Optimal Self-Esteem is Contingent: Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Contingencies

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Optimal Self-Esteem is Contingent: Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic and Upward Versus Downward Contingencies

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Abstract

We argue that noncontingent, unconditional self-esteem is not optimal but defensive. We introduce the concept of intrinsic contingency, where self-esteem is affected by whether one’s actions are self-congruent and conducive to personal growth. Whereas external contingencies, especially social and appearance, were negatively correlated with authenticity, self-compassion, and personal well-being, intrinsic contingencies were positively correlated with these measures, and uncorrelated with aggression and self-esteem instability. Participants with high intrinsic contingency rated higher on measures of psychological adaptiveness than noncontingent participants. In addition, we distinguish upward from downward contingencies, the latter being more harmful in case of external contingencies but not for intrinsic contingencies. We conclude that intrinsic contingency, rather than noncontingency, may reflect true self-esteem as implied in self-determination theory.

Keywords: self-esteem, contingent self-esteem, self-determination, psychological well-being, self-compassion, authenticity
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Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic and Upward Versus Downward Contingencies

Contrary to conventional wisdom, evidence for beneficial effects of high self-esteem is scarce (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). People with high self-esteem tend to engage in all sorts of self-deception (for reviews, see Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Crocker & Park, 2004). When confronted with failure or rejection, they tend to aggressively lash out at those who criticize or disrespect them (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996); engage in excessive self-enhancement and downwards social comparisons to reaffirm the self (cf. Vohs & Heatherton, 2001, 2004); derogate others (e.g., Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Fein & Spencer, 1997); and cling to their own self-serving interpretations of events, producing conflict with the (possibly also self-serving) interpretations of their friends, spouses, or colleagues (Gilovich, Kruger & Savitsky, 1999; Leary, 2002).

These negative effects are particularly strong for individuals with high contingent self-esteem, i.e., self-esteem based on meeting standards or attaining certain outcomes, such as social approval or successful performance (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Contingent self-esteem requires continual validation; it can only be sustained if sufficient success, acceptance or approval is accomplished. As a result, it is a fragile form of self-esteem that requires a great deal of protection. Individuals with high contingent self-esteem are more likely (compared with high noncontingent or low self-esteem individuals) to engage in maladaptive behavior, such as disordered eating and binge drinking (Crocker, 2002; cf. Neighbors, Larimer, Geisner, & Knee, 2004), aggressive behavior in response to ego threat (Paradise & Kernis, 1999), and verbal defensiveness in a life event interview (Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008). This makes sense:
When self-esteem depends on contingencies, there is a lot at stake (cf. Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000).

Based on self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000), Kernis (2003) has argued that the optimal form of self-esteem is noncontingent. Deci and Ryan (1995) refer to it as *true* self-esteem: self-esteem that develops when people act in ways that satisfy their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. People with true self-esteem behave in a self-determined and authentic way. Their behavior is intrinsically motivated: It results from interest, enjoyment, or striving for meaningful goals, and not from pressure to match external standards.

Although this idea is persuasive, the concept of unconditional, noncontingent high self-esteem may include varieties of high self-esteem that can be regarded as psychologically unhealthy and even defensive. If one’s self-esteem is maintained no matter what, there is no incentive for growth and self-improvement. Experiencing some fluctuation in state self-esteem in response to one’s outcomes may be a natural and adaptive part of psychological functioning, because it motivates people to learn and develop, and to adapt their behavior to their environment. In fact, absolutely stable and noncontingent high self-esteem may result from effective defensive strategies that shield self-esteem from threats -- in which case it reflects the ultimate totalitarian ego (Greenwald, 1980), characterized by rigidness, reality distortion, and unwillingness to develop and to accept some basic facts of life, such as failure and rejection. Noncontingency, therefore, may not be the key to healthy psychological functioning and truly mature self-esteem.

At the same time, it is also clear that high contingency can have psychologically unhealthy consequences as well. In trying to meet contingencies such as looking good or gaining
approval, people may neglect their own values and intrinsic needs, thereby undermining their autonomy and impairing their self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and self-development. Interpersonal contingencies create a strong vulnerability and dependency on others’ responses, producing negative effects on psychological well-being and adaptiveness (e.g., Crocker, 2002; Crocker, Luthanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Sargent, Crocker, & Luthanen, 2006).

As a way out of this predicament, we suggest it is not contingency *per se* that produces negative effects, but only extrinsic, interpersonal contingency that depends on external events, feedback, or others’ validation. In the present study, we introduce a contingency that is, in our view, entirely in line with the principles of self-determination: the motive to be true to oneself and develop oneself. Other contingencies have been described that are relatively internal (Crocker et al., 2003), such as virtue or God’s love, but they still reflect cultural standards one has to live up to, rather than personal values, inherent interests, or entirely integrated goals (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to self-determination theorists, “true” self-esteem is affected by whether one’s behavior is self-congruent (e.g., Koestner, Lekes, Power & Chicoine, 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). For example, self-esteem could drop after not taking one’s own feelings seriously, or it could rise after getting in touch with a new undiscovered side of the self. These examples reflect typical intrinsic, humanistic motivations: authenticity and personal growth.

