Not All Organization-Based Self-Esteem is Created Equal: Sources and Consequences of OBSE Fragility

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Existing theory on organization-based self-esteem assumes that high levels of OBSE motivate employees to exhibit outcomes consistent with their OBSE level. That is, high OBSE employees are expected to think and act in a way reflecting a secure sense of high self-worth, consistently exhibiting positive attitudes and behavior across contexts. In contrast, we argue that employees' OBSE can be more or less fragile, and that higher levels of fragile OBSE will motivate employees to react defensively to circumstances threatening self-worth. Our multidimensional view is unique and important because it offers a possible explanation for inconsistent employee behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Since its introduction and definition by Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham (1989) as an individual's feelings of self-worth associated with organizational membership, organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) has been studied as an antecedent, a mediator, a moderator, and a consequence shaped by work and organizational experiences. (See Pierce & Gardner [2004] for a complete review.) Although past work is insightful, it is important and interesting to note that much OBSE research is based on the a priori assumption that employees are motivated to think and act in a manner *consistent* with their OBSE level. Yet, research on global self-esteem has revealed that high levels of self-esteem sometimes do not result in theorized outcomes (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Kruegar, & Vohs, 2003). In fact, some researchers have noted the counterintuitive finding that high levels of self-esteem can be associated with such unpleasant outcomes as aggression (Baumeister, Boden, & Smart, 1996) and cheating behavior (Lobel & Levanon, 1988). Thus, it appears that current OBSE researchers are faced with a bit of a conundrum: past empirical OBSE work supports the validity of the concept, yet there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the assumed consistency motive might be overly simplistic. This puzzle has not gone entirely unnoticed in published theoretical reviews. For example, Pierce and Gardner (2004) briefly acknowledged that past OBSE studies do not adequately consider employees' motives and that some individuals do not always think and behave in a way that is consistent with their level of self-esteem.

Toward this end, we review the theoretical history and basic definitions of the OBSE concept, and we point out that this theory assumes that individuals are motivated to think and act in a way that is consistent with their level of OBSE (Pierce et al., 1989; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Next, we provide an argument that the consistency assumption is sometimes unrealistic. Based on work by Kernis and his colleagues (e.g., Kernis, 2003; Kernis, Lakey, & Heppner, 2008), we introduce the term "fragile" OBSE to account for the fact that OBSE can be state-like in nature (even among employees with long organizational tenure) and easily influenced by context. We propose that OBSE fragility derives from three sources: the degree to which employees' OBSE is dispositionally (un)stable (Kernis, 2005; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989), the degree of (in)congruence between explicit and implicit aspects of employees' OBSE (Franham, Greenwald, & Banaji, 1999), and the degree to which employees' OBSE is contingent upon meeting a personal standard of performance (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Rather than assuming that individuals are motivated to think and behave in a way that is consistent with their OBSE, we assume that the motives associated with OBSE can vary. We acknowledge that stable and secure OBSE likely causes employees to think and act in a manner consistent with their sense of self-worth; however, we also argue that OBSE will provide employees with the motivation to defend their sense of self-worth to the extent that their OBSE is fragile. We depict these relationships in a model (see Figure 1), and develop propositions to describe them throughout the text. Taken as a whole, viewing OBSE as potentially fragile offers more nuanced predictions and explanations of potentially ambivalent and inconsistent employee behavior. Such a view may allow researchers to shift their focus from studying stable OBSE levels towards studying how an employee's self-concept fluctuates over time and interacts with the organizational context.
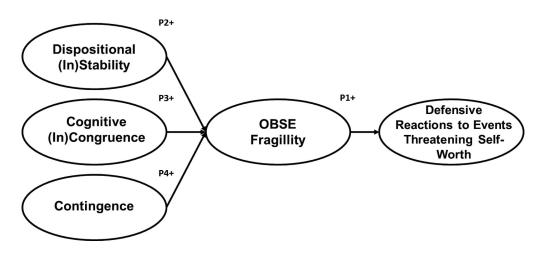
FIGURE 1
SOURCES AND OUTCOMES OF OBSE FRAGILITY

