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# Sheltering the Self From the Storm: Self-Construal Abstractness and the Stability of Self-Esteem

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## Abstract

Self-construal abstractness (SCA) refers to the degree to which people construe important bases of self-esteem in a broad, flexible, and abstract rather than a concrete and specific manner. This article hypothesized that SCA would be a unique predictor of self-esteem stability, capturing the degree to which people's most important bases of self-worth are resistant to disconfirmation. Two studies using a daily diary methodology examined relationships between SCA, daily self-esteem, and daily emotions and/or events. In Study 1, individual differences in SCA emerged as the most consistent and unique predictor of self-esteem stability. Furthermore, SCA contributed to self-esteem stability by buffering the influence of daily negative emotions on self-esteem. Study 2 manipulated SCA via a daily self-construal task and found an abstract versus concrete self-focus to buffer the influence of daily negative events on self-esteem. Implications of these findings for the study of the self and well-being are discussed.

## Keywords

individual differences, self-concept, self-esteem, self-evaluation, stress, well-being

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Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles . . .

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

The drive to view oneself favorably—seeing oneself as a good, competent, and worthy individual—is a strong motivation of the self, particularly among those from Western, individualistic cultures (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Indeed, a large body of research shows that maintaining a mild dose of positive illusions about oneself can be beneficial for mental health (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Yet, maintaining such saccharine beliefs is not always a simple matter, even for people facing fates less tragic than Hamlet's. Daily life is chock-full of hassles, frustrations, and disappointments capable of whittling away at the rosier of self-views. Romantic relationships may dissolve, goals fail to get met, weight may be gained, or a coworker could toss a not-so-veiled insult one's way. In the face of these slings and arrows of even the most commonplace of fortunes, how do people emerge with their self-worth intact? More generally, how do people maintain stable evaluations of themselves amidst the myriad uplifts and hassles of everyday life?

The present study seeks an answer to this question by examining a number of processes hypothesized to underlie self-esteem stability. Self-esteem stability refers to a person's global self-esteem that remains stable and consistent over time rather than fluctuating in response to daily events. A number of explanations have been proposed to understand the possible roots of self-esteem instability, yet empirical support for most of the accounts is surprisingly sparse. In this article, we round up some of these "usual suspects" but chiefly focus on an understudied yet potentially valuable dimension for understanding individual differences in self-esteem instability: self-construal abstractness (SCA). By abstract self-construal, we refer to important bases of self-worth that are construed in a very generalized, almost trait-like manner, in which multiple evaluative criteria could be subsumed under a general characteristic ("I am a smart person"). In contrast, concrete self-construal refers to important bases of self-worth that are construed very specifically, using criteria that clearly can or

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cannot be attained (“I have a 4.0 GPA”). Individual differences in this dimension are known to influence reports of life satisfaction (Updegraff & Suh, 2007). In the present article, we expand research on both SCA and self-esteem stability by examining the unique relationship between the two while also examining the extent to which a number of other usual suspects may contribute to self-esteem stability.

### Consequences of Unstable Self-Esteem

Self-esteem stability is a unique dimension of the self, distinct from self-esteem level (Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989, 1992). Typically, researchers have assessed self-esteem stability by taking the within-person standard deviation of repeated self-esteem measurements over time. Of importance, research shows that it is not one’s average level of self-esteem but rather the stability of a person’s self-esteem that is the more potent predictor of subsequent mental health problems (Butler, Hokanson, & Flynn, 1994; Kernis et al., 1998; J. E. Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; J. E. Roberts & Monroe, 1992). Notably, in four nonclinical young adult samples, self-esteem instability emerged as a unique prospective predictor of vulnerability to depression even after controlling for trait self-esteem level and other ostensibly related constructs (Butler et al., 1994; Kernis et al., 1998; J. E. Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; J. E. Roberts & Monroe, 1992). Furthermore, self-esteem instability has been linked to a number of other maladaptive responses to threat, such as anger and excuse making (Kernis et al., 1989, 1992) and more damaging physiological responses to stress (Seery, Blascovich, Weisbuch, & Vick, 2004).

### SCA and Self-Esteem Stability

Despite this empirical link between self-esteem stability and well-being, very little is known about its roots or the mechanisms by which it confers vulnerability (Butler et al., 1994; Kernis & Goldman, 2003; J. E. Roberts & Gotlib, 1997). As studies show, fluctuations in self-esteem most often occur when an individual encounters events that are perceived as being relevant to self-worth (Greenier et al., 1999; Hayes, Harris, & Carver, 2004; J. E. Roberts & Kassel, 1997). Accordingly, most explanations of self-esteem instability have focused, in one way or another, on the degree to which people base their self-worth on specific evaluative criteria or the attainment of particular outcomes. Decades ago, humanist theorists such as Carl Rogers touched on this issue in theorizing that basing self-worth excessively on “conditional” criteria puts one’s well-being at risk (Rogers, 1959, 1961). More recently, Deci and Ryan (1995) and Kernis and Paradise (2002) expanded on this idea by characterizing unstable self-esteem as being *contingent*, or tied to matching a standard of excellence, living up to specific expectations, or being unduly tied to the opinions and evaluations of

others. Across these accounts, it is believed that when people with contingent self-esteem encounter events that signal either an attainment or failure to attain expectations, their self-esteem rises or falls as a result. In contrast, when individuals with noncontingent self-esteem encounter such events, they may react with strong emotions such as elation or disappointment, but their global sense of self-worth will be relatively unaffected (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003).

