THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF GOOD AND EVIL

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CHAPTER 11

The Pursuit of Self-Esteem

Implications for Good and Evil

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North Americans generally view self-esteem as an unmitigated good, integral to a meaningful, satisfying, and fulfilling life. From a young age, parents, teachers, and popular culture teach us that feeling good about ourselves is a high priority (Miller, 2001). Thousands of self-help books, child-rearing guides, and television shows hail the benefits of increasing self-esteem. The self-esteem movement, based on the assumption that high self-esteem leads to positive outcomes (Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998; Glennon, 1999; Miller, 2001), aimed to raise children's self-esteem to combat social problems, such as academic underachievement, high dropout rates, crime, teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and interpersonal aggression (Branden, 1994; Dawes, 1994; McElherner & Lisovskis, 1998; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Seligman, 1998).

Underlying this cultural concern with self-esteem is the belief that feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem lead people to do things that are harmful and destructive to themselves and to others; in other words, low self-esteem is one source of evil. The belief in the costs/disadvantages of low self-esteem and the benefits of high self-esteem seem so pervasive that many psychologists have assumed that self-esteem is a universal

and fundamental human need (Allport, 1955; Epstein, 1985; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; James, 1890; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961; Rosenberg, 1979; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Steele, 1988; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988), even arguing that humans evolved as a species to pursue self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995).

In recent years, however, researchers have questioned the idea that self-esteem is an unmitigated, universal good (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Dawes, 1994; Heatherton & Ambady, 1993; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). A review of the literature yields little support for the notion that increasing self-esteem reduces social problems (Baumeister, 1998); in fact, researchers have found that even among those with high self-esteem, *threats* to self-esteem lead people to respond in ways that may exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, social problems (Baumeister, 1998; Crocker & Park, in press; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). These findings have led scientists to criticize the self-esteem movement (Baumeister, 1999; Seligman, 1998), criticism echoed in the popular media (Goode, 2002; Slater, 2002). Recent research on self-esteem and its description in the popular media have created confusion about self-esteem. Is low self-esteem a root of evil, or is high self-esteem a root of evil?

In our view, neither high nor low self-esteem is a cause of good or evil. Instead, much of what is considered evil stems from the *pursuit* of self-esteem: from the desire to prove to oneself and others that one is wonderful and worthy, not worthless. Concern with feelings of self-worth and self-esteem—feeling competent, superior, having the regard of others—can lead people to lose sight of the consequences of their behavior for others, and focus instead on how their behavior *feels* to themselves and *looks* to others. Consequently, pursuing self-esteem is sometimes incompatible with doing good or behaving in ways that ultimately satisfy our fundamental human needs for relatedness, learning, and autonomy. In fact, doing good sometimes requires abandoning ego concerns and risking failure, disapproval, or rejection—all of which can take a toll on self-esteem.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* includes several meanings for the word *evil*. We use the word here to refer to the consequences of action, to "something that causes harm, misfortune, or destruction," rather than the moral intent behind the action, as suggested by the definition, "morally bad or wrong; wicked." In our view, much that causes harm, misfortune, and destruction—from petty slights, looking down on others, and ignoring another's need for social support, to prejudice, aggression, violence, and even war—stems from the struggle to prove one's worth and value. The pursuit of self-esteem is not morally wrong or wicked, it need not have evil intent, but, as we will see, it can cause harm, misfortune, and destruction to the self and to others.

THE PURSUIT OF SELF-ESTEEM

People pursue self-esteem when they become concerned with the question, "Am I wonderful and worthy, or am I worthless?" We assume, like most other researchers, that people want to feel good about themselves and believe that they have worth and value as a person. How do people arrive at the belief that they are worthy and wonderful, and have value? In some cultural and religious meaning systems, this is not a relevant question; every person has worth and value by virtue of being human, a living creature. In these meaning systems, one's worth or value does not need to be proved, earned, or deserved; it is a given. In North American culture, however, people commonly assume that some people have more worth or value than others, and that their worth or value as a person depends on what they are or do. Self-worth or self-esteem is *contingent* on satisfying standards of worth or value. Some people stake their self-worth on being beautiful or thin, others on being morally virtuous, others on accumulating wealth or professional success, and so on. Consequently, feelings of self-worth and self-esteem depend on perceived success or failure in those domains on which self-worth is contingent (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

For most North Americans, then, self-worth is not a given; it must be earned or deserved. People therefore strive to achieve success and avoid failure in those domains on which their self-worth is staked. Because success or failure in these domains can either prove one's worth and value or demonstrate one's worthlessness, people pursue self-esteem in these domains. Failure, or the threat of failure, in the areas on which self-worth is staked is particularly distressing and may trigger efforts to maintain, enhance, and protect self-esteem from the threat. Because it feels good to conclude that one is worthy and wonderful, and it feels bad to conclude that one is not, acceptable performance in these domains of contingency often feels compelling—the pursuit of self-esteem captures attention, provides motivation, and impacts emotions (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Because this pursuit is, first and foremost, about the self, people lose sight of other goals and the impact of their behavior on others when they are caught in the question of whether they are wonderful or worthless. The pursuit of self-esteem leads to heightened self-evaluation and preoccupation with the self, interferes with emotional and behavioral self-regulation, hinders the ability to maintain mutually caring, supportive relationships with others, and may ultimately contribute to interpersonal violence, aggression, and intergroup conflict. Hence, the pursuit of self-esteem can ultimately cause harm, misfortune, and destruction.

Cognitive Reactions to Ego Threat

Threats in domains of contingency trigger self-evaluation and self-preoccupation. For example, in an experiment, college students who

scored high or low in basing their self-worth on academic competence completed either an easy or difficult version of the Remote Associates Test or were assigned to a control condition in which they rated their preference for words. Afterward, participants completed a thought-listing task. Students whose self-worth was staked on academic competence and took the difficult RAT test (failure condition) reported more negative self-evaluative thoughts than students whose self-worth was less contingent in the academic domain or students in the control condition (Park & Crocker, 2003).