OBSE THEORY AND THE CONSISTENCY MOTIVE

Self-esteem has been explored by organizational researchers since the 1960s, when Korman (1966), conceptualized self-esteem as the overall "…extent to which one sees the self as a competent, need-satisfying individual…" (Korman, 1976, p. 51). This conceptualization described self-esteem, in a global fashion, as the stable end result of success or failure. However, in 1989, Pierce et al. noted that individuals do not experience self-esteem in a strictly global sense. Rather, self-esteem is a hierarchical phenomenon comprised of aspects that are global (general feelings of self-worth), specific (self-worth in reference to a mid-level context or role such as work), and task-specific (self-worth in reference to a micro-level task contained within a context or role). Further, Pierce et al. observed that behavioral variables are most predictive when they are framed within context (Epstein, 1979), and reasoned that a

lack of context specificity was a primary cause of the lack of findings in early organization-related self-esteem research. Thus, these authors concluded that it was appropriate to use organization-specific self-esteem measures when studying organization-related outcomes, and they introduced the concept of OBSE to address this need. According to Pierce and his colleagues, OBSE is an attitude that reflects "…the self-perceived value that individuals have of themselves as organization members" wherein employees with high OBSE "…should perceive themselves as important, meaningful, effectual, and worthwhile within their employing organization" (1989, p. 625).

Current OBSE theory is driven by an assumption that was borrowed directly from early global self-esteem research (e.g., Korman, 1971, 1976): A need for cognitive consistency motivates employees to think and act in a manner that is congruent with their level of OBSE (Pierce et al., 1989). This assumption leads to the prediction that employees with high levels of OBSE will consistently exhibit positive attitudes and behavior across contexts (Pierce et al., 1989; Pierce & Gardner, 2004), thereby emphasizing the importance of OBSE levels. For example, empirical researchers have predicted that high levels of OBSE result in higher degrees of citizenship behaviors (e.g., Tang & Ibrahim, 1998), job satisfaction (e.g., Carson, Carson, Lanford, & Roe, 1997), commitment (e.g., Gardner & Pierce, 1998), and motivation (e.g., Pierce et al., 1989). Yet, recent counterintuitive findings have complicated a straightforward interpretation of past findings.

OBSE FRAGILITY AND THE PROTECTION MOTIVE

Drawing on findings that high levels of self-esteem do not always result in positive outcomes (e.g. Baumeister et al. 2003) and that high levels of self-esteem can be associated with reactive and dysfunctional outcomes usually associated with low self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1996; Lobel & Levanon, 1988), some researchers have recently concluded that individuals' self-esteem can be either more "secure" or more "fragile" in nature (Kernis, 2003; Kernis et al., 2008). Self-esteem that is highly secure represents the traditional conceptualization of self-esteem as a trait-like construct that is resistant to context effects and results in positive attitudes and behaviors (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003; Kernis et al., 2008). In strong contrast, self-esteem that is highly fragile represents feelings of self-worth that are more state-like, influenced by context, and cause individuals to react defensively to any circumstance threatening their sense of worth (Jordan et al., 2003; Kernis et al., 2008).

Defensive reactions to self-esteem threats come in a variety of forms. These may be immediate emotion-laden responses such as self-consciousness (Oosterwegel, Field, Hart, & Anderson, 2001), anger (Waschull & Kernis, 1996), and self-doubt (Lupien, Seery, & Almonte, 2012). Or, defensive reactions may be behaviors intended to protect one's self-worth, such as avoidance of social situations so as to insulate oneself from awkward comparisons (Oosterwegel et al., 2001) and reduced curiosity along with preference for challenge so as to pre-empt a potentially poor performance (Waschull & Kernis, 1996). Or, defensive reactions may be behaviors intended to boost one's self-worth such as rationalization of poor performance (Jordan et al., 2003), a preference for in-groups (Jordan et al., 2003), or downplaying the importance of a threat (Borton, Crimmins, Ashby, & Ruddiman, 2012).