Although this distinction between contingent and noncontingent self-esteem provides an important starting point for understanding the possible roots of self-esteem instability, it may not provide a complete account for a number of reasons. For one, the link between contingent and unstable self-esteem has not yet been empirically demonstrated. Second, as others have argued, very few people (if any) are likely to have truly noncontingent self-esteem; for most people, self-esteem is based on something (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). Thus, it is unlikely that the wide variability in self-esteem stability found in prior studies can be explained by a simple distinction between contingent and noncontingent self-esteem (cf. Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Furthermore, the question remains as to what makes a particular source of self-worth more or less resistant to disconfirmation.

Accordingly, a potentially more valuable way of understanding individual differences in self-esteem stability involves knowing not *whether* people base their self-esteem on something but rather *what* people base it on. We propose that SCA is a key dimension in this respect because it most directly captures *what* people base their self-esteem on and how resistant those bases should be to the inevitable slings and arrows of daily life. Our view is grounded in the premise that most individuals have generally positive views of themselves and are primarily motivated to maintain these evaluations (Sedikides et al., 2003; Taylor & Brown, 1988). We argue that individuals are better able to maintain stable and favorable self-evaluations when those bases of evaluation are abstractly—rather than concretely—construed. In particular, when people construe important bases of evaluation in an abstract manner (“I am smart”), they should be better able to withstand threats compared to those who construe those bases more concretely (“I have a 4.0 GPA”). For one, people who hold abstract self-construals should be better able to flexibly and idiosyncratically define the specific criteria that support those construals, especially in cases when another criterion is challenged. For example, someone with an abstract construal of academic competence could muster up any number of idiosyncratically chosen criteria (i.e., “I can name all nine justices of the Supreme Court” or “I can calculate derivatives”) if they happen to receive an unexpectedly low grade in an English composition course. Consistent with this notion, Dunning, Leuenberger, and Sherman (1995) found that people are indeed able to evaluate themselves more favorably on an ambiguous ability (e.g., successful in marriage) after failure than

after success, suggesting that more abstract self-construals may be particularly adaptive in response to a threat. In contrast, when the criteria relevant to a self-evaluation are more constrained—such as when a person construes bases of self-worth concretely (“I have a 4.0 GPA”)—people may have less latitude with which to maintain a stable, positive view of themselves when that criterion is disconfirmed (cf. Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Felson, 1981). Furthermore, it should be far easier for individuals who hold more abstract self-construals to view any specific supporting criteria as being less diagnostic of a more global trait or ability when it is challenged (Greve & Wentura, 2003). In other words, abstract self-construals should offer more ways to rationalize and minimize a threat to the self than concrete self-construals. Pyszczynski et al. (2003) summarized this issue succinctly: “Although concrete standards can be met in relatively few ways, more abstract standards leave far greater latitude as to what represents a successful attainment of those standards” (p. 335). For these reasons, we proposed that SCA may be an important dimension that underlies not only stability of self-esteem but also the degree to which one’s self-esteem should be shielded from the inevitable hassles and disappointments of everyday life.

### Rounding Up Some Other Suspects

Although the link between SCA and self-esteem stability has yet to be tested, it is worth noting that a number of existing accounts of self-esteem stability invoke dimensions that may covary with SCA. For example, Crocker and colleagues (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) have shown that the most commonly endorsed contingencies of self-worth among young adults can be placed on a continuum ranging from those that are primarily dependent on the individual for their satisfaction (*internal* contingencies; i.e., God’s love, virtue) to those that are more dependent on others for their satisfaction (*external* contingencies; i.e., approval from others). Furthermore, both Crocker et al. (2003) and Pyszczynski et al. (2003) have argued that people should experience greater well-being and more stable self-esteem when they endorse more internal and fewer external contingencies because internal contingencies are likely to be more resistant to challenge. We note, however, that internal contingencies such as basing self-worth on virtue or spirituality could be easily disconfirmed if a person construes such bases in a very concrete manner (i.e., earning an award for volunteering or weekly attendance at church events), just as external contingencies such as seeking approval from others could more easily resist challenge when construed abstractly (i.e., “I am a likable person”).

In previous research we found that it was indeed the dimension of abstractness and not internality that was uniquely tied to reports of life satisfaction (Updegraff & Suh,

2007). Thus, we believe the dimensions of abstractness and internality represent unique constructs, and if disconfirmability is indeed a key issue in understanding self-esteem stability, then we believe the dimension of abstractness should hold the greatest explanatory power.