Indeed, when self-worth is on the line, attention is focused on the self, often at the expense of others' needs and feelings. A recent study investigated the effects of a threat to contingent self-worth on subsequent interpersonal interactions (Park & Crocker, 2002). The results showed that among high self-esteem targets, those who were highly contingent on academic competence and in the ego-threat condition rated themselves as more preoccupied, less supportive, and less empathic toward another's personal problem and liked their partners less, compared to targets who were less contingent on academic competence. Partners, in turn, also perceived high self-esteem, highly contingent targets who were ego-threatened as being more preoccupied, less supportive, and less likable. These findings suggest that when people receive a threat to a domain of contingency (especially if they have high self-esteem), they become preoccupied with the self, which detracts from their ability to experience compassion toward another person's problem and, therefore, may hinder them from forming and maintaining mutually caring, supportive relationships with others.

Emotional Consequences

Affective reactions to events are more intense when they pertain to contingent domains than when they do not (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). For example, a daily report study examined college seniors' responses to graduate school acceptances and rejections as a function of how much they based their self-worth on academic competence (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Compared to students who based their self-esteem less on academic competence, those who highly based their self-worth in this domain experienced more dramatic decreases in state self-esteem and increases in negative affect on days they received rejection letters from graduate schools, and more dramatic increases in state self-esteem and positive affect on days they were accepted to graduate schools. Similarly, a study of college students majoring in either psychology or engineering found that those who were highly contingent on academic competence showed greater drops in self-esteem on days they received worse-than-expected grades, compared to students who were less contingent on academic competence (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, in press). Taken together, these findings suggest that when people are threatened in contingent domains, they are likely to experience decreases in self-esteem and increases in negative affect and depressive symptoms.

Failure in contingent domains may also evoke negative self-relevant emotions, such as humiliation and shame. Shame leads to a painful scrutiny of the entire self and to feelings of global inadequacy and worthlessness (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996). These negative self-evaluations, in turn, can lead to anger. Consequently, the intense negative affect and loss of self-esteem that people experience in the face of failure in domains of contingency can result in emotional dysregulation: that is, the failure to control and modulate the intensity of emotional reactions to arousal-producing experiences (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Walden & Smith, 1997). As part of emotional regulation processes, negative emotions initiate efforts to improve one's emotional state, which can involve switching from a long-term focus on inhibiting negative reactions to distress to a shorter-term focus on immediately improving one's emotional state (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). When self-esteem is at stake, failure implies that one is worthless, so attempts to improve one's emotional state are focused frequently on identifying an explanation or excuse for the failure that protects self-esteem (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). When threatened in a domain of contingency, people may move quickly from feeling ashamed, humiliated, and worthless to blaming others for the failure. Feelings of shame are frequently accompanied by a sense of humiliated rage (Tangney et al., 1996). When pursuing self-esteem, people focus on and exaggerate feelings of anger and hostility, which are associated with blaming others for failure (Weiner, 1985). Rather than modulate negative affect, this reaction replaces shame and humiliation (feelings associated with worthlessness), with anger and hostility (feelings associated with the belief that the failure was unfair or someone else's fault) (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985)—feelings that are often expressed in maladaptive, destructive ways. Shame-prone individuals respond to anger-inducing events by expressing malevolent intentions, externalizing blame onto others, and engaging in indirect, direct, and displaced forms of aggression and hostility (Tangney et al., 1996). When pursuing self-esteem, people can become trapped in intensely negative emotional states (e.g., anger and even rage), as they struggle to replace feelings of worthlessness, shame, and humiliation with self-worth.

Behavioral Consequences

Emotional dysregulation, triggered by threats in domains on which self-worth is staked, can also have important implications for behavior. Paralleling emotional regulation, behavioral self-regulation is the process of inhibiting impulsive or immediate behavioral reactions to life events (Tice et al., 2001). People's efforts to regulate their emotions and to feel better about themselves in the short-term may come at the expense of longer-

term goals (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Tice et al., 2001). People who experience anger, frustration, or embarrassment often make risky decisions, ignoring relevant information on the costs and benefits of behavioral alternatives (Leith & Baumeister, 1996) and compromising behavioral self-regulation.

Poor behavioral self-control interferes with the ability to delay gratification in obtaining rewards, leads to a lack of persistence on important tasks, inability to control eating behavior, and increased vulnerability to depressive symptoms (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Muraven et al., 1998; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Pyszczynski, Holt, & Greenberg, 1987). Breakdowns in emotional and behavioral regulation may also contribute to school underachievement, unsafe sexual behavior, crime, and violence (Baumeister, 1997, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1993; Muraven et al., 1998).

Additionally, emotional and behavioral dysregulation are linked to self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and risky sexual behaviors (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998). Lack of self-regulation and high arousal in the face of a negative mood increase the frequency of risk-taking behaviors (Leith & Baumeister, 1996). Ego threat is also linked to increased alcohol use (Baumeister, 1997). Indeed, research suggests that increased alcohol consumption may be specific to incidents that relate to contingent domains, such as others' approval (Baumeister, 1997). Finally, lack of self-regulation has even been linked to increased vulnerability to suicide (Vohs & Baumeister, 2000).

In sum, the pursuit of self-esteem is triggered by threats in domains on which self-worth is staked. The pursuit of self-esteem is characterized by self-centered preoccupation with one's worth and value, intense emotional responses to success and failure, and emotional and behavioral dysregulation. In the next section, we examine the impact on others of frequently used strategies for pursuing self-esteem. Specifically, we explore how self-preoccupation, emotional dysregulation, and behavioral dysregulation can cause harm, misfortune, and destruction for others; we also consider individual differences in people's strategies for pursuing self-esteem.