Such intrinsically contingent self-esteem may be the equivalent of the true, optimal self-esteem as intended by self-determination theorists: It implies that state self-esteem drops if one’s behavior is not congruent with one’s authentic inner self or is not conducive to personal growth, and rises when it is. Kernis (2003) approached true self-esteem by establishing what it is *not*: contingent. We argue that true self-esteem is contingent, but contingent upon something else.
Thus, we approach true self-esteem for what it is: the extent to which self-esteem depends on self-contact, autonomy, and self-development.

The first purpose of our study is to examine several domain-specific contingencies in relation to negative and positive indicators of healthy psychological functioning. We selected the measures below because (a) they are relevant to our main argument and have been studied in earlier research in this area, and (b) they jointly represent personal as well as interpersonal and healthy as well as unhealthy aspects of psychological functioning.

Subjective well-being: We examined the positive-negative affect scale PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which can be seen as a hedonic measure of well-being, as well as a selection of items from the Personal Well-Being Scale PWBS (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which is associated with personal growth and eudaimonic well-being (i.e., developing one’s best possible self and experiencing meaning and fulfilment, as opposed to hedonic well-being which follows the pleasure–pain principle; e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 2000; Waterman, 1993) and with intrinsic goal pursuit (e.g., Sheldon, Ryan, Deci & Kasser, 2004).

Authenticity represents “the operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise” (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). The concept and its measurement are partially rooted in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), reflecting the idea that self-congruent and autonomous behaviors are psychologically healthy. Presumably, people cannot behave authentically when they are concerned with living up to external contingencies; meeting intrinsic contingencies, on the other hand, is a fundamental part of authenticity.

Self-compassion (Neff, 2003) involves unconditional acceptance of the self and a non-judgmental attitude towards one’s weaknesses and imperfections. It is negatively related to
contingent self-esteem (Neff & Vonk, 2009) and provides a buffer in stressing or self-threatening situations (Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003).

**Instability of self-esteem:** variation across multiple assessments of state self-esteem (Kernis & Waschul, 1995), a variable that it is correlated with contingency of self-esteem (e.g., Crocker, Sommers & Luthanen, 2002; Paradise & Kernis, 1999).

**Aggression** was assessed by means of scenarios asking participants to imagine self-threats such as being ignored or treated badly (selected from the Anger Response Aggression Inventory; Tangney et al., 1996). People with vulnerable self-esteem respond more aggressively to such threats (e.g., Kernis, Granneman & Barclay, 1989; Baumeister, Smart & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister 1998).

We examined the relationships of these variables with intrinsic contingency -- encompassing personal growth and self-congruence -- in comparison with three established interpersonal contingencies: appearance, social approval, and performance. We selected these three because they have been studied extensively in contingency research and they can be applied to the general population we examined; for instance, we expected that “God’s love” would not work well in The Netherlands where many people do not believe in God, and “school” would not be applicable because our sample contained mostly non-students.

We hypothesized that intrinsic contingency is positively correlated with positive indicators of psychological adaptiveness (authenticity, well-being, positive affect, and self-compassion) and negatively with negative indicators (negative affect, instability, and aggression), whereas the opposite applies to external contingencies (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, if intrinsic contingency reflects optimal self-esteem, as we argue, then participants with high intrinsic contingency should rate higher on measures of psychological adaptiveness than those
Optimal Self-Esteem is Contingent with high extrinsic but low intrinsic contingency (Hypothesis 2a), and, importantly, also higher than those with noncontingent self-esteem (Hypothesis 2b).

A second aim of this study was to investigate the direction of contingency. Contingency measures typically include both positively (e.g., “I like myself more if I know that someone else likes me”; upward contingency) and negatively phrased items (e.g., “I feel bad about myself after failing a test”; downward contingency); the difference between them has not been systematically investigated. It is assumed that the two are correlated (e.g., if your self-esteem rises as a consequence of social approval, it is also likely to decrease as a consequence of disapproval), but they are not the same and they may be differentially associated with other variables. Downward contingency may be more strongly related to psychological adaptiveness than upward contingency: Individuals with a predominant downward contingency experience the vulnerability of their self-esteem to a greater extent and they stand to lose more than those with a predominant upward contingency. Thus, we expect that in general, downward extrinsic contingencies are more detrimental to psychological health than upward contingencies (Hypothesis 3). However, this difference may not occur for intrinsic contingencies: Although reduced self-esteem as a consequence of being untrue to the self may temporarily be unpleasant, it also motivates one to restore self-integrity. Hence, it may have similar psychological benefits as upward intrinsic contingency, because it can be just as conducive to one’s authentic goals. Moreover, the problem of not living up to one’s intrinsic values is more easily managed than not meeting external demands: The individual is more autonomous in carrying out an improvement, and receives immediate feedback from within (cf. Martin, 1999). As a consequence, the experience of “letting yourself down” is different from being let down by someone else and, presumably, does not produce the anxiousness and tension that is associated with other downward contingencies.
Precisely these dynamics of intrinsic contingency make it possible for people to experience swings in state self-esteem without any need to become either defensive or lose a basic sense of self-acceptance.