Two other constructs that may help explain individual differences in self-esteem stability are self-concept clarity and neuroticism. Kernis and colleagues (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993) have suggested that possessing a *poorly defined self-concept* could contribute to self-esteem instability. Consistent with this proposition, Campbell and colleagues (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Campbell et al., 1996) have found that people high in self-concept clarity—that is, people who hold beliefs about themselves that are clear, well defined, and consistent—tend to have greater temporal stability in trait ratings. Kernis and colleagues (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000) and Nezlek and Plesko (2001) have indeed reported correlations between self-concept clarity and self-esteem stability. However, self-concept clarity is known to covary with a number of other constructs, including self-esteem and neuroticism (Campbell et al., 1996; Campbell et al., 2003); therefore, it remains unclear the degree to which self-concept clarity is uniquely tied to self-esteem stability. We believe that self-concept clarity should not be a de facto determinant of self-esteem stability because a clear and well-defined self-concept can still fall prey to disconfirmation if it is construed very concretely. Lastly, neuroticism has been linked to self-esteem stability (J. E. Roberts, Kassel, & Gotlib, 1995), although this relationship may be due to an indirect link with emotional instability, which is related to but separable from self-esteem instability (Kernis et al., 1989).

### The Present Studies

To assess the extent to which self-esteem stability may be rooted in SCA, as well as other theorized constructs, we conducted two daily diary studies. In each study, self-esteem instability was assessed in two ways. First, we looked at a frequently used but relatively coarse index of self-esteem instability: the within-person standard deviation of daily self-esteem ratings (cf. Kernis et al., 1993; J. E. Roberts et al., 1995). Although such a measure captures the extent of one’s day-to-day variability in self-esteem, it is a rather unrefined method because it does not capture the degree to which these fluctuations are tied to daily emotions and events or simply reflect random variation (cf. Butler et al., 1994). To address this limitation, we also used multilevel modeling (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 1999) in each study to examine the degree to which daily reports of self-esteem were predicted by day-to-day experiences and to determine whether any of the self dimensions buffered self-esteem from negative daily experiences. Across these two ways of conceptualizing self-esteem stability, we hypothesized that SCA

would be a unique predictor of self-esteem stability, that SCA would buffer the effect of daily negative experiences on self-esteem, and that these relationships would not be attributable to overlap with other ostensibly related constructs.

## Study 1

Study 1 investigated individual differences in SCA, its overlap with other usual suspects, and the degree to which SCA uniquely explained individual differences in self-esteem stability. Our method of assessing SCA used a more idiographic approach than typically used in research on self-esteem instability. Participants first described in their own terms the bases of self-worth that were the most important to them. This open-ended assessment of contingencies ensured that the bases of self-worth that we investigated were truly consequential for the person, and this allowed us to assess bases that might be missed by existing measures. More important, by eliciting this information in an open-ended manner, participants described the bases in ways that revealed the degree of abstractness with which they construed them. After eliciting bases of self-worth in this idiographic manner, we coded all participants' responses in terms of their relative abstractness or concreteness, and these nomothetic ratings served as our measures of SCA. As others have noted, such an integration of idiographic and nomothetic approaches is particularly useful in research on self-concept and personality, as it can often allow for a more valid assessment of key constructs than purely nomothetic approaches (Allport, 1937; Bem & Allen, 1974; Pelham, 1993).

## Method

**Participants.** Eighty undergraduate students participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Prior studies have used at least five assessments of self-esteem to reliably calculate self-esteem stability (Greenier et al., 1999; Kernis et al., 1992; Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007). Using this cutoff, 13 participants failed to provide enough daily assessments, and 3 participants did not provide open-ended data in enough detail to code on the abstractness dimension. The remaining 64 participants (41 females) were used in all analyses. They ranged in age from 16 to 43 ( $M = 19.5$ ) and were primarily Caucasian (70%), Asian (17%), and African American (5%).

**Procedure.** The study was described as a week-long study of responses to everyday life events. Participants first completed a short questionnaire packet in the lab and then were asked to complete a Web-based questionnaire at the end of each day (or shortly thereafter) over the following week. Time stamps verified the date and time of the diary questionnaires, and any questionnaires not completed on time (i.e., by noon of the following day) were not used in analyses. One week following the first session, participants returned to the lab for a follow-up questionnaire packet and debriefing.

**Dimensions of self-construal.** In the first lab session, the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) measured participants' trait level of self-esteem. Participants were asked to respond to the items of the RSES in terms of how they "typically describe how you feel," using a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability of the composite measure was good,  $\alpha = .83$ .