INTERPERSONAL COSTS OF EVERYDAY STRATEGIES FOR PURSUING SELF-ESTEEM

Thus far we have considered how people generally respond to threats to domains of contingency: They experience drops in self-esteem and increases in negative affect, become highly preoccupied with the self, and are motivated to maintain, protect, and enhance their self-esteem. Repairing

self-esteem can take many forms, such as distancing the self from others, making downward social comparisons, stereotyping and derogating outgroups, and seeking reassurance from others. These are but a few of the many self-protective and self-enhancing responses to self-esteem threat that have been well-documented in research and appear to be ubiquitous. Although these strategies may temporarily relieve the anxiety created by failure in contingent domains, even these run-of-the-mill ways of pursuing self-esteem can have enduringly harmful and destructive ripple effects on others and society.

Distancing Self from Others

When people are outperformed by a close other in a domain that is central to their self-concept, they are likely either to diminish the relevance of the domain or distance themselves from the other (Tesser, 1988). For example, Pleban and Tesser (1981) conducted a study in which college students individually competed against another student, who was actually a confederate, on a series of general knowledge questions. The questions were rigged so that some participants were asked questions on topics that were highly self-relevant to their self-concept and that the confederate was able to answer correctly. The researchers found that participants in this condition distanced themselves more from the confederate, saying that they would not want to work with him or her in the future.

Distancing from others may also take the form of withholding help to others who outperform the self in domains that are relevant to the self-concept. Tesser and Smith (1980) conducted a study in which participants were asked to play a game of Password with both a friend and a stranger, and were instructed to give clues to the other person to help him or her guess a word. Some of the participants were told that the game was highly correlated with their intelligence and leadership skills. Under these conditions, participants were less likely to be helpful toward their friend. One explanation for this finding is that participants in the ego-threat condition did not want their friends to outshine them on a task that was highly relevant to their self-concept. In contrast, when the task was not self-relevant, people gave more difficult clues to the strangers than to their friends. Both response modes are costly to others: When people pursue self-esteem goals, they distance themselves from others and become competitive, withholding information from others in order to protect and maintain their self-worth. This research illustrates how, when people pursue self-esteem, life can easily turn into a zero-sum game: One person's success may be a threat to another person's self-worth, especially if that person is close to him or her. Thus, instead of helping those to whom we are close and promoting mutually supportive and caring relationships, the pursuit of self-esteem leads us to exactly the opposite: competition, distancing from oth-

ers, and withholding of assistance that could support the other person in his or her endeavors.

Downward Social Comparisons

Following threats in domains of contingency, people tend to actively seek out information about others who also did poorly (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Laprelle, 1985; Wood, Giordano-Beech, & Ducharme, 1999) and compare themselves with others who are less fortunate (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Beauregard & Dunning, 1998; Crocker & Schwartz, 1985; Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1999). Comparisons with worse-off others reduce anxiety and enhance people's self-esteem and mood (Gibbons, 1986; Morse & Gergen, 1970). However, this self-enhancement strategy may come at a price to others. For example, following threats in contingent domains, people are more likely to remember negative information about others, even information that is unrelated to the domain of the threat (Crocker, 1993). Engaging in downward comparisons also creates distance between the self and others. In this context, others are merely seen as a means to achieving the goal of protecting and enhancing self-esteem. Thus, although focusing on others' shortcomings may repair people's threatened self-esteem temporarily, it is likely to have a detrimental impact on others in the long run by making them feel unsupported and disconnected.

Prejudice and Derogation

Prejudice toward and derogation of out-groups are extremely common but destructive human behaviors, often triggering hostility and aggression that result in intergroup conflict and violence (Brewer & Brown, 1998). How do outgroup prejudice and derogation relate to the pursuit of self-esteem? When people experience a threat to their self-concept, they become motivated to repair their self-esteem—an activity they pursue by favoring the groups to which they belong and derogating outgroup members. For example, research has shown that people who receive a threat to their self-esteem are more likely to show ingroup favoritism (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987), automatically stereotype others (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Spencer & Fein, 1994; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998), and perceive and recall members of their own group as possessing more favorable qualities, traits, and abilities than members of other groups (Brewer & Brown, 1998).

The pursuit of self-esteem via derogation of outgroup members has high costs for targets of prejudice. For example, African Americans who experience prejudice and discrimination are likely to have poorer mental and physical health outcomes that are often associated with higher mortality rates among this population (Jackson et al., 1996; LaVeist, Sellers, & Neighbors, 2001; Neighbors, Jackson, Broman, & Thompson, 1996). Furthermore, targets of prejudice and derogation are likely to pursue their own self-esteem by questioning their identity and self-worth (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Jones, 1986). For example, African American students who are rejected by white students may become preoccupied with attempting to discern whether they deserved the rejection personally or whether it could be attributed to the other person's prejudices (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major & Crocker, 1993). In sum, when threatened, people try to protect and restore their self-esteem by derogating others, which can impose costs on the targets of prejudice and also create ripple effects by triggering others' self-esteem concerns.

Overall, this research shows how the everyday pursuit of self-esteem, triggered by threats to the self in domains on which self-worth is staked, leads to attempts to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem at the expense of others. Although some of these efforts may seem innocuous—what, after all, is so bad about restoring one's sense of self-worth after failing a test by focusing on others who did worse?—they all have the consequence of creating distance, feeding competition, and undermining a sense of common humanity. Even the seemingly innocuous strategy of comparing oneself to worse-off others to restore a sense of well-being can have the unintended effect of diminishing the humanity of the downward comparison target, making it easier to commit acts of harm or violence against them.

