-esteem measure. The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) is designed to measure global self-evaluation (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"). Participants responded on a 6-point scale (1= *disagree very much*; 6= *agree very much*) to provide a wider range of scores than the original 4-point scale. Deviations from this original scale have been commonplace for some time (see Baumeister, et al., 1989; Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010). Internal consistency was strong (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 48.9$ ,  $SD = 7.2$ ). Meanwhile, researchers sorted the ratings and matched participants with partners they did not know well. Prior to learning their partner's identity, participants completed a packet (labeled "To Be Read By Your Partner") containing the key dependent measures. To follow through with the cover story, the partners next met, read each other's self-ratings, engaged in a discussion, and finally were debriefed.

#### Self-Presentation Measures

Prior to meeting, participants rated themselves on a variety of traits to be read by their partner. The first page listed nine desirable traits (*generous, ambitious, bright, productive, adventurous, pleasant, playful, capable, and courageous*) and the second listed nine undesirable traits (*irritable, immature, suspicious, bossy, sloppy, self-centered, irresponsible, wish-washy, and prejudiced*) from Anderson's (1968) list. Items were selected to create lists that had a wide variety of traits and to be either clearly desirable ( $M$  Anderson rating of 4.7) or undesirable ( $M = 1.3$ ), but not too extreme (0= *least desirable* to 6= *most desirable*), in order to avoid socially desirable responding and promote variability in responses.

Participants used a ten-point Likert scale (-5= *extremely non-descriptive of me*; -3= *somewhat non-descriptive of me*; -1= *slightly non-descriptive of me*; 1= *slightly descriptive of me*; 3= *somewhat descriptive of me*; and 5= *extremely descriptive of me*) to make their ratings. The zero point was removed to prevent participants from avoiding self-presentation on any particular trait. Indices of attributive and repudiative self-

presentation were computed by averaging desirable and undesirable traits, respectively. Each index exhibited adequate reliability (desirable  $\alpha = .78$ ; undesirable  $\alpha = .80$ ).

### **Results**

Data from two participants were dropped prior to analysis because they reported knowing all other participants well. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to assess the degree to which self-esteem was related to self-presentation on desirable and undesirable traits in both a linear and curvilinear fashion. First, the mean response to scores on the self-esteem scale were entered into an equation predicting one of the self-presentation scores to test for linear effects; next, self-esteem scores were squared and entered in the equation to test for quadratic effects. Given self-esteem literature debate regarding that the meaning of "low" self-esteem, we planned to investigate whether the two types of self-presentation strategies are associated with certain portions of the distribution (e.g., those with very low or very high self-esteem) and included the quadratic effect terms permitting this analysis.

The self-presentation items were recoded to set the most repudiative rating (i.e., *extremely undescriptive*) to 0 and the most attributive rating (i.e., *extremely descriptive*) to 9. Overall, participants presented themselves modestly favorably on both desirable ( $M = 7.20$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) and undesirable items ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). Participants' self-presentation on desirable items was strongly related to their self-esteem scores only in a linear fashion ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $R^2 = .28$ ,  $t = 6.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that people higher in self-esteem were more likely to ascribe desirable traits to themselves than were individuals lower in self-esteem. However, there was no statistically significant relationship between self-presentation on undesirable items and participants' self-esteem scores ( $\beta = -.14$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ ,  $t = -1.41$ ,  $p > .15$ ); participants at all levels of self-esteem were equally likely to deny that they possessed undesirable traits. No curvilinear effects were observed on either desirable or undesirable traits.

A  $t$  test for dependent correlations indicated that simple correlations between self-esteem and each dependent measure were significantly different from each other,  $t = -4.67$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, when the undesirable items were reverse-coded, another  $t$  test for dependent correlations also indicated that the correlations were different in magnitude,  $t(96) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants' ratings on desirable and undesirable items were negatively correlated ( $r = -.29$ ,  $t = -2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that the more positively they portrayed themselves, the less negatively they portrayed themselves. However, the correlation was modest in size and is consistent with the idea that attributive and repudiative self-presentation are distinct.

### **Discussion**

These results suggest that individuals lower in self-esteem are equally likely as those higher in self-esteem to engage in repudiative self-presentation (i.e., to deny undesirable traits). Further, the absence of a quadratic self-esteem effect suggests that individuals with very positive, moderately positive and more ambivalent self-evaluations were all equally likely to engage in repudiative self-presentation. By contrast, those higher in self-esteem were much more likely to engage in attributive self-presentation than were their counterparts lower in self-esteem.

