

The Developmental Costs of High Self-Esteem for Antisocial Children

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Two hypotheses—high self-esteem leads children to act on antisocial cognitions (disposition-activating hypothesis) and high self-esteem leads children to rationalize antisocial conduct (disposition-rationalizing hypothesis)—were investigated in two longitudinal studies. In Study 1 ($N = 189$; mean age = 11.1 years), antisocial behavior was aggression; in Study 2 ($N = 407$; mean age = 10.8 years) it was avoidance of the mother. In both studies, there was little evidence for the disposition-activating hypothesis but considerable support for the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis. Over time, aggressive children with high self-esteem increasingly valued the rewards that aggression offers and belittled their victims, and avoidant children with high self-esteem increasingly viewed their mother as harassing and uninvolved. For antisocial children, high self-esteem carries costs.

Introduction

High self-esteem is so widely considered a boon to children's development that it is commonly found among a list of "positive adjustment outcomes" included in developmental investigations. Indeed, high self-esteem does often go with good things, such as school success, athletic competence, physical attractiveness, positive relationships with parents and peers, absence of internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression) and eating disorders, and low participation in risk behavior (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Harter, 1998). For many of these associations, however, self-esteem may be the consequence rather than the determinant (Baumeister, 1998; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Longitudinal studies showing that self-esteem promotes advantageous outcomes over time (or buffers against the ill effects of risk factors) are rare (Baumeister et al., 2003). Nevertheless, a few conclusions about the effects of self-esteem are possible based mainly on the scant longitudinal evidence and laboratory research with adults.

One central theme that emerges is that people with high self-esteem are intolerant of threats to the self, and they vigorously strive to maintain or restore their high sense of self-worth when it is threatened. In one longitudinal investigation, Egan and Perry (1998) found that high self-esteem protected preadolescents from victimization by peers, apparently because high-self-esteem children refused to submit to bullies' coercive overtures. Adults with high self-esteem stick up for themselves too, and in a number of ways, including speaking up and expressing their views, cultivating their most promising traits (as opposed to focusing on remedying their deficiencies), taking credit for successes and denying blame for failures, reacting to setbacks by increasing their expectations for success, and persisting in the face of failure (Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister et al., 2003; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998).

The confident, assertive, ego-serving self-system of high-self-esteem people is often likely to promote adaptive outcomes for these individuals. However, it is now clear that, at least for a subset of people with high self-esteem, such a self-system may also lead to harmful outcomes, especially for the persons' interaction partners but also for the high-self-esteem persons themselves. Several investigators have proposed that it is necessary to distinguish *secure* high

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self-esteem from *insecure* high self-esteem and have stressed that persons with high but insecure self-esteem are at risk for problematic development, especially antisocial conduct (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989). Individuals have been said to have insecure, or fragile, high self-esteem if their high self-appraisals appear to be inauthentic (at variance with other people's evaluations of them; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999; Zakriski & Coie, 1996), narcissistic (reflect feelings of superiority, infallibility, and entitlement; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), coupled with implicit (unconscious) low self-esteem (e.g., as indexed by the Implicit Attitude Test; Greenwald et al., 2002), unstable (showing short-term fluctuations; Kernis, 2003; Kernis et al., 1989), contingent (dependent on specific qualities, such as physical attractiveness or outperforming others; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995), or coupled with the sense that others harbor ill will toward them (Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpaa, & Peets, 2005). Children (Salmivalli et al., 1999, 2005; Waschull & Kernis, 1996) and adults (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis et al., 1989; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) who have high but insecure self-esteem are prone to anger, hostility, and aggression, especially in response to ego threats (e.g., challenges to their adequacy in a domain in which they stake their self-esteem). Presumably, persons with high but insecure self-esteem lash out at people who criticize or disrespect them as a way of avoiding painful downward revisions of their lofty self-concepts (Baumeister, 1998). In contrast, persons with secure high self-esteem tend to be nonviolent and are sometimes exceptionally prosocial (e.g., protect and defend victimized peers; Salmivalli et al., 1999, 2005). Given the heterogeneity of high-self-esteem people with respect to aggressive tendencies, it is perhaps unsurprising that, as a group, high-self-esteem persons are not consistently more or less aggressive than low-self-esteem persons (though when a difference is found, high-self-esteem people usually are less aggressive than low-self-esteem people; e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Sprott & Doob, 2000).

Clearly, then, high self-esteem has a dark side, revealed in the violence of persons whose high self-esteem is insecure. However, there may exist other, previously unrecognized, developmental risks associated with having high self-esteem. The present research explores two such additional possibilities. The first is that high self-esteem causes children to act on social cognitions (e.g., expectations, values, efficacy beliefs) that encourage antisocial conduct. A second possibility is that high self-esteem causes

children to rationalize antisocial conduct, thereby solidifying an antisocial value system. Confirmation of either possibility would require further amendment to a conceptualization of high self-esteem as an unmitigated blessing and suggest certain cautions to investigators planning interventions to boost children's self-esteem. Each of the two possibilities is considered in turn.

Does High Self-Esteem Encourage Children to Act on Antisocial Cognitions?