AGGRESSION, VIOLENCE, AND THE PURSUIT OF SELF-ESTEEM

Aggression and violence are more extreme and dramatic examples of the harm and destruction that can result from the pursuit of self-esteem (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). Perceived threats to the ego produce negative affect (e.g., anger, frustration, shame, humiliation), which, in turn, can interfere with emotional regulation by increasing the propensity to react aggressively when confronted with negative feedback. Anger, hostility, and aggression are positively related, and the emotional dysregulation that accompanies threats to the self has been identified as an important factor in the etiology of aggressive behavior. In particular, some types of aggression (e.g., reactive, hostile aggression) may be due partly to an inability to control angry emotions. Other forms of aggression (e.g., proactive, instrumental aggression) seem related to an inability to feel empathy for others and a lack of anxiety about the use of aggression. Because the pursuit of self-esteem is related to both emotional and behavioral

dysregulation, as well as to preoccupation with the self and lower empathy, both types of aggression may increase when people pursue self-esteem (Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Park & Crocker, 2002). Thus, although increased aggression and hostility may make people feel better following ego threat (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001), this enhanced sense of self often occurs at the expense of innocent third parties (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

Emotional dysregulation is linked to the occurrence of violence and aggression in both laboratory and real-world situations (Baumeister et al., 1993). Research has shown, however, that although people engage in aggressive behaviors to regulate negative affect and to feel better about themselves, aggressive behaviors do not actually discharge or eliminate angry or hostile feelings; ironically, people report a *more intense* negative mood (Bushman et al., 2001).

The domains in which people stake their self-worth and the ways in which they pursue self-esteem may affect the frequency of aggressive behavior, independent of emotional regulation. People whose self-worth is based on internal sources, such as religious beliefs or virtue, may inhibit hostile, harmful, or aggressive behavior even when they experience emotional dysregulation; the translation of anger into physical violence depends on normative beliefs and social mores that condone the use of violence as a viable response (Berkowitz, 1993). However, people who stake their self-worth on these internal sources may respond to threat with more socially acceptable forms of indirect aggression. Consistent with this view, internal contingencies of self-worth are associated with lower self-reported physical aggression but not lower verbal aggression, hostility, or anger (after controlling for level of self-esteem and socially desirable responding; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, in press). Externally based contingencies of self-worth, on the other hand, are strongly associated with hostility (Crocker et al., in press).

Domestic Violence

One extremely harmful form of aggression that appears to result, in part, from the pursuit of self-esteem, is domestic violence. Research has documented the self-perpetuating nature of domestic violence. Many abusive men either have witnessed violence in their family of origin or been the victim of child abuse and experienced parental rejection (Mischel & Shoda, 1995); domestic violence is highly correlated with child abuse (Osofsky, 1999).

Infants who are maltreated either through exposure to abuse or as a direct victim of abuse are more likely to experience insecure relationships with caregivers (Kaufman & Henrich, 2000). As a result of their unmet needs, attachment relationships are compromised, leaving these individuals with a pattern of sensitivity to rejection, insecure attachment styles, and unsatisfying relationships (Feldman & Downey, 1994). Insecure attachment is also implicated in tendencies to inhibit or exaggerate negative emotions and other emotional regulation problems (Kaufman & Henrich, 2000). Unmet attachment needs, anxiety, and rejection fears are thus hypothesized to be important factors in the occurrence of domestic violence (Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), which is used as a coping strategy to feel better following felt rejection (Bushman et al., 2001). Abusive men seek attention from their spouse through an interaction pattern of low-level conflict that, at times, erupts into violence (Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, & Shortt, 1995), or they use aggression to maintain the spouse's closeness and control her behavior. In other words, it seems that abusive men use defensive strategies to cope with an excessive need for reassurance and approval.

Domestic violence is clearly linked to behavioral and emotional dysregulation and the inability to cope with emotion in the context of interpersonal relationships with significant others. At the physiological level, behavioral regulation patterns indicate that most abusive men experience heart rate increases and other signs of emotional arousal during conflict-laden discussions. Abusive men who experience increased physiological arousal may also rely more on a self-regulatory style that is impulsive, based on emotions, fears, and passions (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999) that undermine self-control. A smaller subgroup of abusive men who are the most violent display decreased physiological arousal under conditions of low-level conflict with a significant other. This group of men is also more likely to use violence against others as well as their domestic partner (Gottman et al., 1995).

Domestic violence causes tremendous harm to the victim, the perpetrator, and others. Women in abusive relationships report lower levels of self-esteem, increased depression, and high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Research suggests that domestic violence and its psychological consequences can compromise women's abilities to parent adequately (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000), and children who witness domestic violence show increased levels of anxiety and depression (Graham-Berman, 1996) and signs of PTSD (Graham-Bermann, 1998). Children who witness abuse in the home are also more aggressive themselves, suggesting that domestic violence contributes to cross-generational violence (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995). Indeed, parental reports of childhood aggression and adulthood aggression significantly predict aggression among their children (Huesmann et al., 2002).

We do not mean to suggest that all domestic violence and its consequences are caused by the pursuit of self-esteem. Yet it seems clear that early experiences resulting in unmet attachment needs and sensitivity to rejection create adults whose sense of self-worth is based on others' approval

and who simultaneously expect and react to perceived rejection with anger, aggression, and violence.

Intergroup Violence

Domestic violence is a form of interpersonal violence that has high social costs. Similarly, intergroup violence that occurs within and between racial, ethnic, and national groups also has grave consequences. Many aggressive subcultures exist within our society, such as delinquent groups (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). One subculture of violence in American society is that of criminal gangs. Typically, gangs have strict rules of conduct and rigid standards that guide gang membership. Gang-related violence is noteworthy because of its reliance on social influence, which guarantees that gang members meet group standards of behavior (Berkowitz, 1993). Violent behavior and criminal activity may be used to prove masculinity; youth who are susceptible to influence from gangs may be unusually high in the need to gain approval from others. Adolescents who join gangs may then use gang membership as a defensive strategy to protect against potential ego threats that are present in their dangerous neighborhoods, and gang membership may increase self-esteem and serve other self-protective functions (Baumeister et al., 1996).