Given the growing body of evidence demonstrating that individuals' global self-esteem can be more or less fragile, we believe it is prudent to consider that organizational members' OBSE will also vary in this way. Further, we propose that organizational members will tend to exhibit defensive reactions to the extent that their OBSE is fragile because many aspects of the organizational context potentially threaten members' sense of self-worth. For example, there is evidence that performance feedback can threaten employees' self-esteem (e.g., Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and that employees respond negatively to this kind of feedback with anger and discouragement (e.g., Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). Also, organizational members are often faced with social comparisons that threaten their sense of worth by drawing attention to more capable and better compensated individuals (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007). These threatening comparisons have been linked to negative outcomes such as jealousy and loss of self-esteem (Vecchio, 2000). In addition, employees' sense of self-worth may be threatened by judgmental

and critical individuals, thereby resulting in variety of antisocial behaviors and attitudes (Aquino & Douglas, 2003).

> *Proposition 1: To the extent that it is fragile, high levels of OBSE will cause individuals to react defensively to events threatening self-worth.*

SOURCES OF OBSE FRAGILITY

Given that OBSE can lead to defensive reactions to the extent that it is fragile, we describe three sources of fragility that explain how and why OBSE outcomes are likely to vary as a result. Sources of fragility include: the degree to which employees' OBSE is dispositionally (un)stable (Kernis, 2003, Kernis et al., 2008; Kernis et al., 1989), the degree of (in)congruence between explicit and implicit aspects of employees' OBSE (Franham et al., 1999; Kernis 2003; Kernis et al., 2008), and the degree to which employees' OBSE is contingent upon meeting a personal standard of performance (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Kernis 2003; Kernis et al., 2008).

Disposition for (In)stability

Drawing heavily from Korman's (1966; 1976) description of global self-esteem, Pierce et al.'s (1989) proposed that OBSE is an attitude that develops over time into a stable characteristic, and subsequent researchers have operated from this stability premise. In a recent literature review, Pierce and Gardner (2004, p. 593), drawing on Campbell (1990), state: "Early in one's tenure with an organization, OBSE is an outer level conceptualization of the self – state-like, reflecting unstable feelings of self-regard. With increasing tenure, self-esteem evolves from a primarily outer level to a less changeable inner level self-concept. Thus, for most job experienced employees, OBSE is highly stable." Despite this focus on trait-like stability, there are compelling reasons to believe that individuals' OBSE can be more or less stable as a function of individual differences even if an employee has significant organizational tenure.

To begin, dispositional characteristics influence the degree to which attitudes, even those central to individuals' self-concept, are stable or unstable (Briñol & Petty, 2005), and some of these attitude-influencing characteristics may cause individuals to have OBSE that is more state-like and readily responsive to contextual changes. In addition, the findings of global self-esteem research corroborate the influence of dispositional characteristics on self-esteem stability (e.g., Greenier, Kernis, McNamara, Waschull, Berry, Herlocker, & Abend, 1999; Greenier, Kernis, Waschull, 1995; Kernis, 2005), and a recent meta-analysis provides evidence that level and degree of instability are distinct (although sometimes related) dimensions of self-esteem (Okada, 2010). This research provides evidence that individuals may not experience consistent, long-term feelings of self-worth. Rather, both high and low self-esteem individuals can experience large degrees of instability in their sense of self-worth (Greenier et al., 1999; Greenier et al., 1995; Kernis, 2005; Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993).