The first hypothesis of this research is that high self-esteem causes children to translate antisocial thought into antisocial behavior. Antisocial conduct takes different forms, and different social-cognitive factors underlie each form. Aggression—the quintessential antisocial behavior—is spurred by a number of cognitive motivators, including a hostile attributional bias, aggressive goals, the belief that aggression is normative and expected, expectations of reward, expectations of victim suffering, and perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1986; Egan, Monson, & Perry, 1998; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Slaby & Guerra, 1988; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Another type of antisocial conduct is the active avoidance or dismissal of a relationship partner evidenced by persons with an insecure/avoidant attachment. Avoidant attachment has been studied mainly in infants' relationships with their mother (Ainsworth, 1979) but also in adults' conceptions of their relationships with their parents (Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999) and their romantic partners (Feeney, 1999). However, some preadolescents self-report an avoidant attachment to their mother by denying affection toward her, shunning her when upset, avoiding her during exploration and reunion, and refusing to use her as a task-relevant resource (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1996). Such avoidance forecasts aggression toward peers (Hodges, Finnegan, & Perry, 1999). Presumably, the cognitions motivating avoidant attachment are perceptions of the mother as unloving, unavailable if needed, intrusive, disinterested, harsh, or rejecting (Ainsworth, 1979). Indeed, preadolescents who report an avoidant attachment do perceive their mothers in these ways (Kerns, Tomich, Aspelmeier, & Contreras, 2000; Yunger, Corby, & Perry, 2005).

Our prediction is that children with high self-esteem are more likely than low-self-esteem children to act on any antisocial cognitions that they happen to possess. In other words, the cognitions that encourage aggression (e.g., expectation of reward) or avoidant attachment (e.g., perception of the mother as

rejecting) should promote the behavior in question mainly for high-self-esteem children. This *disposition-activating* function of high self-esteem is expected because high-self-esteem persons, compared with low-self-esteem people, place greater confidence and trust in the beliefs that they hold, are actually more accurate in their perceptions of people and situations, possess greater self-concept clarity, are more confident of their strengths, act more assertively on their beliefs and values, select more efficacious strategies for pursuing goals, and are disinclined to give up easily when thwarted (Baumeister, 1998; Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996; Kernis, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002; Sandelands, Brockner, & Glynn, 1988; Swann & Pelham, 2002; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). These qualities should conspire to cause high-self-esteem individuals to act on any antisocial cognitions they harbor.

Does High Self-Esteem Cause Antisocial Children to Justify Their Conduct?

Our second hypothesis, which is not incompatible with the first, is that high self-esteem causes children to rationalize antisocial behavior after performing it. That is, high self-esteem should lead aggressive children to develop cognitions that justify (and sustain) aggression, such as the conviction that aggression is rewarding; it should also lead avoidantly attached children to develop cognitions that justify (and sustain) avoidant behavior, especially perceptions of the mother as harassing and unloving.

This *disposition-rationalizing* hypothesis is based on several considerations. As noted, the memory biases of high-self-esteem individuals lead them to exaggerate and take credit for their successes and to minimize and deny responsibility for their failures (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; John & Robins, 1994). Also, antisocial children with high self-esteem may reason about the self in a way that yields antisocial values: "I am good and I push others around; therefore, pushing others around is good" (see e.g., Rudman, 2004). Finally, high-self-esteem people tend to engage in self-enhancing strategies when threatened. One self-enhancement strategy particularly favored by persons with high self-esteem (especially if their self-esteem is insecure) is derogation of an adversary (Baumeister et al., 2003; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Kernis et al., 1989; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). It is likely that aggressive and avoidant children encounter numerous interpersonal threats (Dodge, 1986; Yunger et al., 2005), and thus, it is reasonable to expect that they might react to their

adversaries (peer victims, mothers) by increasingly derogating them over time.

Our view that high self-esteem worsens the development of children who hold antisocial cognitions (by causing them to carry out their injurious thoughts) or who engage in antisocial conduct (by reinforcing their antisocial worldviews) stands in contrast to a conception of high self-esteem as a panacea-like buffer against all things bad. A critic of our position might argue that children who have achieved high self-esteem should feel the *least* need either to act on their antisocial cognitions or to rationalize their antisocial conduct, because their strong sense of self should provide a sense of security and well-being that obviates the need for hurting others or rationalizing hurtful conduct. However, the considerations we have raised suggest that it is more reasonable to think that high self-esteem, when combined with either antisocial behavior or antisocial cognitions, constitutes risk for, rather than protection against, developmental adversity.

This article reports two longitudinal studies, each of which tests both the disposition-activating and the disposition-rationalizing hypotheses as they pertain to antisocial conduct. The first study, which is a reanalysis of data published by Egan et al. (1998), tests the hypotheses with respect to aggression. The second study presents new data and tests the hypotheses with respect to avoidant attachment to the mother.

Study 1: Aggression

This short-term longitudinal study evaluates two hypotheses. The first is that high self-esteem transforms aggressive cognitions into aggressive action (the disposition-activating hypothesis). That is, Time 1 self-esteem should interact with Time 1 aggressive cognitions to predict change in aggressive behavior over time, with aggressive cognitions forecasting increased aggression mainly for children with high self-esteem. This hypothesis was tested for each of five aggression-encouraging cognitions found in previous work to be associated with aggression: expectation of reward, expectation of victim suffering, value placed on reward, value placed on victim suffering, and self-efficacy for aggression.