**Method**

**Participants**

The different questionnaires were administered as part of a large-scale Internet study (Vonk, Celik, Jolij, & Stoeller, 2010). Participants were recruited by means of articles in newspapers and magazines, brief advertisements (e.g., “time for self-reflection?”), and links with other websites (e.g., psychology sites, self-test sites, and unrelated sites). As an incentive to participate, they received feedback on their personal test scores after completing the study, and lottery tickets for prizes of 25 to 50 euro for each assessment that they completed. In total, 3575 people completed the study: 2577 females and 986 males (for 12 participants, gender was not recorded due to a disruption during the first assessment). Their ages ranged from 16 through 83, with a mean of 38.6 and 50% of participants between 30 and 46. The large majority were living together with their partner (1034) or family (1087); 908 were living alone. Most participants had higher professional education (1571) or university at the Master’s level (1257). The majority was working in paid employment (2216) or had their own business (312); most others were studying (345) or doing the household (395).

**Procedure**

The study was introduced as a study on “self-concept, self-determination, happiness, and motivation”. At their first visit to the website of the study, participants were told that anyone above the age of 16 could participate, if they were able to read and write Dutch and had their own e-mail address. There were no other restrictions. It was explained that the study was
intended to answer research questions; that it was not intended to help solve any psychological problems; on the website visitors with such problems were referred to other sites. Participation would require about 20 to 30 minutes every one or two weeks for the coming months. Visitors who responded “yes” on the informed consent form first answered a series of background questions, such as age, religion, and education. At the end of this questionnaire, they were asked to type in their e-mail address and to provide a personal user name, which they would be using throughout the study. At their e-mail address, they received a code name and a password that gave them access to the first questionnaire.

Subsequently, they automatically received an e-mail message each time a new questionnaire was available. Each questionnaire consisted of several different scales. Some were administered several times, for instance, state self-esteem in order to establish self-esteem stability (Kernis & Waschul, 1995). The tests analyzed for the present paper were filled out across twelve different occasions within a period of six months, with intervals of two weeks to one month between assessments. The dropout rate was relatively low (83% of participants who started at T1 completed the study up to the last series of tests at T12), but not all participants filled out each questionnaire. As a consequence, N differs per questionnaire.

Questionnaires

Domain-specific contingency of self-esteem (Jansen & Vonk, 2005) (T10). This is the central questionnaire in the present study. The questionnaire includes three of the contingency domains described by both Crocker c.s. (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) and Kernis (Paradise & Kernis, 1999): appearance, social approval, and performance. In addition to these, we created items about intrinsic contingency. For each of the resulting four domains, two subscales were distinguished: one in which participants rated the extent to which a particular event raises their
self-esteem and one in which they rated the extent to which an event lowers their self-esteem. To avoid confusion in the use of the response scale, the upward and downward items were separated. For upward items, participants were instructed to rate the extent to which events enhance their self-esteem (1 = does not affect my self-esteem at all, 7 = raises my self-esteem very much). After completing these items, they went on to a new page and were instructed to rate the extent to which events reduce their self-esteem (1 = does not affect my self-esteem at all, 7 = reduces my self-esteem very much).

The 4 x 2 subscales are: upward performance (e.g. “successfully completing a task”), downward performance (e.g. “failing at a task”), upward appearance (e.g. “looking good”), downward appearance (e.g. “feeling unattractive”), upward social (e.g. “receiving appreciation from others”), downward social (e.g. “feeling that others don’t like me”), upward intrinsic (“discovering a new side of myself”; “giving attention to my inner feelings”; “getting to know myself better”; and “taking time for myself”), and downward intrinsic (“going against my conscience”; “being untrue to myself”; “not taking my feelings seriously”; and “presenting myself different from how I am”). Each scale included four items, but for physical upward, physical downward, and social downward, one item was removed to enhance internal consistency. Within the upward and downward scales, the items from the four domains were distributed randomly. Confirmatory factor analysis showed that the expected eight-factor solution was optimal. Details of this analysis are described in the Results section.

The other variables relevant to the present purposes were mostly derived from questionnaires we translated from English to Dutch. In some cases, items were dropped or adapted because they were not applicable to the present sample. For instance, we changed an item in the Aggression Response Inventory (Tangney et al., 1996) about waiting to be served in a
restaurant: Because waiting periods in European restaurants are longer than in the US, the waiting time was changed from 15 to 30 minutes, which was judged by a convenience sample as ‘too long’. Unless otherwise specified, all questions were answered on 7-point scales.

**General contingent self-esteem** (Paradise & Kernis, 1999), 10 items, $\alpha = .82$ (T4). These 10 items were selected from the 15 items of the original scale, designed to measure contingency as a general individual difference variable. Subjects were asked to rate the extent to which general statements are applicable to them. Examples are: “My overall feelings about myself are heavily influenced by how much other people like and accept me” and “Even in the face of failure, my feelings of self-worth remain unaffected” (reverse scored).

**Personal well-being scale** (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), 21 items, $\alpha = .90$ (T5). For this measure we used a selection of items from the Dutch adaptation of the PWBS by Van Dierendonck and Smith (2001). This Dutch questionnaire contains 84 items from which we selected three or four items for each of the six subscales based on face value: self-acceptance (e.g., “When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out”), personal growth (e.g., “For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growing”), purpose in life (“Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them”), positive relations with others (“People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others”), environmental mastery (“In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live”), and autonomy (“I do not tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions”). The alpha’s for these subscales were all reasonable; in the present study we used only the overall scale consisting of 21 items, $\alpha = .90$.