Although these results suggest a link between lower self-esteem and a repudiative rather than an attributive self-presentation style, they do not address the strategic basis of this self-presentation. Research shows that individuals higher in self-esteem shift their public self-descriptions when others think of them negatively, but such a pattern has yet to be observed among those lower in self-esteem (Baumeister, 1982; Boney-McCoy et al., 1999; Brown & Smart, 1991). It is unclear whether repudiative self-presentation is preferred by those lower in self-esteem when they are free to portray themselves using traits of their own choosing and whether it is the preferred strategy used to compensate for a public challenge to their identity.

### **Experiment: Compensatory Self-Presentation and Self-Esteem**

When faced with the dilemma of a negative public image, people creatively turn to positive self-presentation on dimensions unrelated to that image. Specifically, participants who anticipated meeting an activity partner rated themselves particularly positively on personality traits unrelated to a public, negative personality description (Baumeister & Jones, 1978). This shift in the dimension of favorable self-presentation, termed “compensatory self-enhancement,” not only demonstrates that people take into account their audience, but also that most people are motivated to restore a positive public impression in response to setbacks.

Several studies report that only those high in self-esteem exhibit compensatory self-enhancement (Baumeister, 1982; Boney-McCoy, et al., 1999; Brown & Smart, 1991). Baumeister (1982) found that, after receiving feedback indicating that they were self-centered, only individuals high in self-esteem described themselves more positively on other personality traits (e.g., creative). Further, only those high in self-esteem behaved in ways contradictory to the personality profile (i.e., more cooperatively) on a subsequent task. These findings suggest that only those higher in self-esteem cope with setbacks with a direct, active self-presentation, reflecting their acquisitive, self-enhancing style. Given the findings of the pilot study, however, it seems likely that previous studies have either prevented or concealed active, direct repudiative self-presentational efforts of people lower in self-esteem.

Our second study followed the original compensatory self-enhancement study closely (Baumeister & Jones, 1978) in which participants present themselves while under the impression that their partner has already formed a positive or negative image of their personality. Like the pilot study, we measured attributive and repudiative self-presentation separately, but also included items that were either related or unrelated to the personality profile their partner read. We expected to replicate previous studies and find compensatory self-enhancement (bolstering on unrelated desirable items) only among those higher in self-esteem. We also expected that both low and high self-esteem participants would deny possessing unrelated undesirable traits. We also included an open-ended measure in which participants could list traits they possessed or did not possess as a way to explore participants' preferred strategies, unconstrained.

## Method

### *Participants*

Fifty-two participants (34 male;  $M$  age=19.7,  $SD$ = 1.0 ) at a large mid-western university were recruited for a study about personality and the acquaintanceship process and received course credit for their participation. Data for three participants were excluded from analysis because they expressed strong suspicion about the cover story and/or guessed the hypothesis. One additional participant's data were excluded for failing to follow directions.

### *Procedures*

Following Baumeister (1982), participants on arrival (in groups of 2-4) filled out a brief packet for another researcher, containing the RSES completed this time on a 7-point scale to be consistent with the other, unrelated measures (1= *disagree very much*; 4= *neither agree nor disagree*; 7= *agree very much*;  $M$ = 54.4,  $SD$ = 6.7,  $Range$ = 35-65). Participants were then reminded that they would meet another participant of the same sex and play a game that involved both cooperation and competition. Under the guise of simulating conditions in which people have varying amounts of information about others prior to meeting, participants learned that some would share information with their partner via questionnaire prior to the game.

### *Personality Feedback*

Participants were told that they had completed a personality assessment tool as part of a pre-screening instrument earlier in the term. Once in private cubicles, each participant was given a sealed professional-looking profile with their last name and ID number and used the participant's name throughout the text. The experimenter explained that, although they had not seen the profile, a copy was given to their partner to facilitate the acquaintanceship process, that they were also required by regulations to give a copy to each participant and left it for them to read. The profiles were nearly identical to those used in Baumeister's (1982) previous research, and described both desirable and undesirable traits. Participants in the *positive profile* condition were described as predominantly cooperative, good-natured, and non-materialistic, while those in the *negative profile* condition were described as predominantly competitive, exploitative, and materialistic.