The second hypothesis is that high self-esteem encourages aggressive children to rationalize their aggressive conduct—to develop cognitions that justify aggression (the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis). Thus, Time 1 self-esteem should interact with Time 1 aggressive behavior to predict change in aggressive cognitions over time, with aggressive

behavior portending increased aggressive cognitions mainly for children with high self-esteem.

Method

Because details of this study are published (Egan et al., 1998), only highlights of the method are provided. Participants were 189, predominantly White third- through seventh-grade boys ($n = 92$) and girls ($n = 97$). Children were tested in the fall and again in the spring of a school year. They averaged 10 years 10 months of age in the fall. At each testing, children's aggression was assessed with a 3-item peer nomination scale (e.g., "He/She makes fun of people."). A child's score on aggression was determined by calculating the percentage of classmates who checked the child's name on each item and then totaling these percentages across the items; thus, scores could range from 0 to 300 (fall and spring Cronbach α s = .85 and .87). At each testing, children also responded to a 40-item questionnaire assessing five aggression-encouraging cognitions (eight items each): *expectation of reward* (the belief that aggression yields tangible and status rewards), *expectation of victim suffering* (the belief that aggression causes physical or psychological harm and suffering), *value of reward* (the importance placed on tangible and status rewards), *value of victim suffering* (feeling little empathy for one's victims, e.g., not caring whether a victim suffers), and *self-efficacy for aggression* (feeling capable of enacting aggression).

Cronbach α s for these measures, respectively, for the fall (spring) were .63 (.69); .60 (.70); .76 (.83); .85 (.83); and .87 (.90). Sample items from the scales are given in Egan et al. (1998). Scale scores could range from 1 to 4, with 4 indicating greater endorsement of the social cognition. Finally, Harter's (1985) 6-item *global self-worth* scale was administered at each testing, but only Time 1 scores were used (fall Cronbach $\alpha = .73$); scores could range from 1 to 4, with 4 indicating greater self-esteem.

Results

Intercorrelations of measures. Table 1 displays the associations among the measures with child sex and age controlled (because the means of some measures varied with child sex or age). Several features of these correlations are noteworthy. First, aggression and, to a lesser degree, the five aggression-encouraging cognitions were moderately stable over the school year. Second, although there were some significant correlations among the cognitions at each time of testing, the associations were not consistent or strong, suggesting that it is worthwhile to retain the five cognitions as separate variables. Third, surprisingly, self-esteem was positively correlated with expectation of victim suffering at each time of testing.

The disposition-activating hypothesis: does high self-esteem magnify the contribution of cognitions to aggressive behavior? This hypothesis was evaluated in five

Table 1
Correlations Among the Measures of Study 1

Measure	Measure												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Self-esteem (Time 1)	1.00	.12	-.05	.20*	-.10	-.08	.05	.00	.02	.17*	-.10	-.03	-.03
2. Aggression (Time 1)		1.00	.11	.05	.15	.06	.14	.75**	.08	.13	.20**	.12	.11
3. Expectation of reward (Time 1)			1.00	.25**	.46**	.44**	.41**	.13	.42**	.35**	.17*	.16*	.28**
4. Expectation of victim suffering (Time 1)				1.00	.25**	.13	.10	.04	.09	.34**	-.05	.08	.03
5. Value of reward (Time 1)					1.00	.34**	.25**	.18*	.29**	.27**	.37**	.25**	.21**
6. Value of victim suffering (Time 1)						1.00	.44**	.11	.17*	.08	.10	.49**	.31**
7. Self-efficacy for aggression (Time 1)							1.00	.14	.38**	.10	.20*	.34**	.60**
8. Aggression (Time 2)								1.00	.09	.02	.15*	.10	.18*
9. Expectation of reward (Time 2)									1.00	.23**	.28**	.28**	.47**
10. Expectation of victim suffering (Time 2)										1.00	.04	.07	-.02
11. Value of reward (Time 2)											1.00	.18*	.22**
12. Value of victim suffering (Time 2)												1.00	.53**
13. Self-efficacy for aggression (Time 2)													1.00

Note. Table entries are for the entire sample of Study 1 ($N = 189$) and are partial correlations controlling for age and sex.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

hierarchical regression analyses, one for each aggressive cognition. The dependent variable was always Time 2 aggression. In each analysis, child sex, child age, and Time 1 aggression were entered on the first step. On the second step, Time 1 self-esteem and a Time 1 cognition measure (e.g., expectation of reward) were entered. On the third step, the focal interaction of self-esteem and cognition was tested. Supplementary analyses were also conducted to see whether child age or sex might moderate a focal two-way interaction, that is, to see whether a three-way interaction of Age \times Self-Esteem \times Cognition or of Sex \times Self-Esteem \times Cognition was significant (with all relevant main effects and two-way interactions in the model).

In no analysis was the focal two-way interaction significant. Furthermore, in no supplementary analysis was the three-way interaction significant. Thus, Study 1 failed to yield any support for the disposition-activating hypothesis.