Immediately following the trait self-esteem assessment, participants were asked to list and briefly describe five aspects of themselves on which they based their self-esteem ratings (see also Updegraff & Suh, 2007). Participants were asked to write a brief sentence or two listing each aspect and describing how it influenced his or her overall evaluation. A team of three trained coders rated the open-ended thoughts along four dimensions: abstractness, satisfaction, internality, and stability. The *abstractness* dimension was coded on a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely concrete*) to 7 (*extremely abstract*). As in Updegraff and Suh (2007), an extremely concrete thought was defined a priori as one that refers to a concrete experience or event, something a person clearly can have or not have, or something that states clear and objective criteria. In contrast, an extremely abstract thought was defined as one that focuses on broad descriptions and is vague, undefined, or could be judged flexibly by the participant. Examples of concrete thoughts included "I am the first person in my entire family to attend college" and "I feel worthless because of the 30 pounds I still have to lose." Examples of abstract thoughts included "My unique abilities: I know a little about some things and more about others" and "Goals—feels like I have fulfilled a couple of my goals but I still have a lot more difficult ones ahead." The interrater reliability of the abstractness–concreteness ratings was good, intraclass  $r = .76$ .

As in Updegraff and Suh (2007), we coded thoughts along three other dimensions that might covary with abstractness: satisfaction, internality, and stability. *Satisfaction* was coded on a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely unsatisfied*) to 7 (*extremely satisfied*), and degree of satisfaction was readily apparent from either participants' direct statement (i.e., "This made me feel extremely satisfied") or from the nature of the thought itself, intraclass  $r = .90$ . *Internality* was coded on a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely external*) to 7 (*extremely internal*) and reflected the degree to which the thought referred to something about the person's environment versus something about the person, intraclass  $r = .80$ . *Stability* was coded along a continuum ranging from 1 (*extremely unstable*) to 7 (*extremely stable*) representing the degree to which the thought referred to something that was likely to change (e.g., "Sometimes I struggle to pay my bills") or likely to remain stable over time (e.g., "Being an athlete has always been a satisfying aspect of my life"), intraclass  $r = .81$ .

For each dimension, codes were aggregated across each participant's five statements to create mean indices of

SCA, satisfaction, internality, and stability. The abstractness dimension had the strongest reliability, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ , indicating that there was a high degree of within-person consistency in the abstractness of each participant's five bases of self-worth. In contrast, the satisfaction, internality, and stability dimensions had somewhat lower reliabilities,  $\alpha$ s = .67, .57, and .43, respectively, indicating less within-person consistency along these dimensions

**Self-concept clarity.** Self-concept clarity was assessed in the first session with Campbell and colleagues' (1996) Self-Concept Clarity (SCC) scale. The SCC includes 12 items that ask participants to rate the certainty of their views about themselves using a 5-point Likert scale,  $\alpha = .90$ .

**Neuroticism.** Neuroticism was assessed in the first session with the 12-item Neuroticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Participants rated their agreement to each item with a yes–no response; the responses were summed to create a composite measure of neuroticism,  $\alpha = .85$ .

**Contingencies of self-worth.** In the final session, participants completed the 35-item Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS; Crocker et al., 2003). The CSWS, developed for use with young adults, assesses the degree to which individuals base their self-worth on seven sources: academics, appearance, approval from others, competition, family support, God's love, and virtue. Reliabilities of the subscales ranged from  $\alpha$ s = .65 (family support) to .95 (God's love). Previous research (Crocker et al., 2003) has shown that these subscales can be arranged on a continuum ranging from highly internal (God's love) to highly external (approval from others). In the present study, the subscales loaded onto two factors representing internal (virtue, God's love) and external (approval from others, appearance, academics, competition) contingencies. With the exception of the family support subscale, which loaded strongly on neither factor and had low reliability, we averaged the respective subscales to create measures representing the strength of participants' internal ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and external ( $\alpha = .85$ ) contingencies of self-worth.

**Daily diary measures.** For each day, participants completed an RSES that asked them how they "feel about themselves today." Reliability was strong, average  $\alpha = .92$ . Consistent with prior research, we created an index of self-esteem instability by taking each person's within-person standard deviation of daily self-esteem across all days of the study. Daily emotions were assessed with 12 items used in prior research on daily emotions (Updegraff, Gable, & Taylor, 2004) that asked participants to rate the extent to which they felt 6 positive (excited, proud, interested, pleased, enthusiastic, affectionate) and 6 negative (upset, guilty/ashamed, irritable, nervous, lonely, depressed) emotions over the course of the day using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). As expected, the 12 items loaded onto two factors representing positive ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and negative ( $\alpha = .80$ ) emotion.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Major Measures and Correlations With Self-Construal Abstractness and Self-Esteem Instability (Study 1)

	M	SD	r with SC abstract	r with SE instability
SC abstractness	5.19	0.80	—	-.32**
SC satisfaction	4.88	0.82	.00	-.26*
SC internality	4.77	1.00	.27*	.09
SC stability	5.24	0.67	.08	-.22
Trait SE	4.29	0.60	.18	-.27*
Self-concept clarity	3.51	0.90	.09	-.30*
Neuroticism	4.81	3.73	-.25*	.41**
CSW-Internal	5.22	0.85	-.01	-.05
CSW-External	4.97	0.73	-.20	.36**
Daily PE	3.00	0.73	.18	-.19
Daily NE	1.74	0.57	-.11	.57**
Daily SE	4.02	0.56	.22	-.55**
SE instability	0.44	0.28	-.32**	—

SC = self-construal; SE = self-esteem; CSW = Contingencies of Self-Worth; PE = positive emotion; NE = negative emotion.