### *Dependent Measures*

After reading their profile, participants completed a questionnaire to be shared with their partner. The first page contained measures of attributive self-presentation, which consisted of eleven socially desirable personality traits (Anderson, 1968). Using Baumeister's (1982) procedure, 5 of the traits were pre-tested to be clearly related to those mentioned in both the positive and negative profiles (*generous, sympathetic, soft-hearted, giving, & accommodating*) and 6 traits were rated unrelated to the profiles (*non-conforming, imaginative, inventive, strong, playful, & courageous*). Participants rated themselves on each of the same ten-point scale used in the pilot study and made similar ratings on 11 undesirable traits as a measure of repudiative self-presentation. Five of the traits had been pre-tested to be related (*exploitative, self-centered, greedy, manipulative,*

& egotistical) and 6 to be unrelated (*flaky, unoriginal, uncreative, predictable, boring, & compulsive*) to the profiles. Participants were then asked to list any other traits they wished their partner to know using two columns of blanks labeled, "Traits that describe me well" and "Traits that do not describe me well."

Next, participants completed two items to assess the feedback manipulation: "As you think about your partner before you meet, what kind of impression do you think your partner has of you?" (-3= *very negative impression*; 3= *very positive impression*) and "How satisfied were you with your personality profile?" (-3= *very dissatisfied*; 3= *very satisfied*). Next, the experiment was ended prior to any meeting, and each participant was debriefed individually.

## Results

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to determine whether self-esteem moderated the impact of type of profile on self-presentation. Again, the curvilinear effect of self-esteem was also analyzed to explore the degree to which self-presentation strategies were associated with certain portions of the self-esteem distribution. Following standard procedures to test for interactions in hierarchical regression (Cohen, Cohen, Aiken, & West, 2003), centered self-esteem scores and profile condition were entered to test for main effects, and the product of was entered to test for interaction effects. The quadratic self-esteem effect (i.e., squared self-esteem scores) and the product of this and profile condition were entered to test for the interaction. Profile condition effects were coded: -1 for positive and +1 for negative. Interactions involving the curvilinear effects of self-esteem were plotted at five points along the self-esteem continuum: the mean, .625, and 1.25 SDs above and below the mean.

### Manipulation Checks

As expected, analyses of participants' perceptions of their partner's impression yielded a main effect of profile condition ( $\beta = -.62, t = -5.16, p < .001$ ). On average, participants in the negative profile condition believed their partner had a moderately negative impression ( $M = -0.73; SD = 1.20$ ) and those in the positive profile condition believed their partner had a moderately positive impression ( $M = 1.00; SD = 1.07$ ). No other effects were statistically significant. Similarly, analyses of participants' ratings of their satisfaction with their personality profile only yielded a main effect of profile condition ( $\beta = -.64, t = -5.55, p < .001$ ). As expected, participants in the negative profile condition were less satisfied with their profile ( $M = -1.05; SD = 1.36$ ) than those in the positive profile condition ( $M = 1.41; SD = 1.53$ ).

### Measures of Self-Presentation

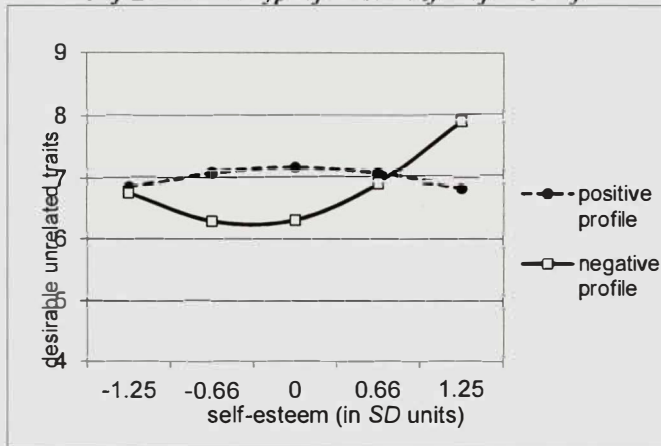
Analyses of *unrelated desirable* items yielded no main effects, no interaction with the linear self-esteem term, but an interaction of the quadratic self-esteem term and profile condition ( $\beta = .61, t = 2.97, p = .01$ ; see Figure 1). The simple effects for profile condition for those very high (+1.25 SD) very low (-1.25 SD) and moderate (at the mean) in self-esteem were probed using standard procedures (Cohen et al., 2003). Analyses indicated that those very low in self-esteem rated the items relatively equally between conditions ( $\beta = -.05, t = -.21, p > .80$ ), but those moderate in self-esteem rated themselves more

negatively after the negative profile ( $\beta = -.45, t = -2.53, p < .05$ ) and the reverse was true for those very high in self-esteem ( $\beta = .57, t = 2.02, p < .05$ ). As illustrated in Figure 1, those very high in self-esteem appear to have engaged in compensatory self-enhancement, while those moderate in self-esteem appear to have generalized the negative profile into their self-presentation on the unrelated dimensions.