**Positive and negative affect scale** (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), 10 items (T7). We selected five positive ($\alpha = .85$) and five negative ($\alpha = .73$) items from this scale to obtain a
more hedonic, less humanistically oriented index of well-being, as compared to the PWBS which is closer to the idea of intrinsic motivation. Participants were asked to indicate how often in the past weeks they had experienced certain feelings (e.g., “enthusiastic” or “irritable”), on a 4-point scale from rarely or never to mostly or almost all the time. As in Diener and Emmons (1984), the two components positive and negative affect were analyzed separately.

**Authenticity inventory** (Goldman & Kernis, 2001), 26 items, $\alpha = .80$ (T5). The scale by Goldman and Kernis contains 44 items representing four dimensions: awareness of and trust in one’s own motives and feelings, unbiased processing of information, behavior in accordance with one’s own values and preferences, and openness and truthfulness in relationships with others. We did not include all of them because we felt that some items, mainly from the unbiased processing scale, were ambiguous. For instance, it requires some degree of authenticity to acknowledge “I am aware of when I am not being my true self” or “I tend to have difficulty accepting my personal faults, so I try to cast them in a more positive way”, so we did not use these items. For the 26 items we did translate, we obtained two dimensions in factor analysis, inner authenticity ($\alpha = .77$) reflecting introspection and self-reflection (e.g., “I actively attempt to understand myself as best as possible”) and outer authenticity ($\alpha = .81$) reflecting self-congruence in outward behaviors and interactions with others (e.g., “I try to act in a manner that is consistent with my personally held values, even if others criticize or reject me for doing so”). For the present purposes we combined the two ($\alpha = .80$).

**Self-compassion** (Neff, 2003; Neff & Vonk, 2009). 24 items, $\alpha = .90$ (T12). This scale assesses six aspects of self-compassion (negative aspects are reverse coded): self-kindness (e.g., “I try to be understanding and patient toward aspects of my personality I don’t like”), self-judgment (e.g., “I’m disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies”),
Optimal Self-Esteem is Contingent on common humanity (e.g., ‘‘I try to see my failings as part of the human condition’’), isolation (e.g., ‘‘When I think about my inadequacies it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world’’), mindfulness (e.g., ‘‘When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation’’), and over-identification (e.g., ‘‘When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong.’’). We dropped two items from the original 26-item scale due to translation difficulties.

**Instability of self-esteem** (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). As a measure of instability we used the procedure developed by Kernis and his colleagues (Kernis et al., 1993; Kernis & Waschull, 1995). Like Kernis et al., to assess state self-esteem on multiple occasions we used the Heatherton & Polivy (1991) scale (e.g., “I feel concerned about the impression I am making”). We selected 10 items because a small number of items is typically sufficient to obtain a reliable estimate of self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998). The original Heatherton & Polivy scale contains a relatively large number of items about satisfaction with one’s appearance (e.g. “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”); we did not want to focus inordinately on one specific domain of self-esteem, so we deleted most of those and retained the more general items (e.g., “I feel good about myself”). We emphasized that participants were to indicate how they had felt in the past two weeks, rather than generally. Cronbach’s α ranged from .86 to .89 across multiple assessments. Instability was calculated by computing the standard deviation of the scores on state self-esteem across eight measurements (T1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12) conducted within a period of six months.4

**Hostility** (Tangney et al., 1996), 18 items, α = .88 (T9). This test measures aggressive responses to a selection of six out of the 23 hypothetical ego-threatening scenarios of the Aggression Response Inventory. We selected six scenarios from these that all contained self-
related threats, namely: “You are waiting to be served at a restaurant. Half an hour has gone by, and you still haven’t even received a menu”; “You find out a “friend” was talking about you behind your back”; “You are waiting in line for a movie, and someone cuts in front of you”; “You tell a friend about a problem, and your friend doesn’t take it seriously”; “You are trying to rest or read, but there are children nearby who are making a lot of noise while playing”; “Your friend makes plans to meet you for lunch, but doesn’t show up”. For each scenario, three questions were asked to assess hostility: (1) “how angry would you be in this situation?”, (2) “how much would you feel like getting back at him or her?”, (3) “how much would you feel like letting off steam?”. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was reliable across all 6 x 3 items; the alphas for the three hostility questions were similar in all six scenarios, and across scenarios the alphas for the same question were high as well (all between .70 and .88).

**Global self-esteem**, 10 items, $\alpha = .92$ (T10). In addition to these measures, we also assessed trait self-esteem because it typically correlates negatively with contingency, and we expected it to be correlated with our other measures as well. We developed a measure (Vonk et al., 2010) that captures not only ability-related self-esteem (as the Rosenberg scale; see Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) but also self-liking and a basic sense of self-acceptance. Our measure of global trait self-esteem (GSE) consists of 10 brief statements, e.g., “I have confidence in myself”, “I believe in myself”, “I like myself”, “I wish I were different” (reverse coded), and some items from Tafarodi and Swann’s (1995, 2001) self-liking scale. An independent study (results not reported here) in which this measure and the Rosenberg (1965) scale were assessed among 108 participants (Jongenelen & Vonk, 2007) showed that the correlation between the two is .86 and the factor structure of the two scales is one-dimensional ($\alpha$ overall $= .93$).
Results