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

## Results

**Compliance.** Participants provided timely data for an average of 6.66 days. Compliance was not significantly associated with age, gender, or any other measure used in analyses (all  $ps > .25$ ).

**Correlations with dimensions of self-construal.** Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of all study variables, as well as correlations with SCA and self-esteem instability. Most people tended to report abstract self-construals ( $M = 5.19$  on 7-point scale), with scores normally distributed and ranging from 3.47 to 6.73. Gender was not significantly associated with any study variables (all  $ps > .13$ ) so it was not included in Table 1 or any subsequent analyses.

As hypothesized, there was a significant correlation between SCA and self-esteem instability ( $r = -.32$ ) such that participants with greater abstractness had less variability in daily self-esteem. SCA was also significantly associated with self-construal internality ( $r = .27$ ) and lower neuroticism ( $r = -.25$ ), somewhat but not significantly associated with higher trait self-esteem ( $r = .18$ ), and less emphasis placed on external contingencies of self-worth ( $r = -.20$ ). Because of this overlap with SCA, these four dimensions were included in subsequent multivariate analyses.

**Predictors of self-esteem instability.** To examine the unique relationship between SCA and self-esteem instability, a series of regression analyses were conducted that regressed self-esteem instability onto SCA while controlling for one of the other four dimensions.

Results are presented in Table 2. In each case, SCA remained a significant predictor of self-esteem instability, indicating that the link between SCA and self-esteem instability was not due to shared variance with other related constructs.

**Table 2.** Summary of Regression Analyses of Self-Esteem Instability on Self-Conceptual Abstractness (SCA) While Controlling for Selected Covariates (Study 1)

Covariate included	$\beta$ SCA	$\beta$ covariate
SC internality	-.37**	.19
Trait self-esteem	-.28*	-.22
Neuroticism	-.23*	.36**
CSW-External	-.26**	.31*

SC = self-construal; CSW = Contingencies of Self-Worth.

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

Neither self-construal internality nor trait self-esteem remained significantly associated with self-esteem instability and were not considered in further analyses.

To identify which constructs were the best predictors of self-esteem instability, we conducted another regression in which all significant predictors from Table 2 were included along with self-construal satisfaction and self-concept clarity because of their significant correlation with self-esteem instability in Table 1. As Table 3 shows, only SCA remained a significant predictor of self-esteem instability.

*Multilevel analyses predicting daily self-esteem from daily emotions.* To obtain a finer grained picture of the processes underlying self-esteem instability, we used multilevel analyses to investigate two questions. First, to what degree are daily fluctuations in self-esteem predicted by daily fluctuations in positive and negative daily emotions? Second, do any of the aforementioned dimensions of self-view buffer daily self-esteem from the influence of daily emotional experiences? Multilevel analyses (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 1999) are well suited to address such questions because they take into account the repeated nature of the diary data and allow for the examination of interactions between person-level factors (e.g., SCA) and daily-level predictors (e.g., emotions) in predicting daily-level outcomes (e.g., self-esteem). In this study, we used the software package Stata 10 (StataCorp, 2007) to investigate the degree to which daily self-esteem was predicted by within-person fluctuations in daily positive emotion and negative emotion. The daily-level regression was specified as:

$$\text{Daily SE} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Daily PE}) + \beta_2(\text{Daily NE}) + r,$$

where SE = self-esteem; PE = positive emotion; NE = negative emotion.

In the preceding equation, the positive emotion and negative emotion measures were person centered so that they represented day-to-day fluctuations around each person's average daily positive emotion and negative emotion. To examine the degree to which SCA moderated the relationship between daily self-esteem, positive emotion, and negative emotion, a number of person-level regression equations were added that specified each of the preceding

**Table 3.** Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Esteem Instability by Self-Conceptual Abstractness, Self-Conceptual Internality, Trait Self-Esteem, Neuroticism, and External Contingencies of Self-Worth (Study 1)

Predictor	$\beta$	$t$
SC abstractness	-.22	-2.29*
SC satisfaction	-.14	-.82
Self-concept clarity	.08	-.34
Neuroticism	.23	1.26
CSW-External	.24	1.66

SC = self-construal; CSW = Contingencies of Self-Worth.

\* $p < .05$ .