Analyses of *unrelated undesirable* items revealed a main effect of profile condition ( $\beta = -.31, t = -2.22, p < .05$ ). Participants receiving a negative profile rated unrelated undesirable items as less self-descriptive ( $M = 2.19, SD = .95$ ) than those receiving a positive one ( $M = 2.71, SD = .98$ ); no other effect was significant. This main effect is consistent with the pilot findings and suggests that participants at all levels of self-esteem engage in strategic repudiative self-presentation to compensate for a negative image. Thus, those lower and moderate in self-esteem appeared to exhibit compensatory self-protection, rather than enhancement. Analyses of *related desirable* and *related undesirable* items revealed no significant effects, which is consistent with participants perceiving that their public image regarding these traits was already known.

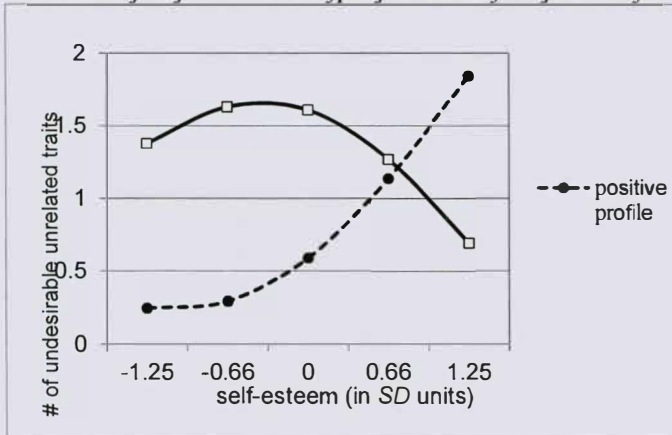
Participants' responses on the open-ended trait listing measure were classified as either desirable or undesirable and either related or unrelated to the personality profile by independent raters. Because participants unsurprisingly listed very few undesirable descriptive traits ( $M = 0.12$ ) and desirable non-descriptive traits ( $M = 0.08$ ), analyses were conducted only on the number of desirable descriptive ( $M = 1.84$ ) and undesirable non-descriptive traits ( $M = 1.00$ ) listed. Coding reliabilities were high for each (.87 and .88, respectively).

**Figure 1**  
*Self-Presentation on Unrelated Desirable Items as a Function of Self-Esteem and Type of Personality Profile- Study 2*



Analyses of the number of *unrelated undesirable non-descriptive traits* listed revealed no main effects, but there was an interaction of the quadratic self-esteem term and profile condition, ( $\beta = -.48$ ,  $t = -2.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The simple effects tests at  $-1.25$ ,  $0$ , and  $1.25$  standard deviations indicated that more traits listed in the negative profile condition for those very low ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and moderate in self-esteem ( $\beta = .4$ ,  $t = 2.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but the reverse for those very high in self-esteem ( $\beta = -.53$ ,  $t = -1.85$ ,  $p = .07$ ). As Figure 2 illustrates, those moderate to low in self-esteem, consistent with their ratings on unrelated undesirable items, compensated for the negative profile by listing more undesirable traits that did not describe them. Those very high in self-esteem, however, were more likely to list non-descriptive traits after a positive profile. Analyses of the number of *related desirable descriptive*, *unrelated desirable descriptive traits*, and *related undesirable non-descriptive traits* listed revealed no main effects or interactions.