The disposition-rationalizing hypothesis: does high self-esteem magnify the contribution of aggressive behavior to aggressive cognition? This hypothesis was evaluated in five regression analyses, with the Time 2 level of each cognition measure taking a turn as the dependent variable. In each analysis, child sex, child age, and the Time 1 cognition variable were entered on the first step; Time 1 self-esteem and Time 1 aggression were entered on the second step; and the focal interaction of self-esteem and aggression was tested on the third step. Supplementary analyses tested whether child sex or age moderated any focal two-way interaction. In four analyses, the focal two-way interaction was significant, or nearly so, and in no supplementary analysis was the three-way interaction significant (i.e., no significant two-way interaction was moderated by age or sex). The interaction was evident for expectation of reward ($F = 8.45$, $p < .004$), value of reward ($F = 5.69$, $p < .02$), value of victim suffering ($F = 3.51$, $p < .07$), and self-efficacy for aggression ($F = 4.37$, $p < .04$).

In each case, the interaction conformed to the predicted pattern: high self-esteem exacerbated the contribution of aggression to the aggressive cognition. The nature of each significant interaction was examined using the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991), which estimates the relation of a predictor (e.g., Time 1 aggression) to a criterion (e.g., a Time 2 cognition) at each of the three levels (-1 , 0 , and $+1$ SD) of a moderator (e.g., Time 1 self-esteem); relations are estimated in the form of unstandardized beta coefficients. Table 2 displays the results of these follow-up analyses. Notice that the impact of Time 1 aggression on each cognition outcome becomes increasingly positive as children's self-esteem moves from low to medium to high. These results are consistent with the idea that high-self-esteem children rationalize their antisocial conduct.

Although the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis specifies that self-esteem moderates the impact of aggression on cognition, and therefore it is appropriate to evaluate the hypothesis by treating self-esteem as the moderator in the follow-up results reported in Table 2, it is also possible to unpack the significant interactions by examining the impact of Time 1 self-esteem on Time 2 cognition at different levels of Time 1 aggression (i.e., by treating Time 1 aggression as the moderator). Results of such analyses are given in Table 3. Noteworthy is that the beta coefficients in the first column are uniformly negative, with two reaching significance. These data suggest that for children who are nonaggressive, high self-esteem is not problematic but in fact inhibits the development of aggression-encouraging cognitions.

Discussion

Results support the view that aggressive children who have high self-esteem react to their aggressive conduct with a variety of self-enhancing and aggression-justifying strategies, including viewing

Table 2
Relation of Time 1 Aggression to Time 2 Cognition as a Function of Time 1 Self-Esteem (Study 1)

Time 2 cognition	Time 1 self-esteem		
	Low (-1 SD)	Medium (0 SD)	High ($+1$ SD)
Expectation of reward	-.20 [†]	-.01	.19*
Value of reward	-.02	.15*	.33***
Value of victim suffering	-.04	.08	.20*
Self-efficacy for aggression	-.10	.02	.15 [†]

Note. Table entries are unstandardized beta coefficients from the Aiken & West (1991) procedure. Within each row, there is significant variability among the betas.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Relation of Time 1 Self-Esteem to Time 2 Cognition as a Function of Time 1 Aggression (Study 1)

Time 2 cognition	Time 1 aggression		
	Low (−1 SD)	Medium (0 SD)	High (+1 SD)
Expectation of reward	−.14	.06	.25*
Value of reward	−.22*	−.05	.13
Value of victim suffering	−.11	.01	.14
Self-efficacy for aggression	−.12*	−.03	.06

Note. Table entries are unstandardized beta coefficients from the Aiken & West (1991) procedure. Within each row, there is significant variability among the betas.

* $p < .05$.

the self as more powerful and successful, viewing the rewards of aggression as more desirable, and viewing the inflicting of harm and suffering on one's victims as less objectionable. Low-self-esteem children are not inclined to react to their aggressive actions in these self-serving, aggression-encouraging ways.

Although results are consistent with a disposition-rationalizing mechanism, other factors may have contributed. Aggressive children who have high self-esteem may enact their aggression more confidently or with greater success than aggressive children with less self-esteem (see Perry, Perry, & Kennedy, 1992, for a discussion of effectual vs. ineffectual aggressors), and these qualities may have mediated the effects. Also, it is likely that the high self-esteem of aggressive children is insecure (e.g., unstable, inauthentic), and the insecurity of the high self-esteem may account for the results. Direct assessments of the qualities of children's aggression (e.g., efficacy) and of the security of their self-esteem would be desirable in future research.

Regardless of the mechanism(s), it is clear that high-self-esteem aggressors are inclined to increase their aggression-encouraging beliefs over time. This is likely to sustain their antisocial behavior bringing grief not only to their victims but also, ultimately, to themselves (e.g., via peer rejection and academic difficulties; Coie & Dodge, 1998).

No evidence was found for the disposition-activating hypothesis that high self-esteem encourages children to act on their aggressive cognitions. Several factors may have contributed to the failure to confirm this hypothesis. First, children with high self-esteem who harbor aggressive cognitions may retaliate immediately to ego threats but may not increase in trait level of aggression over a school year; future research might include assessment of aggression as an immediate response to provocation. Second, high self-esteem may cause children to act on aggressive cognitions only when their self-esteem is insecure.