**Table 4.** Summary of Multilevel Model Predicting Daily Self-Esteem From Daily Positive Emotion (PE), Daily Negative Emotion (NE), and Interactions With Self-Conceptual Abstractness (SCA; Study 1)

Parameter	Coefficient	SE	$z$
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )	4.02	.07	59.39**
SCA main effect ( $\gamma_{01}$ )	0.15	.08	1.79*
PE main effect ( $\gamma_{10}$ )	0.28	.03	8.39**
SCA $\times$ PE interaction ( $\gamma_{11}$ )	-0.04	.04	-1.10
NE main effect ( $\gamma_{20}$ )	-0.35	.05	-7.52**
SCA $\times$ NE interaction ( $\gamma_{21}$ )	0.14	.06	2.62**

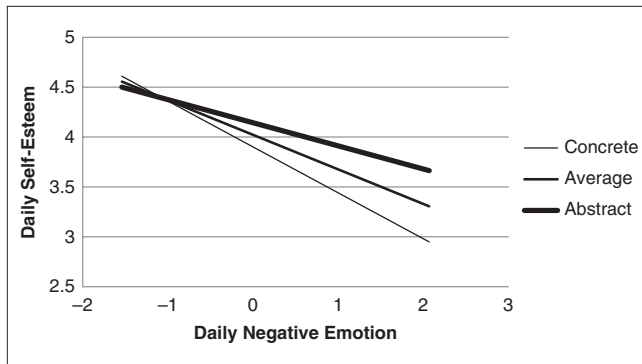
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

$\beta$  coefficients to be predicted by a constant ( $\gamma_0$ ) and the participant's level of SCA, as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\beta_0 &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{SCA}) + U_0, \\ \beta_1 &= \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{SCA}), \\ \beta_2 &= \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{SCA}).\end{aligned}$$

In these person-level equations, the  $\gamma_{11}$  and  $\gamma_{21}$  coefficients provide evidence of the degree to which the relationships between self-esteem and positive emotion and negative emotion, respectively, are tied to SCA. A random component ( $U_0$ ) was added to the  $\beta_0$  intercept to take into account individual differences in average daily self-esteem. In contrast, the  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$  coefficients were treated as fixed rather than random effects because of the limited number of days of data available and the number of cross-level interaction terms to be tested (cf. Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

Results are displayed in Table 4. As expected, both positive emotion and negative emotion were significant predictors of daily self-esteem. The SCA  $\times$  Positive Emotion interaction was not significant, indicating that SCA did not moderate people's responses to daily positive emotion. However, the significant SCA  $\times$  Negative Emotion interaction indicated that SCA moderated self-esteem from experiences of daily negative emotion. As Figure 1 shows, as participants' self-construals became more concrete, their



**Figure 1.** Relationship between daily negative emotion and daily self-esteem for participants with concrete ( $-1$  SD), average, and abstract ( $+1$  SD) self-construals (Study 1)

Values on the x-axis represent fluctuations around each individual's mean level of negative emotion.

self-esteem on a particular day was more strongly influenced by their negative emotion on that day. Specifically, for participants with more concrete self-construals ( $1$  SD below the mean), the slope of the relationship between negative emotion and self-esteem was  $B = -.49$ ,  $z = -7.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, for participants with more abstract self-construals ( $1$  SD above the mean), this association was still significant but nearly half in magnitude,  $B = -.21$ ,  $z = -2.79$ ,  $p < .01$ . Furthermore, this  $SCA \times$  Negative Emotion interaction was as characteristic of low-self-esteem participants as high-self-esteem participants, as it was not significantly moderated by trait self-esteem level as tested in a separate analysis,  $B = -.04$ ,  $z = -.51$ ,  $p = .61$ .

To investigate the degree to which other constructs might moderate the influence of negative emotion on self-esteem or otherwise account for the  $SCA \times$  Negative Emotion interaction, we conducted an additional series of analyses that each added the main effect and negative emotion interaction term of one of the six related dimensions as covariates (self-construal internality, self-construal satisfaction, trait self-esteem, self-concept clarity, neuroticism, and external contingencies of self-worth). In all of these multilevel models, the  $SCA \times$  Negative Emotion interaction remained significant (all  $ps < .015$ ), indicating that the buffering effect of SCA on daily self-esteem was not attributable to overlap with any of the other assessed constructs. Interestingly, of the six other dimensions, only neuroticism remained as a significant additional moderator,  $B = -.04$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $z = -3.68$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that negative emotion more strongly negatively related to daily self-esteem as participants' levels of neuroticism increased.

## Discussion

Study 1 investigated individual differences in SCA with a number of notable findings. First, there was a high degree of within-person consistency in the abstractness with which

participants construed their most important bases of self-evaluation, suggesting that SCA may reflect a general tendency of self-construal. Second, the findings of Study 1 suggested that these individual differences in SCA are tied to individual differences in self-esteem instability, as SCA was the only construct uniquely predictive of self-esteem stability. Third, a potential mechanism was identified for this relationship, as multilevel analyses showed that the daily self-esteem ratings of participants high in SCA were sheltered from daily negative emotional experiences to a greater extent than those low in SCA. No other constructs related to SCA could account for these relationships. However, given the correlational nature of findings and the limits on the number of other constructs we could control for, there may be other individual differences associated with SCA that we were unable to control for. As such, we note that the findings of Study 1 provide strong preliminary evidence for the role of SCA in buffering self-esteem from the effects of negative emotional experiences.