**Figure 2**  
*Number of Unrelated, Undesirable, Non-Descriptive Traits Listed as a Function of Self-Esteem and Type of Personality Profile- Study 2*



### Discussion

The current findings are the first demonstration of active, direct, strategic, and self-enhancing self-presentation on the part of those lower in self-esteem. Those lower and higher in self-esteem were equally likely to deny unrelated negative traits when they believed their partner had a negative view of them. Further, when given an unconstrained opportunity to list their personality traits, those low and moderate in self-esteem also spontaneously and strategically denied unrelated negative traits. Notably, the findings on the open-ended measures among low and moderate self-esteem participants bolster our interpretation of this main effect as evidence of a compensatory self-protection. Specifically, low and moderate self-esteem participants did not list an appreciable

number of undesirable, unrelated traits (in the “doesn’t describe me” column) in response to a positive public image but did so in response to a negative one. The most parsimonious interpretation is that low self-esteem participants were responding to the negative profile consistently across the two measures, in expressing their presentation of self.

Consistent with Baumeister’s (1982) findings, those very high in self-esteem responded to a negative public image by bolstering on unrelated desirable traits, while those lower in self-esteem appeared to incorporate it to their self-presentation on unrelated desirable traits. Interestingly, participants lowest in self-esteem showed no differences in self-presentation on these traits, which may reflect less motivation for self-presentation generally or pessimism about how their partner would view them. Participants higher in self-esteem did not, however, exhibit compensatory self-enhancement on the open-ended measure by listing desirable descriptive traits. This finding is curious, but it may be that the traits that high self-esteem individuals would typically use to bolster were already included in the self-ratings.

### ***Implications for Individual Differences in Self-Esteem***

The active, strategic, and self-enhancing self-presentation observed in low self-esteem participants may be more common in everyday life than noted in the literature. Given their predominantly positive self-evaluation (Baumeister et al., 1989) and socially-oriented self-concept (Schutz & Tice, 1997), it seems likely that individuals low in self-esteem have the motivation to promote their public image, but their strategies may simply be more indirect. Those lower in self-esteem may use strategies such as diverting attention from the self to positive, less self-related topics when possible (e.g., shifting a conversation about one’s own academic performance to one’s group). This approach may associate them with a positive entity, but protect the self from scrutiny. Additional research could profitably focus on the variety of such strategies used by individuals lower (and perhaps very low) in self-esteem.

The current findings also highlight the value of assessing the impact of individual differences measured in more sophisticated ways. Although dichotomizing continuous measures remains common, benefits of retaining the information inherent in a continuous measure has been established (e.g., MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002). Individual differences in self-esteem seem an especially good candidate for this treatment because of the frequent misrepresentation of those in lower in self-esteem as having a negative self-evaluation. This approach can clarify whether effects are associated with predominantly positive, mixed, or more negative self-evaluations.

### ***Implications for Self-Presentation***

Separating desirable and undesirable traits yielded a very different picture than previously reported for participants lower in self-esteem. It is surprising that this distinction has not been adopted more widely in the self-presentation literature since Roth et al. (1986) offered it 25 years ago. Some have done so when creating self-report measures of self-presentation styles (e.g., Hepper, Gramzow, & Sedekides, 2010; Paulhus & Reid, 1991), but few have taken this distinction into account when measuring self-presentation behavior directly. Both theory and research on self-presentation could

benefit from more focus on the behavioral strategies distinguishing garnering approval from those for avoiding disapproval.

If repudiative self-presentation is occasionally a preferred strategy, this raises important questions about its aftermath. Repudiative self-presentation may satisfy an immediate need for favorable self-presentation, but it is unclear whether it leaves a favorable impression. Further, attributive self-presentation can easily become a part of the self-concept (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994), but the effects of repudiative self-presentation are less clear. On the one hand, to deny an undesirable trait seems just as definitive a self-statement as claiming a positive one. On the other, it may make a negative trait accessible and perhaps cause an audience (or the self) to focus unduly on undesirable qualities generally. The Shakespearean admonition "Thou dost protest too much, methinks," suggests these complexities of self-presentation and the prospect of ironic reversals of one's fortunes when presentation strategies are ineffective.

### **Limitations**

Given the relatively small samples in these studies, we should, however, be cautious about drawing definitive conclusions about the characteristics of individuals at any given point on the self-esteem distribution. In particular, because these samples are taken from college populations, individual on the very low end of the self-esteem distribution may not be represented adequately. The self-presentation behavior of these individuals, however, may be substantially different as they are likely to be severely depressed as well (Nezlek & Leary, 2002). Likewise, although the current methodology allows for studying repudiative and attributive self-presentation separately, it also examines it under conditions that are atypical. Future research should focus on self-presentation strategies that are more spontaneous and naturalistic, especially those that are repudiative in nature.