The crime and violence that accompany some types of gang membership have costs in the form of crime enforcement and the psychological repercussions to others living in unsafe neighborhoods (Raviv et al., 2002; Raviv, Raviv, Shimoni, Fox, & Leavitt, 1999). Neighborhood disorder and exposure to violence have been shown to predict adolescents' actual feeling of irritability and dejection in response to a potentially threatening or provocative situation (Ewart & Suchday, 2002). Children living in areas with moderate crime levels also show increased levels of behavioral problems when compared to children living in areas with less crime (Plybon & Kliewer, 2001).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE PURSUIT OF SELF-ESTEEM

We have explored both run-of-the-mill strategies for pursuing self-esteem in response to threats in domains of contingency—strategies that, in the end, diminish or harm others—and more extreme forms of aggression and violence, such as domestic and gang violence, that can result from the pursuit of self-esteem. It is important to note that, although domestic violence and gang violence are relatively rare, the everyday strategies we reviewed are remarkably robust and frequently used and have been demonstrated in hundreds of studies. No one should presume that he or she is immune from using these strategies to restore a sense of self-worth when threatened in a domain on which self-worth is staked. At the same time, as the research on domestic violence demonstrates, people differ in the frequency with which they are caught in the pursuit of self-esteem and in the particular strategies they favor, and consequently, the harm their pursuit of self-esteem inflicts on others.

Fragile Egotism

In general, people are more likely to pursue self-esteem if their self-esteem is fragile. Fragile self-esteem is unstable or contingent and therefore easily threatened by criticism, rejection, or other negative events. Consequently, the sense of self needs to be defended and bolstered more often (Baumeister et al., 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, in press). People whose sense of self-worth depends on external validation, achievements, or accomplishments are more easily and frequently captured by the question of whether they are wonderful or worthless and, hence, more susceptible to the pursuit of self-esteem. In fact, there appear to be two general styles of pursuing self-esteem: one more characteristic of people with self-esteem that is high and fragile, and one more characteristic of people with self-esteem that is low and fragile.

High, Unstable Self-Esteem

Self-esteem that is both high and fragile conveys a sense of superiority—the sense of being wonderful and worthy *because* one is better than others in domains on which self-worth is staked. Yet this type of high self-esteem is vulnerable because it depends on one's accomplishments; therefore, a failure, setback, or criticism has the potential to puncture or deflate one's self-worth. Along these lines, research has shown that praise or acceptance for one's accomplishments leads to defensiveness, whereas praise or acceptance of one's intrinsic qualities does not (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001). To sustain the feeling of being wonderful and worthy and avoid feelings of worthlessness, people with high and fragile self-esteem, who generally believe they possess positive qualities and competencies (Blaine & Crocker, 1993), respond to ego threat with defensiveness, making excuses, blaming others (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989; Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001), and by displaying antagonism, anger, hostility, and aggression, more than do people with high and stable self-esteem or people with low self-esteem (Kernis et al., 1989).

The consequences of fragile egotism are reflected in several areas of research, most notably in the work on high, unstable self-esteem (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000; Kernis & Waschull,

1995; Kernis et al., 1998); narcissism (Morf, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995); and the combination of high and contingent self-worth (Luhtanen & Crocker, 2002; Park & Crocker, 2002). Although there are unique features of each of these forms of fragile egotism, they all share the factor of positive self-views that are vulnerable to threat.

Work by Kernis and Waschull (1995) suggests that people with high, unstable self-esteem are highly ego-involved in events and, hence, easily triggered into pursuing self-esteem. Kernis distinguishes between high, unstable self-esteem—that is, fragile feelings of self-worth that fluctuate in response to positive and negative events—and high, stable self-esteem that is less volatile and less susceptible to the ups and downs in state self-esteem and mood associated with successes and failures. People with high but unstable self-esteem are more defensive and more likely to express anger, hostility, and aggression toward others when confronted with an ego threat (Baumeister et al., 1996; Kernis et al., 1989). In sum, when self-esteem is high and unstable, people are easily triggered into pursuing self-esteem, often at the expense of others' well-being.

Narcissism

Narcissists have *exaggeratedly* positive or inflated, yet fragile, self-views (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Studies suggest that narcissists' unstable self-esteem stems from their extremely positive self-views, coupled with extreme fears of being found worthless (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). When their fragile self-esteem is threatened, narcissists may easily be triggered into protecting, maintaining, and enhancing their self-esteem, often at the expense of others. In order to sustain their exaggeratedly positive self-views, narcissists constantly seek external self-validation in the form of attention and admiration from others (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Consequently, their self-views can be easily challenged by external agents or events. Consistent with this view, narcissists' self-esteem fluctuates from day to day in response to whether their social interactions are positive or negative (Rhodewalt et al., 1998).

When threatened, narcissists respond with intensely negative emotions: "They live on an interpersonal stage with exhibitionistic behavior and demands for attention and admiration but respond to threats to self-esteem with feelings of rage, defiance, shame, and humiliation" (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, p. 4). Furthermore, narcissists respond to ego threat with aggression against others (Baumeister et al., 2000; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). For example, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) conducted a study in which participants had the opportunity to aggress against someone who had insulted them, someone who had praised them,

or against a neutral third person. They found that the combination of high self-esteem, narcissism, and insult resulted in the highest levels of aggression; high levels of narcissism predicted increased aggression, especially in instances when negative feedback was received (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Building on this research, Kirkpatrick and colleagues identified narcissism as a significant, positive predictor of aggression when these subjects were placed in conditions of ego threat (Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002).