## Study 2

Although we believe that SCA typically acts as a dispositional influence on self-esteem, we believe that SCA is likely to have such an effect by making particular standards of evaluation chronically accessible, and it is the accessibility of such standards of evaluation that shape people's general evaluations over time. Thus, in Study 2 we investigated the role of SCA in self-esteem instability by manipulating the temporary accessibility of abstract and concrete information about the self, which allowed us to directly examine how a person's focus on either abstract or concrete information influenced their self-esteem reports over time. We randomly assigned participants to engage in either an abstract or concrete self-construal framing task before completing their daily assessments. Participants again provided daily assessments of self-esteem over a 1-week period. Furthermore, to ensure that the findings of Study 1 were not attributable to our use of emotions as the index of daily experiences, we assessed positive and negative daily life events instead and examined the extent to which the experimental task moderated the influence of daily life events on daily self-esteem.

## Method

**Participants.** Ninety-five undergraduate students participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Eighteen participants failed to provide at least 5 days of valid diary data and were excluded from analyses. The remaining 77 undergraduate students (61 female, 12 male, 4 unidentified) ranged in age from 16 to 34 ( $M = 19.22$ ,  $SD = 3.54$ ) and were primarily Caucasian (90%) and African American (5%).

**Procedure.** Participants first completed a series of personality measures in the lab and then were asked to fill out online surveys at the end of every night over the next week.



Time stamps verified the date and time of the daily questionnaires, and all questionnaires not completed by noon of the following day were excluded from analysis.

**Manipulation of abstract and concrete self-construal.** Participants were randomly assigned to complete either an abstract or a concrete self-construal framing task before completing all of their daily assessments. Consistent with how the abstractness dimension was conceptualized in Study 1, we asked participants to think about either broad descriptions of themselves (abstract condition) or specific events or criteria (concrete condition). Accordingly, participants in the abstract framing condition were asked, at the end of each day, to list five “traits and characteristics that describe the kind of person you were today.” Participants assigned to the concrete framing condition were asked to write five “specific things you did or accomplished today.” In both conditions, participants were also asked to briefly describe why each of the five items listed were important.

**Daily measures.** Immediately following the self-construal framing task, participants completed the RSES (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants were asked to rate how they “feel about themselves today” on a 4-point Likert scale, and items were averaged for each day. Reliability was strong,  $\alpha = .94$ .

Following the RSES, participants completed a modified version of the Daily Events Survey (DES; Nezek & Gable, 2001). The DES is a 36-item measure of life events specifically constructed for use with college students and contains items representing events in social and achievement domains. The DES includes 15 positive events, 17 negative events, and 4 additional items for “other” positive and negative events not otherwise specified. In the present study, the 4 other items were excluded from analyses because endorsement of these items was found to be sensitive to experimental condition. Participants rated the occurrence and importance of each of the other 32 events using a single scale ranging from 0 (*did not occur*) to 1 (*occurred and not important*) to 3 (*occurred and extremely important*). Items loaded onto two primary factors representing positive and negative life events, and indices of positive and negative daily events were created by averaging scores across the respective items,  $\alpha_s = .72$  and  $.80$ .

## Results and Discussion

**Manipulation check.** To ensure that the self-construal framing tasks elicited the intended level of self-construal, a team of two to three trained coders rated the statements on the dimension of abstractness as well as the two dimensions correlated with abstractness in Study 1 (internality, satisfaction). Interrater reliabilities on these dimensions were all good, intraclass  $r_s = .82, .81,$  and  $.90$ , respectively. As expected, the conditions differed only on the abstractness dimension, with participants in the abstract condition ( $M = 4.33, SD = 1.06$ ) generating more abstractly construed statements than those in the concrete condition ( $M = 2.56, SD = .52$ ),  $t(74) = 9.47,$

$p < .001$ . Examples of statements coded as abstract included “Responsible—This is important because if you want to succeed in life you must be responsible” and “Today I was a friend—Important because my friends mean everything to me and I would do anything for them.” Examples of statements coded as concrete included “Went to class—This is important because a lot of college students skip their classes, but I didn’t” and “After eating I helped a friend out with setting up his room.” No significant differences emerged between the conditions on the dimensions of internality,  $t(74) = .97$ , or satisfaction,  $t(74) = 1.46$ , both  $p_s > .15$ .

**Effects of self-construal framing task on daily measures.** Participants in the abstract condition ( $N = 38; M = .24, SD = .02$ ) reported similar levels of self-esteem instability as participants in the concrete condition ( $N = 39; M = .20, SD = .03$ ),  $t(75) = -1.26, p = .21$ , as well as similar levels of self-esteem ( $M = 3.20, SD = .09$ ) as participants in the concrete condition ( $M = 3.25, SD = .09$ ),  $t(75) = .34$ . These similarities were evident despite participants in the abstract condition reporting somewhat but not significantly higher levels of negative daily events ( $M = .62, SD = .06$ ) compared to those in the concrete condition ( $M = .48, SD = .04$ ).