Third, perhaps the cognitive dimensions under study were not ones that are the most relevant to an aggression-activating mechanism. Perhaps high self-esteem is more likely to transform hostile attributional bias or aggressive goals, neither of which was investigated here, into aggressive action. Finally, the relatively high overtime stability of the aggression measure may have made it difficult to identify predictors of change.

Study 2: Avoidant Attachment

This 1-year longitudinal study also evaluated the disposition-activating and disposition-rationalizing hypotheses but with avoidant behavior toward the mother serving as the antisocial behavior. Here, the disposition-activating hypothesis is that high self-esteem causes children to act on cognitions that encourage avoidance of the mother. Presumably, avoidant children experience the mother as aversive and are trying to exit the relationship. Thus, we examined whether high self-esteem spurs avoidant behavior in reaction to five qualities of perceived mothering—harassment, unreliable support, low monitoring, low affectionate contact, and intrusive overprotectiveness. The first four of these perceived maternal qualities have been shown to be associated (concurrently) with preadolescents' avoidant stance toward the mother (Yunger et al., 2005).

The disposition-rationalizing hypothesis is that high self-esteem leads avoidant children to justify their avoidance of their mother by strengthening their perceptions of her as an inept, hostile, uncaring, blameworthy parent who deserves the avoidant treatment she is receiving. Adults with avoidant romantic attachments, compared with those with more secure relationships, tend to self-enhance by psychologically distancing themselves from their partners—by seeing them as bad and as different

from themselves and by projecting unwanted traits onto them (Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005; Mikulincer & Horesh, 1999; Mikulincer, Dolev, & Shaver, 2004). Such strategies presumably allow avoidant persons to cast themselves in a favorable and superior light relative to their partner, thereby protecting their self-esteem. We are suggesting that high self-esteem intensifies these efforts of avoidant persons to keep their lofty sense of self afloat.

Method

Participants. Participants were 407 children (213 girls, 194 boys) who were in the fourth grade at initial testing (mean age = 11 years 1 month). Children attended five relatively small elementary schools serving middle- and lower middle-class neighborhoods in southeast Florida. Participating children represented 67% of all fourth graders at the schools. The sample included 113 Black children, 83 Hispanic children, and 211 White children. The sample comprised two cohorts, with Cohort 1 ($n = 156$) tested in the winters of 2001 and 2002 and Cohort 2 ($n = 251$) tested in the winters of 2002 and 2003.

Procedure. When in the fourth grade (Time 1) and again in the fifth grade (Time 2), children responded to self-report scales assessing self-esteem, avoidant attachment, and perceptions of the mother. Additional measures not relevant to the present report were also collected. Children were individually tested in a quiet room at their school by one of several female graduate assistants who read the items to the child.

Measures. *Self-esteem* was assessed as in Study 1; the Time 1 Cronbach α was .72. *Avoidant attachment* was assessed with a 10-item scale adapted by Younger et al. (2005) from Finnegan et al.'s (1996) original scale. The format of the items was that developed by Harter (1982) to minimize the influence of social desirability response bias. Each item described two kinds of children—those engaging in avoidant behavior and those engaging in a nonavoidant way. Children first decided which kind of children they resembled more and then indicated whether this choice was “sort of true” or “very true” for them. The avoidant behaviors captured by these items were described earlier. Scores could range from 1 to 4. Time 1 and Time 2 Cronbach α s were .84 and .85.

Five dimensions of perceived maternal behavior were assessed in a separate questionnaire. The first dimension was the mother's provision of *reliable support* (eight items). This was assessed using a shortened form of the Kerns's Security Scale (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996), which captures the degree to which the caregiver is perceived as loving, accessible,

and sensitive when needed for help or communication. The second dimension was perceived maternal *overprotectiveness* (12 items) or children's perception that the mother discourages exploration and other exciting activities (e.g., from fear that the child will get sick or injured). The third dimension (eight items) was perceived *harassment* or children's perception of angry, rejecting, and humiliating behavior by the mother. The fourth dimension (six items) was perceived *affectionate contact* (e.g., the mother is viewed as participating with the child in joint recreational activities). The fifth dimension (six items) was perceived maternal *monitoring* (i.e., the child reports the mother as knowing the child's whereabouts, activities, and companions). These last five scales were drawn from Finnegan et al. (1996) and Younger et al. (2005). Cronbach α s for the foregoing measures, respectively, for Time 1 (Time 2) were .72 (.77); .73 (.78); .77 (.76); .76 (.80); and .67 (.68).

Results

Intercorrelations of measures. Table 4 displays the associations among the measures with child sex, cohort, and ethnicity/race controlled (because the means of some measures differed with these variables). Avoidant attachment and the perceived parenting variables showed moderate (and similar) degrees of stability over the 1-year period. Correlations among the perceived parenting measures were generally modest to moderate. Self-esteem was associated with other variables in ways that might be expected based on previous studies.

The disposition-activating hypothesis: does high self-esteem energize avoidance by children who perceive their mother negatively? This hypothesis was evaluated in five regression analyses, one for each perceived maternal variable. The dependent variable was always Time 2 avoidance. In each analysis, child sex, cohort, ethnicity/race, and Time 1 avoidance were entered on the first step. On the second step, Time 1 self-esteem and a Time 1 perceived parenting measure (e.g., harassment) were entered. On the third step, the focal interaction of self-esteem and the perceived parenting measure was tested. Supplementary analyses were run to see whether child sex or cohort moderated any focal two-way interaction.