Narcissistic tendencies are also linked to bullying behavior. Salmivalli (2001) reports that bullying behavior is most typical of adolescent boys who have a "defensive" style of self-esteem, defined as needing to be the center of attention, thinking too highly of oneself, and demonstrating inability in facing criticism. Indeed, the construct proposed by Salmivalli seems to closely mirror the model of narcissism used in previous studies by Bushman and Baumeister (1998), thus providing further evidence for a connection between narcissistic personality traits and aggressive behavior.

In sum, research suggests that narcissists tend to focus more on the self and on protecting their fragile self-esteem than on relating to others or enhancing the quality of their relationships with others. When narcissists experience an ego threat, they are likely to react with anger, hostility, and aggression toward others. This reaction may temporarily relieve anxiety but ultimately deter them from building close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others. Even in the absence of ego threat, narcissists tend to focus more on self-enhancement than on their relationships. For example, although both narcissists and high self-esteem people see themselves as better than average on agential traits such as intellectual ability, narcissists do not believe that they are better than average on communal traits such as agreeableness or morality (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikedes, 2002). Unlike high self-esteem individuals, narcissists rate themselves as superior to their romantic partners. Furthermore, narcissists tend to endorse more external contingencies of self-worth, such as appearance and outdoing others in competition (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, in press), consistent with their insatiable need for external validation and admiration from others (Morf, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993, 2001).

High and Contingent Self-Esteem

Another form of fragile egotism can be found among people who have high self-esteem that is highly contingent. High self-esteem people react to ego threat in ways that enhance their self-esteem, such as dismissing the validity of a test on which they perform poorly (Schlenker, Weigold, & Hallam, 1990), seeking out feedback about their abilities and competencies, and becoming more independent in their self-views (Vohs & Heather-

ton, 2001). These responses to ego threats have consequences for how high versus low self-esteem people interact with others. For example, high self-esteem people who received failure feedback on a test of intellectual ability were rated as more antagonistic (i.e., arrogant, fake, uncooperative, rude, and unfriendly) and were liked less by their interaction partners than low self-esteem people who received failure feedback or high self-esteem people who were not threatened (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). Thus, when high self-esteem people are threatened, they respond to ego threats in ways that compromise their ability to form and maintain close, mutually caring, supportive relationships with others. In contrast, low self-esteem people seek self-esteem via a different route: by focusing more on their relationships and striving to be interpersonally responsive and likable (Park & Crocker, 2003; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001).

This tendency for high self-esteem people to become antagonistic and unlikable, however, appears to be true only when they are threatened in domains of contingency (Park & Crocker, 2002). In a study described previously, Park and Crocker (2003) showed that high self-esteem students whose self-worth was staked on their academic performance responded to an academic threat by becoming defensive and preoccupied with self-evaluative thoughts. In an interaction with other students who were describing a personal problem, high self-esteem and academically contingent students who had failed a GRE (Graduate Record Exam) rated themselves as preoccupied, unsupportive, and unempathic; the students with the problems also rated these threatened students as preoccupied, unsupportive, and unempathic, and did not much like them or want to interact with or tell another problem to them. In sum, the form of fragile egotism seen in people whose self-worth is high but contingent is associated with self-centered thoughts, defensiveness, and lowered capability for providing emotional support to others.

Low and Fragile Self-Esteem

People with low self-esteem—those with less positive views of themselves—tend to self-enhance indirectly by focusing on their social qualities and relationships, seeking interpersonal feedback, and becoming more interdependent in their self-construals (Baumeister et al., 1989; Brown et al., 1988; Schuetz & Tice, 1997; Tice, 1991; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Low self-esteem is associated with external and interpersonal contingencies of self-worth; people with low and fragile self-esteem tend to base their self-esteem on others' approval and their physical appearance (Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2002). Because they are unsure of their abilities, using the strategy of directly defending against threat by blaming others or discrediting the threat is more difficult for them (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Instead, people with fragile, low self-esteem attempt to bolster their self-esteem by seeking reassurance and approval from others. Like high self-esteem people, their pursuit of self-esteem involves the use of others to validate their self-worth, but rather than derogating others and becoming hostile or antagonistic, people with fragile, low self-esteem become dependent and needy of approval and reassurance. Yet, because they doubt themselves, they rarely feel truly reassured that others care for them or value them in spite of their shortcomings. Although this strategy for pursuing self-esteem may appear to be less harmful and destructive than the hostility of high, unstable self-esteem people, several lines of research indicate that it wreaks its own form of harm and destruction, particularly self-esteem that is contingent on approval and regard from others. In particular, research on low self-esteem, insecure attachment styles, and rejection sensitivity all share the common theme of low and interpersonally contingent, fragile self-esteem.

As noted, people with low self-esteem tend to base their self-esteem on others' approval and regard or on superficial aspects of the self, such as appearance, that require validation from others. Low self-esteem is also strongly associated with self-esteem instability (Kernis et al., 1989). Thus, it seems likely that most people with low self-esteem also have fragile self-esteem. Murray and colleagues explored the interpersonal consequences of low self-esteem in romantic relationships. In a study of the way that people interact with their partner following threats to the self (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), they found that people with low self-esteem regulate perceptions of their partner and the quality of their relationships in a self-protective manner. Specifically, when low self-esteem people experience self-doubt, they display less confidence in the quality of their relationship, perceive less supportiveness in their partner, and distance themselves from their partner. In contrast, high self-esteem people use their relationship as a self-affirmation and have increased confidence in their partner following threat.