Initial Analyses

To examine the structure of the 4 (domain) x 2 (upward/downward) contingencies scale, we applied confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 4.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999). The expected eight-factor solution was superior to all other theoretically possible solutions, e.g., one factor of general contingency, two factors of upward versus downward regardless of domain, and four factors of the domains regardless of upward/downward. Fit was determined by the Chi-square statistics ‘goodness-of-fit’ (GFI; Bentler, 1983), ‘adjusted-GFI’ (AGFI; Bentler, 1983), ‘normed fit index’ (NFI; Bentler & Bonett, 1980) and the ‘root-mean-square error of approximation’ which takes into account the complexity of the model (RMSEA; Steiger & Lind, 1980, in: Hu & Bentler, 1998). The results are presented in Table 1. For GFI, AGFI, and NFI, .90 implies good fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). For RMSEA, values below .05 are regarded as good, between .05 and .08 as reasonable, and values higher than .10 as bad (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). As shown by all indices of fit, the 8-factor model was optimal. Cronbach’s α’s of the eight subscales range from .78 to .85 (see Table 2, third row).

Table 3 presents the correlations among the different domain-specific contingency subscales. Because of the large sample size almost all correlations are significant; therefore, we decided to consider only correlations higher than .16 as meaningful (i.e., explaining at least 2.5% of variance), to avoid attributing too much meaning to minor relations. Each of the upward scales was strongly correlated with the corresponding downward scale (r’s ranging from .47 to .69), indicating that if people have a particular downward contingency, they tend to have the same contingency in the upward direction as well. Also, the different extrinsic contingencies were highly correlated with each other, especially within the same direction (r = .42 to .52 upward and
The correlations between the intrinsic and extrinsic contingencies were weaker ($r = .24$ to $.32$ upward and $r = .14$ to $.20$ downward).

General contingent self-esteem, as measured by the Paradise and Kernis (1999) scale, correlated strongly with the domain-specific extrinsic contingencies in our own measure ($r = .28$ to $.44$ upward and $r = .47$ to $.54$ downward), but was unrelated to intrinsic contingency. Thus, the intrinsic contingency measure appears to represent a truly different form of contingency.

Intrinsic contingency was moderately correlated with self-esteem ($r = .23$ for upward intrinsic). Extrinsic downward contingencies were negatively associated with self-esteem (see last row in Table 3). This is exactly what could be expected if we consider self-esteem as another index of psychological well-being and adaptiveness. However, because self-esteem is also correlated with the other indices of adaptiveness, this means that part of the beneficial effects of intrinsic contingency may be explained by its correlation with self-esteem. Controlling for level of self-esteem, some of the relations reported below did decrease, but the partial correlations remained significant.⁵

**Contingency and Psychological Adaptiveness Correlations**

The correlations between the domain-specific contingencies and our measures of psychological adaptiveness are presented in Table 3. Note that these variables were assessed on different occasions, so most were several weeks or even months apart; as a consequence, the correlations are probably smaller than if all variables had been assessed on the same occasion.

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, intrinsic contingency was related to all positive indicators of psychological adaptiveness (personal well-being, authenticity, and self-compassion) except for the relation between downward intrinsic and affect. The subscripts indicate that, generally, these relations are also significantly more positive than for any of the other contingencies.
Differing from expectations, there were no negative relations between intrinsic contingency and the negative indicators of psychological adaptiveness (hostility and self-esteem instability).

As in previous research, external contingencies were positively related to the negative indicators of psychological adaptiveness -- with the exception of upward performance, which was unrelated to negative affect. The downward external contingencies were all clearly negatively related to the positive indicators, as expected, but the upward extrinsic contingencies show a mixed picture; they were either weakly negatively related or unrelated to these positive indicators. Upward performance contingency was even weakly positively related to these measures. This pattern of results converges with Crocker et al.’s (2003) classification of contingencies along the external–internal continuum; with social and appearance contingency on one extreme, intrinsic on the other, and performance in between.

Confirming Hypothesis 3, downward external contingencies were more strongly related to psychological adaptiveness measures than their upward counterparts, and this difference was fairly consistent. Though less pronounced, the opposite emerged for intrinsic contingency: The relationships between the positive indicators of psychological adaptiveness tended to be stronger for upward intrinsic than for downward intrinsic contingencies. For authenticity, on the other hand, the correlations with upward and downward intrinsic contingency were in fact the same. For the two negative indicators of psychological adaptiveness, correlations with upward and downward intrinsic contingency were both very small.

On the whole, these correlations indicate that psychological adaptiveness is negatively related to extrinsic contingency and positively to intrinsic contingency (both upward and downward). Downward extrinsic contingency appears more psychologically unhealthy than upward, whereas this difference does not occur for intrinsic contingency, as we expected.
Having both positive and negative effects on psychological adaptiveness, the upward performance contingency seems to be relatively beneficial compared with the other external contingencies.

**Intrinsic, Extrinsic, or Noncontingent**

Hypothesis 2 stated that intrinsically contingent self-esteem is more beneficial than extrinsic or noncontingent self-esteem. As a result, participants with high intrinsic contingency should rate higher on measures of psychological adaptiveness than those with high extrinsic but low intrinsic contingency (Hypothesis 2a), and, crucially, also higher than those with noncontingent self-esteem (Hypothesis 2b). To test these comparisons in mean ratings on the adaptiveness measures, we first collapsed all 2 (upward, downward) x 3 (social, appearance, performance) extrinsic contingency scales on the one hand, and both (upward, downward) intrinsic contingency scales on the other. The scores on both composite scales were split into three equal groups: low, medium, and high. The psychological adaptiveness measures were then submitted to a 3 (extrinsic contingency: low, medium, high) by 3 (intrinsic contingency: low, medium, high) multivariate analysis of variance. This analysis revealed significant main effects of intrinsic contingency, $F(14, 4122) = 21.49, p < .01, \eta^2_p = 0.07$, and of extrinsic contingency, $F(14, 4122) = 30.26, p < .01, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. The interaction was nonsignificant, $F(28, 7432) = 1.00, p = .45$.