Finally, although extant theory presents OBSE as a trait-like variable for experienced employees, there is a lack of empirical evidence demonstrating that this is the case. To be sure, Pierce et al.'s (1989) research did provide some empirical support for the notion of OBSE stability. However, of the seven different studies described in their work, the samples of the two studies purported to assess OBSE stability were relatively small. In fact, only Study One, with a sample of 32 summer school teachers, and Study Two, with a sample of 45 MBA students, address the issue of within-person OBSE variation (Pierce et al., 1989, p. 633). In addition, only Study Two appears to have had a longitudinal design, and this design involved the distribution of only two surveys spaced at a five-week interval (Pierce et al., 1989). Thus, not only might the scale and scope of this research not have been large enough to identify individuals inclined to experience unstable OBSE, but the interval at which OBSE was measured might also have been too long to capture short-term fluctuations.

In sum, there are compelling reasons that suggest organizational members can experience considerable variation in OBSE: 1) evidence demonstrating individuals' dispositions influence attitude stability (Briñol & Petty, 2005); 2) global self-esteem research demonstrating that individuals' self-worth

can vary (Kernis, 2005); and 3) the lack of research demonstrating OBSE stability. Our view is that dispositional instability is an important but overlooked source of fragility in OBSE and that differences in OBSE stability among employees will be noticeable even after controlling for differences in organizational tenure.

Further, we propose instability is likely to cause individuals' OBSE to be fragile in nature and cause individuals to feel more vulnerable to circumstances threatening their self-worth (e.g., negative feedback, unflattering social comparisons, co-workers who degrade others), thereby inspiring defensive reactions. Supporting this assertion, researchers have found that instability in global self-esteem motivates defensive emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. More specifically, higher degrees of instability are associated with stronger reactions to unfair treatment (Meier, Semmer, & Hupfeld, 2009); self-consciousness, anxiousness, avoidance (Oosterwegel et al., 2001); defensive exaggerations (Kernis, Greenier, Herlocker, Whisenhunt, & Abend, 1997); reduced curiosity, reduced preference for challenge, a greater tendency to become angry (Waschull & Kernis, 1996); and immature psychological self defense such as denial, passive aggression, acting out, and projection (Zeigler-Hill, Chadha, & Osterman, 2008). There is also evidence indicating that self-esteem instability can be a stronger predictor of negative outcomes than level of self-esteem (Franck & De Raedt, 2007).

To illustrate the importance of considering (in)stability as a source of OBSE fragility, consider the attitudes and behaviors of two hypothetical employees. Both Employee A and Employee B have substantial and equally long organizational tenure and have high levels of OBSE. Currently, OBSE theory predicts that both Employee A and Employee B would exhibit positive outcomes that are consistent with their OBSE level (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). However, a more nuanced prediction can be made when the notion of dispositionally unstable OBSE is taken into consideration. Assume, for example, that Employee A's OBSE tends to be very stable such that at any one time his/her level of self-esteem will be characteristically high while Employee B's generally tends to be unstable such that at any one time his/her level of self-esteem might be considerably lower or higher than what is usually observed. In a situation that threatens feelings of self-worth (e.g., failing to meet a performance goal, being outperformed by a rival, embarrassing mistakes, etc.), Employee A would still be expected to exhibit the positive attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with a high OBSE level while Employee B would be expected to react defensively, sometimes avoiding and/or withdrawing from the situation. Employee B would also likely respond negatively to criticism at times (e.g., making excuses, blaming others, minimizing the importance/degree of a bad performance).

> *Proposition 2: Dispositional instability will cause OBSE to be fragile, thereby leading to defensive reactions to events threatening self-worth.*

Cognitive (In)congruence Between Explicit and Implicit OBSE

Since Pierce et al.'s (1989) original work, there have been many published studies of OBSE utilizing the original self-report measure and involving thousands of respondents (Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Each of these studies has independently verified the robustness of the OBSE scale, and even shortened versions of the measure have been used with success (e.g., Chattopadhyay, 2003). Based on these results, one might assume that the existing self-report measures of OBSE adequately capture the entire phenomenon of OBSE. However, cognition-oriented researchers (e.g., Nosek & Smyth, 2007) have observed that: 1) attitudes have an explicit component that is associated with effortful conscious thought; 2) attitudes have an implicit component associated with automatic and sometimes unconscious thought; 3) these components can be more or less congruent (i.e., aligned); and 4) the implicit component is an important predictor of outcomes. For example, Thrash, Elliot, and Schultheiss (2007) found that the explicit and implicit aspects of an individual's need for achievement tend to be less congruent among high self-monitors and individuals with a low preference for consistency.