People who are either low in self-esteem or depressed tend to repair self-esteem by seeking reassurance from others (Joiner, 1994; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). Research by Joiner and colleagues has shown that seeking reassurance from others makes people feel good about themselves and decreases their anxiety (Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992; Joiner, Katz, & Lew, 1999; Joiner, Metalsky, Gencoz, & Gencoz, 2001; Joiner, Metalsky, et al., 1999; Katz, Beach, & Joiner, 1998). For example, college students who experienced negative life events were more likely to seek reassurance from others to deal with increases in anxiety and decreases in self-esteem (Joiner et al., 1999). However, seeking reassurance from others may ultimately backfire because people who are contingent on others' approval may burden others by putting them in the position of constantly having to reassure them, which can become mentally and emotionally draining for others and result in rejection (Joiner et al., 1992).

Thus, people who are highly contingent on the approval of others are in the position of constantly taking from others, rather than giving and contributing to the relationship, and ultimately they damage the relationship.

Insecure Attachment Styles

According to attachment theory, people possess working models, or internal representations, of the attachment relationships that they experienced throughout their lives, beginning with the early caretaker–child relationship (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). People differ in the types of working models they have of themselves and of others (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Insecurely attached people are uncertain about whether others will "be there" for them in times of need, have lower self-esteem, and are more reliant on external validation of self-worth (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The preoccupied attachment style (Bartholomew, 1990)—a type of insecure attachment in which people possess a negative model of the self and a positive model of others—is negatively correlated with self-esteem and positively correlated with basing self-worth on appearance and others' approval (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, in press).

Because people with insecure attachment styles lack a sense of a "secure base," they (1) are more likely to experience shame and fear negative evaluation from others (Mikulincer, 1998; Wagner & Tangney, 1991); (2) are more anxious and hostile than securely attached people (Kobak & Sceery, 1988); and (3) deal with stressful events by mentally ruminating on negative thoughts, memories, and affect, rather than engaging in more active, problem-focused coping strategies (Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Shaver & Hazan, 1993).

These characteristics lead insecurely attached people to experience high levels of emotional distress and act in ways that undermine their relationships with others (Collins, 1996; Kobak & Hazan, 1991). For example, Collins and Feeney (2000) found that whereas securely attached individuals in intimate relationships were more effective support seekers and caregivers in their intimate relationships, insecurely attached individuals were less effective in seeking support and in caring for their partners. Indeed, people with a preoccupied attachment style crave constant reassurance from their partners (Bartholomew, 1990), worrying that their partners will not want to be as close as they would like them to be (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). In sum, people with insecure, and especially preoccupied, attachment styles pursue self-esteem by seeking validation from others, yet they are deficient in their ability to provide support to others.

Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity is associated with low self-esteem, neuroticism, and insecure attachment styles (Downey & Feldman, 1996). People who are high in rejection sensitivity anxiously expect, readily interpret, and overreact to signs of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 2000; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Even when the other person's behavior is ambiguous, people high in rejection sensitivity are more likely to expect and perceive intentional rejection than people low in rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Heightened concerns about rejection, in turn, can have deleterious consequences for interpersonal relationships. For example, people who are highly rejection sensitive in romantic relationships are more likely to perceive their partner's insensitive behavior as intentional rejection and are more insecure and unhappy about their relationships than less rejection-sensitive people (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

Why are highly rejection-sensitive people dissatisfied with their relationships? Downey and colleagues (2000) found that highly rejection-sensitive people react in destructive ways that undermine the relationship when faced with the threat of real or perceived rejection. Among highly rejection-sensitive women, anticipated rejection leads to increased hostility and decreased supportiveness toward their partners; among highly rejection-sensitive men, the possibility of rejection leads to increased jealousy, possessiveness, and a desire to control their partners (Downey et al., 2000). These maladaptive responses to rejection may contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy that gradually undermines the quality of a relationship. Not surprisingly, research has shown that highly rejection-sensitive people are more likely to be in relationships that terminate, compared to people who are low in rejection sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998). Thus, highly rejection-sensitive people's expectation of, interpretation of, and reaction to real or perceived rejection ultimately leads them to create situations in which they experience exactly what they do not want.

In sum, research suggests that people with high, fragile self-esteem pursue self-esteem through different strategies than do people with low, fragile self-esteem. When threatened, people with high, fragile self-esteem respond by directly defending against the threat and become angry, hostile, antagonistic—and, consequently, less likable. People with low, fragile self-esteem tend to seek reassurance from others that they are still loveable or valued. Initially, at least with strangers, they become more likeable (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000). Yet their need for reassurance seems insatiable, and they readily perceive rejection and lack of approval from others, to which they respond by distancing themselves or expressing anger, ultimately destroying their relationships with this corrosive pattern.

The pursuit of self-esteem is not restricted to people who feel worthless or to those who have high self-esteem; both high and low self-esteem can be associated with the pursuit of self-esteem, although the strategies each group uses to maintain and protect self-esteem in the face of threats differs. Beyond mere level of self-esteem, research suggests that the pursuit of self-esteem is linked to fragile self-worth, unstable and contingent self-esteem, and especially self-esteem that requires external validation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The notions that the pursuit of self-esteem is a fundamental need and that seeking self-esteem is inherently good are central assumptions in our Western, individualistic culture. Protecting and enhancing self-esteem is viewed as a primary goal, directing much social behavior (Baumeister et al., 1993). Yet, as we have emphasized throughout, the pursuit of self-esteem can cause harm and destruction. Others suffer when our ability to relate to them is compromised by the pursuit of self-esteem in the face of real or perceived ego threat. Events that are perceived as self-threatening initiate coping strategies aimed at repairing the self by distancing self from others, making downward comparisons, preoccupation with the self, expressing less empathy and supportiveness toward others' problems, prejudice toward and derogation of outgroups, antagonism, anger, hostility, and blame, and in the extreme, violence and aggression toward others. We argue that these strategies, although they temporarily relieve anxiety and negative affect, are ultimately counterproductive. They do not fulfill the fundamental human need for relatedness—for close, mutually caring and supportive relationships with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead, they create distance, competition, and lack of safety for others. When people are invested in protecting, maintaining, and enhancing self-worth, they ultimately focus on themselves at the expense of others. Over time, the costs to others accumulate, resulting in conflict, aggression, and violence toward others. Although the harm is easier to see when we examine more extreme and unusual strategies for pursuing self-esteem, such as domestic and gang violence, it is just as real for the everyday strategies we all use to protect our self-esteem from threat. The everyday strategies, such as making downward comparison or derogating others, may, in fact, be more pernicious, precisely because they are so frequent and the harm so subtle.