Subsequent univariate analyses showed that extrinsic contingency had a significant effect on all psychological adaptiveness measures ($F$’s ranging from 10.71 to 123.27 and partial eta² ranging from .01 to .11). As can be seen in Table 4, participants with high levels of extrinsic contingency rated lower on the positive measures such as well-being and self-compassion, and higher on negative measures such as hostility, compared with participants with low extrinsic
contingency; the medium group was in between. Differing from our predictions, intrinsic contingency did not have a significant ($p < .01$) effect on any of the negative indicators -- self-esteem instability, hostility, and negative affect -- but as predicted, it had a significant effect on all positive indicators ($F$'s ranging from 20.92 to 123.18 and partial $\eta^2$ ranging from .02 to .11). High intrinsic contingency was associated with the highest scores on these measures, and low intrinsic contingency with the lowest.

To control for the role of self-esteem, we repeated the same analysis with self-esteem as a covariate. Because self-esteem and the measures of psychological adaptiveness are strongly related, this analysis showed a strong effect of the covariate, $F(7, 2055) = 371.17$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.56$. This effect was significant for all variables ($F$'s ranging from 49.68 to 188.19 and partial $\eta^2$ ranging from .02 to .48). As can be seen from the last column in Table 4, the means are in the same direction as for the other variables, with the high extrinsic contingent group having the most unhealthy profile (low on positive indicators and high on negative indicators), the low extrinsic group scores the healthiest, and the medium group in between. Conversely, for intrinsic contingency the low group shows the most unhealthy pattern, followed by the medium group, whereas the high intrinsic contingent group shows the highest levels of psychological adaptiveness. Although these relations parallel those with the dependent variables, they largely do not account for the effects on these other variables: With self-esteem as covariate, the effects on the other variables remained significant, except for the effects of extrinsic and intrinsic contingency on positive affect which became nonsignificant, $F(2, 2061) = .26$ and 1.69, respectively; $p = .77$ and .18, respectively. Thus, the relationships of extrinsic and intrinsic contingency with affect can be accounted for by self-esteem, but the relationships with other variables were retained after controlling for this.
Pertinent to Hypothesis 2a, participants with predominantly intrinsic contingencies had higher levels of psychological adaptiveness than those with predominantly extrinsic contingencies. For example, those who score high on intrinsic contingency but either low or medium on extrinsic contingency have a higher level of authenticity ($M = 5.26$ and $M = 5.03$) than those who score high on extrinsic contingency but low or medium on intrinsic contingency ($M = 4.41$ and $M = 4.60$). The means show a similar pattern for all other psychological adaptiveness measures. This can be seen by comparing the third and sixth versus the seventh row in Table 4.

Importantly, individuals with high intrinsic contingencies also have higher psychological adaptiveness ratings than those with noncontingent self-esteem, at least for the positive indicators personal well-being, authenticity, self-compassion as well as for self-esteem. For these variables, Hypothesis 2b was confirmed, as can be seen by comparing the third and sixth versus the first row in Table 4. For example, those who score high on intrinsic but low on extrinsic contingency are higher on authenticity ($M = 5.26$) than those low on both types of contingency ($M = 4.76$). For the other variables (positive affect, aggression, and instability of self-esteem), these differences are mostly in the same direction but not significant at $p<.01$.

As noted, performance contingency was somewhat different from the other two extrinsic contingencies (appearance and social). Therefore, we conducted the same series of analyses separately for performance contingency and for social + appearance contingency. For the latter, the results were highly similar to those of all three extrinsic contingencies collapsed. For performance contingency only, we found similar effects on personal well-being and also on self-esteem, but not on authenticity, self-compassion, and positive affect. This is consistent with the idea that performance contingency has an intermediate position in terms of psychological health.
Yet for all positive indicators of psychological adaptiveness, the predominantly intrinsic group again scored higher than the noncontingent group, except on positive affect. There were no differences for the negative indicators.

**Discussion**

The present results support the idea that the contingencies on which people base their self-esteem have important ramifications for their psychological functioning. People whose self-esteem depends on extrinsic factors, such as social approval or good looks, have lower and less stable self-esteem, respond with more hostility to ego threats, experience more negative affect, less personal well-being and positive affect, and are less authentic and self-compassionate. Based on results such as these, it has been argued that noncontingency represents optimal self-esteem (Kernis, 2003), and one might also say optimal authenticity and well-being. We have argued, on the other hand, that noncontingency may not reflect a psychologically healthy response to the ebb and flow of social life.