Similarly, some researchers conceptualize global self-esteem as having two components that are not always in agreement. The first component is explicit self-esteem resulting from an individual's conscious and deliberate self-evaluation, which can be measured directly (Jordan, Logel, Spencer, & Zanna, 2006;

Karpinski & Steinberg, 2006). The second component is implicit self-esteem, which operates in an automatic fashion, often outside of immediate conscious awareness and must be measured indirectly (Jordan et al., 2006; Karpinski & Steinberg, 2006). Lack of congruence occurs when there is a mismatch between levels of implicit and explicit self-esteem. Possible mismatches include low explicit/high implicit, referred to in the global self-esteem literature as discrepant low self-esteem, and high explicit/low-implicit, referred to as discrepant high self-esteem. Owing to the evidence demonstrating that attitudes can have implicit and explicit components that are not always aligned (e.g., Nosek & Smyth, 2007) and given that this finding is mirrored by global self-esteem research (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2005), we believe that an important source of self-esteem fragility being overlooked by organizational researchers is the degree to which explicit and implicit aspects of individuals' OBSE are incongruent. We also propose that incongruence between explicit and implicit aspects of OBSE is likely to cause individuals to become more vulnerable to circumstances threatening their self-worth (causing OBSE to become more fragile) and to inspire defensive reactions.

Again, a body of evidence supporting this proposition exists within global self-esteem research. Researchers have found that incongruence can cause individuals' self-worth to be more easily threatened and lead to greater degrees of in-group bias (Jordan et al., 2003); rationalizations of poor performances (Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2003); greater degrees of narcissism (Zeigler-Hill, 2005); and poor interpersonal relationships (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Although the condition of low explicit/high implicit self-esteem has received much less attention by researchers, the research that does exist indicates a similar pattern. For example, Schröder-Abé, Rudolph, and Shütz (2007) found that low explicit/high implicit individuals tended to display more anger and have poorer psychological health.

To illustrate the importance of considering (in)congruence as a source of OBSE fragility, consider hypothetical Employee C and Employee D who both have high levels of dispositionally stable OBSE. However, Employee C's OBSE explicit and implicit OBSE are highly congruent while Employee D's are highly incongruent. In a situation in which a negative self-evaluation arises, Employee C's feelings of self-worth are secure because his/her explicit and implicit OBSE levels are high. Consequently, this employee would still be expected to exhibit the positive outcomes that are traditionally associated with high levels of OBSE. However, Employee D's feelings of self-worth are likely to be fragile because, although his/her deliberate and conscious feelings of organizational self-worth are high, his/her automatic and unconscious feelings of self-worth are a source of uncomfortable self-doubt. As such, Employee D would be expected to exhibit a defensive reaction to any situation threatening his/her feelings of self-worth (e.g., failing to meet goals, being outperformed by a rival, embarrassing mistakes, etc.).

> Proposition 3: Incongruence between explicit and implicit aspects of OBSE will cause OBSE to be fragile, thereby leading to defensive reactions to events threatening self-worth.

Contingence of OBSE on Performance of Self-Relevant Tasks

As early as 1890, William James observed that the nature of an individual's self-concept is heavily influenced by the domains to which that individual assigns value and worth. While this observation is now well over 100 years old, contemporary global self-esteem researchers have only recently started using the concept of "contingent self-esteem" (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Kernis & Goldman, 2006) to take into consideration how an individual's self-concept can be linked to idiosyncratic standards of self-worth. According to this body of research, individuals' self-esteem is contingent on particular activities in which they are engaged. This research also provides a growing list of activities upon which self-esteem can potentially be contingent, including: task competence and interpersonal relationships (Johnson & Blom, 2007) and maintaining group membership (Amiot & Hornsey, 2009).