There was limited support for the hypothesis that self-esteem motivates avoidance by children who view their mother negatively. In one of the supplementary analyses, the three-way interaction of Self-Esteem \times Perceived Maternal Monitoring \times Sex was significant, $F = 8.04$, $p < .005$. When a separate regression analysis was run for each sex, only for girls

Table 4
Correlations Among the Measures of Study 2

Measure	Measure												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Self-esteem (Time 1)	1.00	-.26**	.32**	-.14**	-.25**	.33**	.34**	-.09	.23**	-.08	-.18**	.21**	.23**
2. Avoidance (Time 1)		1.00	-.49**	-.14**	.32**	-.50**	-.38**	.45**	-.31**	.02	.26**	-.38**	-.35**
3. Reliable support (Time 1)			1.00	-.07	-.51**	.62**	.39**	-.26**	.41**	-.12*	-.31**	.38**	.31**
4. Overprotectiveness (Time 1)				1.00	.22**	-.18**	-.11*	-.06	.04	.46**	.06	.03	-.04
5. Harassment (Time 1)					1.00	-.54**	-.36**	.19**	-.31**	.28**	.41**	-.33**	-.24**
6. Affectionate contact (Time 1)						1.00	.35**	-.29**	.38**	-.19**	-.33**	.43**	.30**
7. Monitoring (Time 1)							1.00	-.24**	.30**	-.06	-.24**	.29**	.51**
8. Avoidance (Time 2)								1.00	-.57**	-.01	.51**	-.65**	-.52**
9. Reliable support (Time 2)									1.00	-.15**	-.58**	.65**	.50**
10. Overprotectiveness (Time 2)										1.00	.29**	-.16**	-.08
11. Harassment (Time 2)											1.00	-.55**	-.47**
12. Affectionate contact (Time 2)												1.00	.47**
13. Monitoring (Time 2)													1.00

Note. Table entries are for the entire sample of Study 2 ($N = 407$) and are partial correlations controlling for sex, cohort, and ethnicity/race. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

was the focal two-way interaction (Self-Esteem \times Monitoring) significant, $F = 10.68$, $p < .001$. Follow-up tests showed the predicted pattern: perceived maternal monitoring increasingly inhibited avoidance as the level of girls' self-esteem moved from low (-1 SD) to medium (0 SD) to high ($+1$ SD), respective β s = .07, *ns*; $-.10$, *ns*; and $-.27$, $p < .002$. Thus, girls (but not boys) with high self-esteem who view their mother as unaware of their whereabouts, activities, and companions reported greater avoidance of their mother over time. However, high self-esteem did not transform other negative perceptions of the mother into avoidant behavior toward her.

The disposition-rationalizing hypothesis: does high self-esteem lead avoidant children to view their mother negatively? This hypothesis was examined in five regression analyses, with the Time 2 level of each perceived parenting variable taking a turn as the dependent variable. In each analysis, child sex, cohort, ethnicity/race, and the Time 1 perceived parenting variable were entered on the first step; Time 1 self-esteem and Time 1 avoidance were entered on the second step; and the focal interaction of self-esteem and avoidance was tested on the third step. Supplementary analyses examined whether child sex or cohort moderated any focal two-way interaction. The focal two-way interaction (of self-esteem and avoidance) predicted change in perceived harassment ($F = 6.98$, $p < .009$) and perceived monitoring ($F = 10.25$, $p < .001$). Also, the supplementary three-way interaction of self-esteem, avoidance, and child sex was significant ($F = 5.30$, $p < .03$), and when the

focal two-way interaction was examined separately for each sex, it was significant for girls ($F = 7.97$, $p < .005$) though not for boys.

Each significant two-way interaction conformed to the predicted pattern: high self-esteem magnified the contribution of avoidant attachment to a negative view of the mother. Table 5 displays the results of the follow-up tests. These results are consistent with the notion that high self-esteem children rationalize their antisocial conduct via a self-enhancing strategy that disparages their adversary—in this case, their mother.

Table 6 tells the results of interaction follow-up analyses in which avoidance is treated as the moderator of the impact of self-esteem on perceptions of the mother. From the entries in the first column, it can be discerned that high self-esteem is not problematic for children who do not avoid their mothers; in fact, for children low in mother avoidance, higher self-esteem appears to promote positive perceptions of the mother.

Discussion

As in Study 1, there was support for the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis: for children with high self-esteem, an avoidant stance toward the mother forecast an increasingly negative view of the mother over time. For low-self-esteem children, avoidant tendencies did not foretell disparagement of the mother. It is likely that avoidant children are locked in a power struggle with their mother. Those who

Table 5
Relation of Time 1 Avoidance to Time 2 Perception of Mother as a Function of Time 1 Self-Esteem (Study 2)

Time 2 perception of mother	Time 1 self-esteem		
	Low (−1 SD)	Medium (0 SD)	High (+1 SD)
Harassment	.04	.15**	.26***
Monitoring	−.10 [†]	−.22**	−.34***
Reliable support (girls only)	.01	−.16*	−.34**

Note. Table entries are unstandardized beta coefficients from the Aiken & West (1991) procedure. Within each row, there is significant variability among the betas.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

have high self-esteem may devalue their mother because this strategy discredits her, making her less threatening, and, by contrast, making themselves feel morally superior and blameless.