Can the Pursuit of Self-Esteem Lead to Good Instead of Evil?

In this chapter we have focused on the harmful ways people pursue self-esteem, from everyday, run-of-the-mill self-protective strategies, such as making downward comparisons, to more extreme and devastating behaviors, such as domestic and gang violence. But does the pursuit of self-esteem *always* lead to these harmful and destructive consequences? Are people just as likely to do good, to help or benefit others, in the pursuit of self-esteem?

Although it is not our focus here, we certainly agree that many good works, from charitable contributions to helping behaviors, are done for the sake of self-esteem (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). Although space constraints preclude an extensive discussion of these findings, our research consistently supports the conclusion that basing self-esteem on internal sources, especially being a virtuous person, is related to less destructive and more constructive behavior (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, in press; Crocker et al., 2003). College students whose self-esteem is based on being virtuous, for example, spend more time in volunteer activities, get higher grades, and drink less alcohol in their freshman year of college than students who base their self-worth on external contingencies, such as their appearance (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Crocker, Luhtanen, et al., 2002; Luhtanen & Crocker, 2002).

Yet, we suspect that even when people pursue self-esteem by being virtuous, subtle costs and harm to others may result. When good works and noble deeds are done for the sake of self-esteem, the focus is on the self, not on whether the good deed is actually helpful to, or appreciated by, the other. Thus, good deeds done for the sake of self-esteem may create a sense of superiority and distance, with the helper feeling superior to the beneficiary. For example, consider a person who bakes cookies and delivers them daily to the old and infirm in her town; although this is a good deed, it is not always appreciated. She delivers cookies, whether they are wanted or not, in order to feel morally virtuous, not because this act will truly help others in need. Those who receive unwanted deliveries of cookies may feel patronized and resent the clear expectation that they express their "gratitude" to boost the self-esteem of the do-gooder. Indeed, research shows that receiving help can sometimes be harmful to the recipient (Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Nadler, Fisher, & Streufert, 1976; Schneider, Major, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1996). We suspect that such harm is most likely to occur when help is offered to raise the self-esteem of the help-giver by "proving" his or her moral virtue and superiority.

Responsibility and Choice

Despite our account of harm and destruction—forms of evil that result from the pursuit of self-esteem—we do not consider people who cause harm to others in the pursuit of self-esteem to be evil in the sense of wicked; we do not think that people typically intend to hurt others when they engage in downward comparisons, derogation of others, or self-distancing behaviors. Except in the extreme case of aggression and vio-

lence, the harm that is done to others is often subtle and difficult to see, especially if one is not looking for it. In our view, the pursuit of self-esteem, although related to early attachment experiences and dispositional qualities such as narcissism and rejection sensitivity, is typically triggered by situations—specifically, threats to the self in domains in which self-worth has been staked.

At the same time, we do not believe that the perpetrators of these acts are simply innocent victims of their need for self-esteem. In contrast to many other researchers, we do not consider self-esteem to be a fundamental human need. Instead, we propose that people have a choice, at every moment, whether to take the action that makes them *feel* good about themselves in the short term, or the action that will *be* good in the long run for both others and the self. Consequently, our inclination is to consider people responsible for the harm they do to others in the pursuit of self-esteem. One of the goals of our research is to illuminate the costs of pursuing self-esteem and help people understand those costs as well as the real choices available to them. At each moment, we have a choice whether to engage in behaviors that protect and maintain our self-esteem (at the expense of others) or to shift to goals that include others, as well as the self; often, these are goals of building, giving, contributing, or creating something larger than the self (Crocker, 2002; Crocker & Park, in press). In our view, goals that include others are not only better for others as well as the self, but they are also more likely to create what we really want in our lives—mutually supportive connections with others, openness to learning, and a feeling of being the agent of our lives.

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CHAPTER 12

THE MANY FACES OF LIES

BELLA M. DEPAULO

It is rarely difficult to interest the American public in the topic of lying. Occasionally, though, the interest becomes obsessive. The talking heads on television start screaming, every newspaper and magazine is stuffed with stories, it is the buzz around the water cooler and the dinner table, and for a while, it seems that no one can get enough of it. One profoundly important instance of this national preoccupation with lying occurred as the Watergate story unfolded and a stunned citizenry learned that a massive campaign of lies, crimes, evasions, and cover-ups could be orchestrated from the highest office in the land. The Watergate scandal may have marked the end of American political innocence, but it did not mark the beginning or the end of lying in public life.

Lying famously reemerged as political spectacle in the fall of 1998, when President Bill Clinton, under increasing suspicion of having had an affair with the young intern Monica Lewinsky, looked into the camera and sternly declared, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."

At that time, one of the nightly television programs hosting impassioned discussions of the issues of the day was *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. I sat next to former Connecticut Governor Lowell Weicker as he insisted that "one thing that really has to be thrown out with the rest of the garbage here is people that think that all politicians lie. They do not." Referring to Clinton's response to his accusers, Weicker added, "If we accept what's going on here we'll admit that lying is a normal part of life in this country."

In so proclaiming, former Governor Weicker revealed two fundamen-