When individuals feel as if they have met a self-imposed standard of success in an activity central to their self-concept, they experience stronger feelings of self-worth. However, failure to meet personal expectations in these important activities threatens self-esteem by calling into question one's self-worth

and results in a variety of defensive outcomes. Among other things, contingent self-esteem has been linked to deviant workplace behavior (Ferris, Brown, Lian, & Keeping, 2009); narcissism (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008); hostile interpersonal style (Zeigler-Hill, 2006); dysfunctional achievement orientation, greater desire for affiliation, and dependence on others (Johnson & Blom, 2007); and intergroup bias (Amiot & Hornsey, 2009). Additionally, the effects of contingent self-esteem have been shown to be empirically distinct from those of implicit self-esteem (Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel, & Biesheuvel, 2010).

Considering the evidence cited above, we believe that the degree to which organizational members' OBSE is contingent is yet another important source of fragile OBSE being overlooked by organizational researchers. We propose that greater degrees of contingency will cause OBSE to become more fragile (i.e., more state-like, more easily influenced by context). Thus, any circumstance that calls into question the individual's performance on activities central to one's self-concept constitutes a threat to be defended against.

To illustrate, consider Employees E and F who both have high levels of generally stable, congruent OBSE. Both of these employees may understand that "good customer service" is an important contributor to organizational success. However, the act of providing this service may or may not be linked to each employee's self-worth. As such, Employee E's OBSE may be highly secure and not based on meeting a personal standard of performance on any activity. Thus, this employee may not respond defensively to any situations that call into question his/her self-worth (e.g., supervisor criticisms, irate customers, critical co-workers). However, Employee F's OBSE may be highly fragile because his/her self-worth is contingent upon providing customers with the best service possible. Consequently, Employee F can be expected to exhibit a defensive reaction to any customer service related situation that potentially threatens his/her self-concept (e.g., avoiding difficult customers, getting angry when criticized, making excuses, etc.).

> *Proposition 4: Contingence will cause OBSE to be fragile, thereby leading to defensive reactions to events threatening self-worth.*

DISCUSSION

Current OBSE theory predicts that employees with a high level of OBSE will develop and maintain favourable work attitudes and behaviors consistent with this level of OBSE, while employees with a low level of OBSE will exhibit unfavourable work attitudes and behaviors (Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Pierce et al., 1989). In effect, OBSE researchers have hypothesized a simple and straightforward relationship: High OBSE leads to positive outcomes and low OBSE leads to negative ones. However, in a meta-analysis, Dalal (2005) found that positive and negative discretionary behaviors are only modestly negatively correlated, and an employee who is helpful and compliant at one time might also be uncooperative and deviant at another. Our multidimensional view is unique and important because it offers a possible explanation for this ambivalent and inconsistent behavior by employees. Namely, we conceptualize high OBSE as a neutral variable that is capable of producing both positive and negative outcomes when it is fragile.

We believe that this work represents a logical step towards developing a more nuanced theory of OBSE. Yet, our efforts are by no means comprehensive, and there are likely to be additional avenues of inquiry that can further increase our understanding of OBSE. While some potential research areas are somewhat obvious (e.g., How prevalent is unstable, incongruent, and/or contingent OBSE? To what degree can these dynamics be managed?), we believe that there are four issues that warrant further clarification: the question of what constitutes optimal OBSE, the relationship and theoretical distinction between narcissism and fragile OBSE, measurement difficulties that are likely to be encountered by researchers who examine fragile OBSE empirically, and the practical implications of fragile OBSE.