Although results fit a disposition-justifying hypothesis, other processes may have contributed. High self-esteem may cause avoidant children to behave in ways that elicit real, not imaginary, increased negative treatment by the mother, and the fact that avoidant children with high self-esteem view their mother as monitoring them less and less over time may reflect more successful avoidance of their mother by these children. High self-esteem may also cause avoidant children to perceive and remember maternal behaviors that are consistent with their sense that their mother may not love them or is poised to fight them. It is also possible that avoidant children with high self-esteem are becoming more accurate over time in their perception of a mother who has been rejecting or disengaged all along.

Many of the processes that we have speculated to characterize avoidant children have been identified previously as qualities of avoidant individuals. The contribution of the present findings is to highlight the novel (and somewhat counterintuitive) possibility that high self-esteem magnifies, rather than minimizes, the relationship-undermining effects of an avoidant attachment.

The aftermath of an avoidant attachment in pre-adolescence warrants further investigation, especially as affected by self-esteem levels. Given the escalation of negative attributions to the mother by high-self-esteem avoidant children, these children may be the quickest to trade the mother–child relationship for relationships with peers, perhaps deviant peers such as other avoidant and antisocial children like themselves (see Hodges et al., 1999, for evidence of homophilic attractions among avoidant children). Low-self-esteem avoidant children may be less likely to make a premature exit from the mother–child relationship, but they may be at greater risk for depression. However, because low-self-esteem avoidant children are less likely than their high-self-esteem counterparts to get caught up in a vicious cycle of mutually exacerbating avoidance and negative perception of the mother, they may actually be the more likely eventually to abandon their avoidant relationship stance.

Although high self-esteem may lead avoidant persons who want out of a relationship to make negative attributions about a partner, high self-esteem may lead persons who are satisfied with a relationship to be especially forgiving of irksome behavior by their partner (e.g., Murray et al., 2002). Consistent with this, in the present study, children who had high self-esteem but were not avoidant (i.e., who enjoyed their mother

Table 6
Relation of Time 1 Self-Esteem to Time 2 Perception of Mother as a Function of Time 1 Avoidance (Study 2)

Time 2 perception of mother	Time 1 avoidance		
	Low (−1 SD)	Medium (0 SD)	High (+1 SD)
Harassment	−.18**	−.07	.05
Monitoring	.17**	.05	−.07
Reliable support (girls only)	.19*	.02	−.16

Note. Table entries are unstandardized beta coefficients from the Aiken & West (1991) procedure. Within each row, there is significant variability among the betas.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

and used her as a secure base) developed the most favorable perceptions of her. Self-esteem may interact with relationship goals and partner perceptions to affect relationship functioning and satisfaction in similar ways across the age span. We hypothesize that if adults who were once enamored with a relationship partner but decide they want to end the relationship (i.e., shift toward an avoidant stance), high self-esteem will make the exit easier for them; low-self-esteem people may be more likely to remain longer in an unsatisfying relationship.

There was slim support for the disposition-activating hypothesis that self-esteem would lead children to avoid a mother whom they perceive negatively. However, high-self-esteem girls were more likely than girls with low self-esteem to dismiss a mother perceived as low in monitoring. In this study, maternal monitoring was assessed as the mother's knowledge of the child's conduct rather than as the mother's active attempts to control the child, and children who perceived their mother as low in monitoring may simply not have been spontaneously informing her of their activities, friends, and whereabouts (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Thus, girls with high self-esteem who are disinclined to communicate with their mothers may be the most likely to develop avoidant tendencies, at least during preadolescence.

Traditional attachment theory holds that avoidant attachment derives from perceptions of parents as unavailable or rejecting (Ainsworth, 1979). This may be true in infancy, but our data suggest that by preadolescence, the causal arrow between avoidant attachment and negative perceptions of parents may run primarily in the opposite direction: avoidant attachment at Time 1 predicted deterioration in the quality of perceived parenting, but perceived parenting failed to forecast avoidant attachment (either as a main effect or in interaction with self-esteem, with the exception noted in the previous paragraph). Evidence for the primacy of self-views (i.e., self-views preceding beliefs about how others feel about the self) has also been found for adolescents and adults (Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995). By preadolescence, avoidant children may be rejecting their parents rather than reacting to their parents' rejection. Moreover, by strengthening their negative views of their parents, they may no longer allow themselves to feel loved. Ironically, this may be truer for high-self-esteem children than for low-self-esteem children.

Because in this study all the variables were self-reported, one might wonder whether shared method variance (e.g., response bias, mood) accounted for the

findings. Several considerations suggest that this is unlikely. If shared method variance were responsible for associations among these variables, the disposition-activating hypothesis should have been confirmed as often as the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis; this was not the case. Moreover, the fact that the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis clearly received stronger support not only in this study but also in Study 1 (where the measures were not all self-reported) suggests that something more than shared method variance underlies the pattern. Also, the longitudinal design and regression analyses significantly reduced the threat of shared method variance. In these analyses, the Time 1 level of the outcome variable, which is self-reported, was controlled on the first step, and therefore self-report biases are effectively controlled (for elaboration of this point, see Harold & Conger, 1997; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992).