Intrinsic contingency appears to offer a more adequate reflection of the humanistic notions of self-contact, autonomy and, indeed, self-actualization. This particular form of contingency has not been addressed in the extant literature until now. To some extent, it resembles Crocker et al.’s (2003) ethical standards contingency, but ethical standards are also imposed by society, family, or religion, and they involve self-evaluations about being ”good” or “bad”. The concept of intrinsic contingency is less normative and conceptually closer to the notions of self-growth and self-determination. Importantly, we argue that for this particular contingency, unlike other contingencies studied so far, a high standing reflects higher
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psychological health than a low standing. This argument runs counter to the idea that self-esteem optimally is unconditional.

As expected, individuals with high intrinsic contingency experienced more personal well-being and positive affect, and reported being more authentic and self-compassionate than any other group. In fact, these participants rated higher on measures of psychological adaptiveness than noncontingent individuals. This indicates that contingent self-esteem can be part of successful social functioning and psychological health, if the adequate contingency is addressed.

The present results corroborate our position that noncontingent self-esteem is not the optimal stance in life. True self-esteem is not unconditional; it requires being in touch with and sensitive to one’s authenticity and personal growth, and experiencing drops in self-esteem when being untrue to one’s personal values and goals. Just as disapproval or failure can reduce self-esteem among externally contingent individuals, thus motivating them to restore their social position, so can self-incongruence produce drops in self-esteem among intrinsically contingent individuals, providing an incentive for growth and authenticity.

In this context, it is interesting that both upward and downward intrinsic contingency were positively correlated with authenticity. Possibly, self-esteem works as a gauge for self-congruence among those with high intrinsic contingency. Unlike extrinsic contingencies, downward deviations in this case may not produce strong negative affect, because they serve as a reminder of one’s core values. Also, downward deviations from intrinsic goals can be remedied quickly, in a way that provides immediate feedback and confidence that one is headed in the right direction (cf. Martin, 1999). This may also explain the zero correlations between intrinsic contingency and negative affect. More generally, considering the core meaning of intrinsic contingency, it makes sense that its relations with a eudaimonic type of well-being scale such as
the PWBS (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) are stronger than with hedonic affect such as assessed by the PANAS. A person with high intrinsic contingency is not striving to simply feel good and avoid unpleasantness, but to be true to the self and develop the self (cf. Waterman, 1993).

Our data show that existing measures of contingency, as well as our own measure of extrinsic contingency, are unrelated to intrinsic contingency. However, intrinsic contingency is correlated with self-esteem, so its beneficial effects can partly be explained by level of self-esteem; those with intrinsic contingency have higher self-esteem, and high self-esteem is typically associated with higher ratings on psychological adaptiveness measures. For hedonic affect, the results indicated that intrinsic contingency did not have a unique contribution: The effects on this variable were accounted for by self-esteem. This makes sense, considering that the predominant benefit of high self-esteem is that it feels good (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Myers & Diener, 1995), whereas intrinsic contingency is psychologically closer to eudaimonic conceptions of well-being. For the other positive measures in our study, the results indicated that even though they were associated with self-esteem as well, they were also to a significant extent uniquely explained by intrinsic contingency.

The correlational nature of our study impedes conclusions about the directions of the many paths among these variables. In addition, because contingency is typically assessed by self-report, it is conceivable that the results are affected by participants’ theories on which standing is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. As we have noted elsewhere (Brandt & Vonk, 2006), participants may fill out self-report scales following a simple heuristic such as “I’m doing fine” and, thereby, provide high ratings on any item that seems ‘good’ and low ratings on items that seem ‘bad’. If intrinsic contingency is seen as ‘better’ than extrinsic, this could partly explain our findings, because it means that participants who see themselves as ‘doing fine’ will rate higher on intrinsic
contingency as well as the adaptiveness measures. On the other hand, it is also conceivable that participants share Kernis’ (2003) assumption that noncontingency is optimal. This common sense intuition is reflected in the lay claim that “your self-esteem should not depend on anything”. In this case, a response heuristic would not explain our findings regarding intrinsic contingency. Obviously, this is an empirical question that awaits further research.

Self-esteem is also an index of psychological health and is inevitably part of the total picture. The causal paths underlying the interrelations are intricately intertwined and cannot be unravelled by means of the present data. It is possible that intrinsic contingency facilitates self-contact and growth, and thereby produces other beneficial effects, but most likely the converse also applies: People who feel good about themselves and are not anxiously focused on feedback from others, can psychologically afford to be interested in personal growth and self-congruency. In fact, we have evidence (Vonk et al., 2010) that even positive reinforcement from others can produce this type of autonomy by relieving the strain of having to live up to external standards; this autonomy subsequently sustains itself by affecting social behavior and other psychological variables. Once established, the self-congruent person is probably seen as more likeable and more effective than a person who is narrowly focused on pleasing others or achieving higher status. So typically all cogs in the social and psychological wheelwork will spin in the same direction, so that the benefits are self-sustaining regardless of where they were initiated.

Thus, it is easily conceivable that having intrinsic contingency enhances self-esteem, because it enhances self-congruence and self-determination in one’s behaviors and choices, which in turn promotes self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995). But in addition, we may also assume that people develop more sensitivity to their intrinsic needs after having established some basic level of self-esteem via acceptance by others; this can be the necessary groundwork for self-
development and autonomy (Vonk et al., 2010) and, hence, for relying on self-congruence and personal growth motives as a contingency.