Optimal OBSE

In response to evidence demonstrating that high levels of self-esteem can have negative consequences, Kernis (2003) described the concept of optimal self-esteem. Optimal self-esteem is proposed to be dispositionally stable, non-contingent, and congruent (Kernis, 2003), and it is optimal in the sense that it represents a state of high self-worth that is authentic and not associated with defensive reactions. We believe that the notion of optimal may be applicable to OBSE. However, Kernis's (2003) view may not translate directly to OBSE theory because what constitutes optimal can vary depending on the answer to the question "Optimal for what?" (Crocker, 2006).

To clarify, although the vast majority of global self-esteem research focuses on undesirable outcomes, there has been limited documentation of fragile self-esteem being associated with the exertion of extra effort (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Crocker et al., 2003b). In addition, research has demonstrated that situations threatening individuals' self-concepts can result in two different kinds of defensive reactions. On one hand, when individuals believe that they are incapable of surpassing a rival's performance, the threat to self-evaluation can cause them to defend their self-concept through disagreeable means (Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001; Tesser & Smith, 1980). On the other hand, when individuals believe that they can surpass their rival's performance, the self-evaluation threat can cause them to defend their self-concept by performing at higher levels (Buunk, Peiró, & Griffioen, 2007). Therefore, although it seems likely that many of the defensive reactions exhibited by employees with fragile OBSE will be dysfunctional, it is possible that some of the defensive outcomes associated with fragile OBSE may actually benefit employees and their organizations. That is, there may be some optimal form of fragile OBSE that causes organizational members to exhibit performance-oriented defensive reactions aimed at maintain or increasing feelings of self-worth, and research that explores this possibility has the potential to be quite interesting.

Fragile Self-Esteem and Narcissism

Narcissism is generally considered to be a negative trait that denotes an overly positive sense of self. It reflects an individual's desire to be in a position of authority, preoccupation with self-image, feelings of arrogant superiority, and a tendency to feel entitled and exploit others (Emmons, 1987). Similar to our proposed outcomes for fragile OBSE, research has found that narcissists tend react negatively to threatening social comparisons and have a greater potential for ethical misconduct (Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). Further, in the context of organizational research, narcissism has been referred to as "false self-esteem" (e.g., Gardner & Pierce, 2011). Thus, there is potential for confusion between the concepts of fragile OBSE and narcissism and the distinction between the two concepts needs to be highlighted. Specifically, while narcissists have an aggrandized sense of self and a willingness to exploit others (Gardner & Pierce, 2011; Raskin & Terry, 1998), these characteristics are not necessary conditions or characteristics of fragile OBSE. It is entirely possible that a person with unstable, incongruent, and contingent OBSE could still has a very modest sense of self and still tend to defer to others' interests. Indeed, researchers studying self-esteem (at the global level) have already found that fragile self-esteem is empirically distinct from narcissism and that the two concepts can have outcomes that are quite different (Bosson, Lakey, Campbell, Zeigler-Hill, Jordan, & Kernis, 2008). That being said, future organizational researchers may want to draw a distinction between fragile OBSE employees who are and who are not narcissistic. In particular, it seems that the defensive thoughts and actions associated with fragile OBSE might take a particularly unpleasant form when they are combined with the narcissistic tendencies of arrogance and exploitation.

Measurement

The dynamics described in this paper present special measurement challenges that will require creative research methods. Rather than relying on the current measure of OBSE level, new measurement methods are needed to tap the three sources of OBSE fragility proposed in this paper. We provide general directions and suggestions that could be taken to develop a measure of OBSE that captures the construct in a more dynamic way.

To measure how (in)stability affects OBSE, researchers might obtain multiple measurements of OBSE rather than relying on one point-in-time survey. Respondents could be asked about aspects of OBSE at several points over a period of time (cf., Kernis, 2005; Meier et al., 2009). In addition, experience sampling methods could be used. For example, "beepers" programmed to go off at designated intervals signalling employees to fill out OBSE measures at those times might better capture variance in OBSE associated with particular work situations (cf. Kernis et al., 1989). These methods are already being employed successfully by global self-esteem researchers, as well as by organizational researchers studying emotion (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Fisher & Noble, 2004).