General Discussion

Although high self-esteem surely makes people feel good and may often carry developmental benefits (e.g., confident pursuit of goals), it also appears sometimes to carry developmental costs. Previous work had shown that people with high but insecure self-esteem are prone to anger and aggression. The present research explored two additional possible dark sides of high self-esteem—that high self-esteem encourages children who harbor antisocial thoughts to act on those thoughts (the disposition-activating hypothesis) and that it encourages children who behave in antisocial ways to rationalize their conduct, as by derogating their adversaries (the disposition-rationalizing hypothesis). Support was found for the latter, but not the former, hypothesis. For children with high self-esteem, aggressive or avoidant tendencies led to the adoption of cognitions that could justify prior (and, very likely, future) antisocial conduct. Over time, aggressive children with high self-esteem increasingly valued the rewards that aggression offers and devalued their victims, and avoidantly attached children with high self-esteem increasingly viewed their mother as harassing and uninvolved.

These results may be explained in a number of ways, but one interpretation is that high self-esteem leads children with antisocial proclivities to twist their perceptions of their own and their adversaries' behavior in self-serving, ego-protective ways. By belittling and blaming others, for example, they can feel better about themselves and can continue their

antisocial ways undeterred by anticipated negative self-sanctions.

Additional research is needed, however, to determine the validity of various possible mechanisms underlying the effects we observed. For example, high self-esteem may cause aggressive and avoidant children simply to enact more forcefully or effectively their antisocial behavior, causing reactions from the environment (e.g., reward for aggression, withdrawal by mother) that the children notice and remember. Regardless of the precise mechanisms involved, however, the fact remains that high-self-esteem children appear to be at greater risk than low-self-esteem children for consolidating a set of cognitions that are likely to perpetuate their antisocial conduct and, in the case of avoidant children, to perpetuate their basic sense of being unloved.

High self-esteem may be a catalyst for rationalizing antisocial conduct, but for children who are low in antisocial tendencies, high self-esteem may well be beneficial rather than problematic. In both studies, there was evidence that for children low in antisocial tendencies, high self-esteem led to less rather than more antisocial cognition. Some children who are low in antisocial proclivities are likely to be prosocial; for these children, high self-esteem may promote the adoption of prosocial cognitions (e.g., self-efficacy for prosocial conduct, placing value on alleviating others' suffering) that compete with antisocial cognitions. It would be worthwhile to conduct research in which prosocial and other socially valued behaviors and cognitions (e.g., academic achievement) are studied in lieu of, or addition to, the antisocial ones investigated here. It may be that the effect of high self-esteem is not limited to that of rationalizing antisocial conduct but rather is that of fostering cognitions to support *whatever* stable and salient behavioral dispositions the individual possesses.

In contrast to persons with high self-esteem, low-self-esteem people may be disinclined to adopt cognitions that support their dispositions, whatever these may be, because they lack confidence in the validity of their motivation, in the effectiveness of their actions, and in other dimensions of their conduct that might underpin adoption of cognitions that would justify and sustain their behavior. This analysis implies both an upside and a downside to low self-esteem. The upside is that low-self-esteem people should resist internalizing antisocial cognitions when they behave in antisocial ways; the downside is that they should also resist generating cognitions that support socially desirable and competent behaviors when they behave in these ways.

In the present studies, some interpretive ambiguity stems from the use of a single continuous dimension to assess the antisocial trait in each study. As noted, it is likely that children with low scores on either aggression or avoidance are not only low in the antisocial trait but also higher on certain other, unmeasured dispositions (e.g., prosocial tendencies). High self-esteem may not only promote antisocial cognitions among highly antisocial persons but also promote competing prosocial cognitions among less antisocial persons. It is difficult to disentangle the relative contributions of these processes in the present research. It seems likely, however, that both processes contributed to the pattern of results. This is another reason for including additional personality dimensions in future studies. It might also be worthwhile to conduct experimental work in which the cognitions of high- and low-self-esteem persons are compared after they have been induced (under varying motivational sets) to engage in particular behaviors (e.g., avoidance, prosocial, or neither).

That we found more disposition-rationalizing than disposition-activating effects of high self-esteem is consistent with Baumeister's (1998) suggestion that high self-esteem has less effect on behavior than on affective self-protection. However, we are not ready to abandon the disposition-activating hypothesis. Perhaps if high self-esteem is insecure, or if aggression is assessed immediately in response to threatening cues, more evidence that high self-esteem activates antisocial cognitions would be found. Also, high self-esteem may lead people to act on social cognitions that encourage thoughtful, considerate, prosocial conduct, such as rescuing or protecting victimized peers (Salmivalli et al., 1999, 2005). In other words, a disposition-activating function for high self-esteem may exist for traits other than the antisocial ones we studied.

Our findings suggest a caution to investigators who wish to develop or implement intervention programs to boost children's self-esteem. If a child is antisocially inclined, then enhancing the child's self-esteem may lead the child to generate antisocial cognitions that justify sustained, or even increased, antisocial behavior. As just noted, the developmental benefits or costs of high self-esteem may depend on the behavioral disposition with which it is paired. However, when paired with antisocial conduct, high self-esteem would seem to spell trouble.

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