A second novel contribution of our study concerns the distinction between upward and downward contingency, which revealed another insight about the workings of contingency: For extrinsic contingencies, the negative relations with psychological adaptiveness were especially strong in the downward direction, whereas correlations were more moderate in the upward direction. This makes intuitive sense: People whose self-esteem suffers on a “bad hair day” are more likely to experience negative effects from their contingency than those whose self-esteem grows upon receiving a compliment about their clothes. Existing measures of contingency, such as the Paradise and Kernis (1999) measure, include both downward and upward items, so this can explain why previous studies found mostly negative effects of contingent self-esteem.

Upward contingency is not necessarily unhealthy: Its correlations with our measures of psychological adaptiveness do not sketch a strong or uniformly negative picture. Nevertheless, one could argue that the advantages of having high upward and low downward contingency reside in a biased style of processing, where one reaps the benefits of upward movements without incurring the costs of their negative counterparts. This, for instance, is a pattern that emerged among people high in narcissism: They are relatively high on contingency for upward performance, but not downward performance (Jansen & Vonk, 2005).

Interestingly, intrinsic contingency was not associated with more instability, in comparison with noncontingent self-esteem. If, as we assume, changes in state self-esteem resulting from intrinsic contingencies operate as a reminder of one’s true self and personal values and one’s possibility for growth, it is conceivable that people are quite resilient in response to
such changes; after all, the appropriate response is always nearby and under one’s personal control.

In conclusion, these results corroborate our position that true or optimal self-esteem is not high no matter what happens. They suggest that above all else, self-congruence is important, and this seems to be the key to healthy psychological functioning. Whereas noncontingent self-esteem may be rigid and defensive -- how else can one maintain self-esteem even in the face of rejection, failure, or unethical behavior --, those with high intrinsic contingency presumably are open and non-defensive: They accept that nothing is ever fixed or settled, and that the self is always evolving in its interactions with the world.
References


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esteem: reliability and validity of the Dutch global and domain-specific contingency scales.]

Nederlands Tijdschrift voor de Psychologie [Dutch Journal of Psychology], 60, 1-14.


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Author Note

We appreciate the help of Sanne Nauts, Ad van Knippenberg, and Emily Cross.

Footnotes

1 The only exception is Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper & Bouvrette (2003), but some of their scales did not include “downward” items because these had lower factor loadings on that scale (p. 897). However, if upward and downward contingencies have a different psychological meaning, as we suspect, they may show up as different factors, provided that there is a sufficient number of items for both. Therefore, we used an equal number of upward and downward items in each of our scales and computed their reliabilities separately.

2 Questionnaires (in Dutch) are available from the first author upon request.

3 In addition to the personal well-being scale, the study included other measures of subjective well-being, namely, subjective vitality and satisfaction with life. The results were in the same direction as the results for the personal well-being scale.

4 Note that measures of self-esteem instability are typically based on assessments across a few days or weeks at most (e.g., Kernis & Waschul, 995). The present study allowed us to examine instability across longer time spans and multiple assessments. For the sake of comparability with previous work, we also computed instability across only T1, T2, and T3, which had only one week in between. This does not make any difference for the results, so we decided to use the measure based on all assessments, because it reflects stability across a longer time span.
Controlling for age, income, sex, social desirability, and self-concept clarity, the analyses revealed the same results.

We conducted the same series of analyses using the general contingent self-esteem measure (Paradise & Kernis, 1999) as a basis for creating three groups differing in extrinsic contingency. This yielded similar results: Predominantly intrinsic contingent individuals had significantly higher ratings than those with noncontingent self-esteem on personal well-being and authenticity, but not positive affect and self-compassion.

In our study self-esteem revealed only positive effects: less instability, less hostility, more personal well-being, positive affect and self-compassion. So the idea that high self-esteem can be unhealthy, as discussed in the Introduction, is not confirmed by our data. Possibly, this can be explained by the fact that our measure of self-esteem is closer to the concept of self-acceptance and self-liking, rather than self-competence as in the Rosenberg (1965) scale (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Note that we also examined the possible role of social desirability, which was assessed at T5 (Stöber, 2001), but this variable did not explain the relations we obtained.
Table 1

*Fit of five models in confirmatory factor analysis on the domain-specific contingent self-esteem scale including four domains x upward vs downward contingencies*

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* p < .001
Table 2

Means, standard deviations, alpha’s, and Pearson correlations of global and domain-specific contingencies

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Note. *p < .01 (two-tailed).
Table 3

Pearson correlations between domain-specific contingencies, psychological adaptiveness measures, and self-esteem

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<td>.11&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.04&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.23&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.20&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.22&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.03&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-.24&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>.01&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.12&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.23&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>-.30&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.13&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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Note. *p < .01 (two-tailed). Within each row, correlations with non-common subscripts are significantly different from each other (p < .01, tested after Z-transformation).
Table 4: Psychological adaptiveness and self-esteem as a function of participants’ extrinsic and intrinsic contingency (low, medium, high). Rows representing the comparisons of interest are bold typed: the third and sixth row versus the seventh row (Hypothesis 2a) and versus the first row (Hypothesis 2b).

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>personal well-being</th>
<th>authenticity</th>
<th>self-compassion</th>
<th>positive affect</th>
<th>negative affect</th>
<th>hostility</th>
<th>SE instability</th>
<th>self-esteem</th>
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<td>1.79&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>3.16&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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Note. Within each column, means with non-common subscripts are significantly different from each other (p < .01).