To measure how contingence affects OBSE, researchers may benefit from using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews to reveal personal standards of performance and work domains that are most relevant to employees. Interviewees could be asked to list and rank work-related tasks, outcomes, and processes that are most central or important to their self-concept. Diary studies could ask employees to note throughout the work day circumstances in which they feel threatened or defensive. In this way, researchers could learn which specific organizational domains contribute to OBSE (cf. Crocker, et al. 2003a; Crocker et al., 2003b). Once key areas of contingence are identified, it may be possible to develop self-report psychometric scales for use in empirical studies (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

To measure how (in)congruence affects OBSE, researchers will need to move beyond self-reports and explicit measures to assess implicit aspects of an employee's OBSE. Currently, researchers are exploring implicit global self-esteem through use of implicit association tests (IATs) (Albers, Rotteveel, & Dijksterhuis, 2009; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Karpinski & Steinberg, 2006), and evidence regarding the validity and value of these tests is accumulating (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). With IATs, the speed with which respondents categorize pairs of items (e.g., self-other) with other pairs of items (e.g., pleasant or unpleasant) is measured. Self-esteem is then estimated based on how quickly (easily) respondents are able to categorize self items with pleasant rather than unpleasant items. The IAT then overcomes the problems of self distortion because it does not rely on introspection but rather on spontaneous responses (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000).

Practical Implications

The overarching pragmatic implication of our discussion is one of caution. Managers should be careful when drawing conclusions about employees based on their levels of OBSE as it may be unrealistic to assume that a high self-esteem employee will consistently exhibit altruistic and compliant attitudes and behavior across time and events. Rather, because high OBSE can be fragile due to at least three different contingencies, there are likely to be many different kinds of high self-esteem individuals for whom optimal management practices are likely to vary. More specifically, we believe that there are at least four things managers should keep in mind.

First, some employees may exhibit high levels of OBSE with very little fragility. These individuals may be relatively rare, but they are also the ones who are most likely to consistently exhibit the beneficial outcomes documented by past research. Thus, it may be beneficial to strategically place these individuals in jobs where these tendencies can be leveraged. Second, as noted in our discussion of optimal OBSE, individuals with fragile self-esteem are sometimes motivated to defend their self-concept by performing at higher levels (Buunk, Peiró, & Griffioen, 2007). These situations seem to occur when an interest in a particular task is combined with confidence in one's ability to improve. We suggest that managers carefully match these individuals to the tasks they care about so that these motivational tendencies can emerge. Third, some employees may have high OBSE that is exceptionally fragile. These kinds of individuals are the most likely to exhibit unhelpful defensive reactions to organizational events threatening self-worth. Thus, it may be best to shelter them (where possible) from tasks where unflattering social comparisons or lower performance seem likely. Fourth, we believe that managers should be cautious when instituting employee-development programs aimed at raising employee OBSE levels. Managers should have evidence as to what kind (stable and confident vs. fragile) of OBSE is being nurtured before implementation of such a program begins.

CONCLUSION

While the study of OBSE holds considerable promise, we believe it has been impeded by the assumption that the OBSE-related behavior of employees is driven by a consistency motive and by the view that OBSE can be defined and measured simply by assigning a value of "high" or "low." As an alternative, we have argued that OBSE can be more or less fragile, and we have proposed a dynamic and multi-dimensional view that allows for both positive and negative outcomes. We have proposed three sources that contribute to the fragility of OBSE and, ultimately, to defensive responses to protect self-worth. We believe this expanded view will problematize the study of OBSE and thereby open up interesting avenues for future research. Further, our model is an important step in helping researchers to better understand how and why OBSE fluctuates and with what effect.

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