---

### **Author Note**

The authors wish to thank Geoffrey Leonardelli and Pablo Briñol for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

---

### **References**

- Anderson, N. H. (1968). Likeableness ratings of 555 personality-trait words. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9, 272-279.
- Arkin, R. M. (1981). Self-presentational styles. In J. T. Tedeschi (Ed.), *Impression management theory and social psychological research* (pp. 311-333). New York: Academic Press.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1982). Self-esteem, self-presentation, and future interaction: A dilemma of reputation. *Journal of Personality*, 50, 29-45.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Jones, E. E. (1978). When self-presentation is constrained by the target's knowledge: Consistency and compensation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 608-618.
- Baumeister, R. F., Tice, D. M., & Hutton, D. G. (1989). Self-presentational motivations and personality differences in self-esteem. *Journal of Personality*, 57, 547-579.

- Baumgardner, A. H., Kaufman, C. M., & Levy, P. E. (1989). Regulating affect interpersonally: When low esteem leads to greater enhancement. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, *56*, 907-921.
- Boney-McCoy, S., Gibbons, F. X., & Gerrard, M. (1999). Self-esteem, compensatory self-enhancement, and the consideration of health risk. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *25*, 954-965.
- Brown, J. D., & Smart, S. A. (1991). The self and social conduct: Linking self-representations to prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 368-375.
- Cohen, J., Cohen, P., Aiken, S. G., & Aiken, L. S. (2003). *Applied multiple regression/correlation: Analysis for the behavioral sciences* (3rd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gentile, B., Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2010). Birth cohort differences in self-esteem, 1988–2008: A cross-temporal meta-analysis. *Review of General Psychology*, *14*(3), 261–268.
- Hepper, E. G., Gramzow, R. H., & Sedekides, C. (2010). Individual differences in self-enhancement and self-protection strategies: An integrative analysis. *Journal of Personality*, *28*, 781-814.
- Higgins, E. T. (1999). Promotion and prevention as a motivational duality: Implications for evaluative processes. In S. Chaiken & Y. Trope (Eds.), *Dual-process theories in social psychology*. (pp. 503-525): The Guilford Press, New York, NY.
- Jones, E. E., & Pittman, T. S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In J. Suls (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 1, pp. 231-262). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-component model. *Psychological Bulletin*, *107*, 34-47.
- MacCallum, R. C., Zhang, S., Preacher, K. J., & Rucker, D. D. (2002). On the practice of dichotomization of quantitative variables. *Psychological Methods*, *7*, 19-40.
- McFarlin, D. B., & Blascovich, J. (1981). Effects of self-esteem and performance feedback on future affective preferences and cognitive expectations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *40*, 521-531.
- Mussweiler, T. U., Gabriel, S., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2000). Shifting social identities as a strategy for deflecting threatening social comparisons. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*, 398-409.
- Nezlek, J. B., & Leary, M. R. (2002). Individual differences in self-presentational motives in daily social interaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*(2), 211–223.
- Paulhus, D. L. & Reid, D. B. (1991). Enhancement and denial in socially desirable responding. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 307-317.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Roth, D. L., Snyder, C. R., & Pace, L. M. (1986). Dimensions of favorable self-presentation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 867-874.

- Schlenker, B. R., Dlugolecki, D. W. & Doherty, K. (1994). The impact of self-presentations on self-appraisals and behavior: The power of public commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 20-33.
- Schlenker, B. R., Weigold, M. F., & Hallam, J. R. (1990). Self-serving attributions in social context: Effects of self-esteem and social pressure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 855-863.
- Schlenker, B. R. & Wowra, S. A. (2003). Carryover effects of feeling socially transparent or impenetrable on strategic self-presentation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 871-880.
- Scherneck, M. (1999). The effects of self-esteem, gender, and anticipated social evaluation on self-presentation. *Representative Research in Social Psychology*, 23, 42-48.
- Schütz, A., & Tice, D. M. (1997). Associative and competitive indirect self-enhancement in close relationships moderated by trait self-esteem. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27, 257-273.
- Wood, J. V., Giordano-Beech, M., Taylor, K. L., Michela, J. L., & Gaus, V. (1994). Strategies of social comparison among people with low self-esteem: Self-protection and self-enhancement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 713-731.