**Multilevel analyses predicting daily self-esteem from daily emotions.** To examine whether this pattern of findings was attributable to a buffering effect of the abstract task, we conducted multilevel analyses in a similar manner as Study 1. The daily-level equation predicted daily self-esteem by daily positive and negative events:

$$\text{Daily SE} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{DESpos}) + \beta_2(\text{DESneg}) + r,$$

where SE = self-esteem; DESpos = daily positive events; DESneg = daily negative events.

To examine whether the self-construal framing condition moderated the relationship between daily self-esteem, DESpos, and DESneg, the person-level equations were specified as:

$$\begin{aligned}\beta_0 &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Frame}) + U_{0i}, \\ \beta_1 &= \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}(\text{Frame}), \\ \beta_2 &= \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}(\text{Frame}),\end{aligned}$$

where Frame = framing condition.

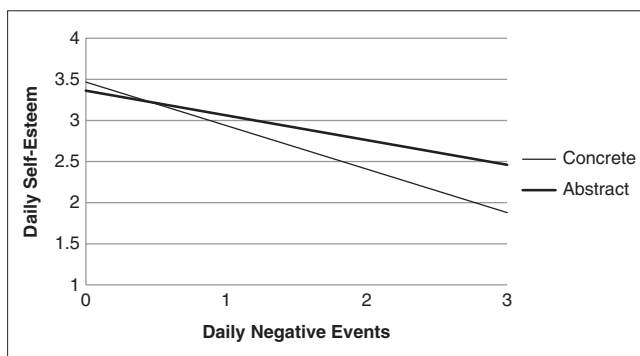
Results of this model are presented in Table 5. The Framing Condition  $\times$  Daily Positive Events interaction was not significant, indicating that framing condition did not moderate people’s responses to daily positive events. However, the Framing Condition  $\times$  Daily Negative Events interaction was significant, indicating that framing condition indeed moderated the relationship between daily self-esteem and daily negative events.

As Figure 2 shows, for participants in the abstract condition, their self-esteem on a particular day was less strongly influenced by negative events on that day than it was for participants in the concrete condition. Specifically, for those

**Table 5.** Summary of Multilevel Model Predicting Daily Self-Esteem From Daily Positive Events (DESpos), Daily Negative Events (DESneg), and Their Interactions With Self-Construal Framing Task Condition (Study 2)

Parameter	Coefficient	SE	z
Intercept ( $\gamma_{00}$ )	3.32	.09	35.75**
Frame ( $\gamma_{01}$ )	-0.00	.11	-0.01
DESpos main effect ( $\gamma_{10}$ )	0.19	.05	3.98**
Frame $\times$ DESpos ( $\gamma_{11}$ )	0.09	.06	1.37
DESneg main effect ( $\gamma_{20}$ )	-0.53	.07	-7.53**
Frame $\times$ DESneg ( $\gamma_{21}$ )	0.22	.09	2.59**

Frame = framing condition (0 = concrete frame, 1 = abstract frame).  
 \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Figure 2.** Relationship between daily negative events and daily self-esteem for participants in abstract and concrete self-construal framing conditions (Study 2)

assigned to the concrete condition, the relationship between daily negative events and self-esteem was  $B = -.53$ ,  $z = -7.53$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, for participants assigned to the abstract condition, this association was significant but substantially attenuated,  $B = -.30$ ,  $z = -5.97$ ,  $p < .01$ . Furthermore, this Framing Condition  $\times$  Daily Negative Events interaction was as characteristic of low-self-esteem participants as high-self-esteem participants, as it was not significantly moderated by average self-esteem level as tested in a separate analysis,  $B = -.04$ ,  $z = -.35$ ,  $p = .73$ . As in Study 1, SCA buffered daily self-esteem from the effects of negative daily experiences, and this pattern was apparent irrespective of self-esteem level.

## General Discussion

These studies were the first to examine the empirical links between self-esteem instability and a number of theorized constructs, including the dimension of SCA. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found SCA to be uniquely tied to self-esteem instability. We found that people who reported more abstract self-construals showed less subsequent day-to-day variability in self-esteem. More important, across both studies, multilevel analyses showed that SCA acted as a buffer between negative daily experiences and daily self-esteem. In

particular, the daily reports of self-esteem among individuals with abstract self-construals were nearly half as influenced by negative experiences as they were for people with concrete self-construals. Thus, the two studies demonstrate that possessing abstract self-construals may protect one's self-concept from the inevitable challenges of daily life.

These findings are important for a number of reasons. First, our findings highlight the importance of SCA as a dimension that may uniquely contribute to the stability of self-esteem over time. We propose that whenever people construe important aspects of themselves in an abstract manner, it makes those beliefs more impervious to challenge. This reasoning is rooted, in part, on the findings of prior laboratory studies in which researchers have manipulated the concreteness of standards of evaluation—for example, by comparing oneself to a specific person versus an “average” person (Alicke et al., 1995) or by experimentally constraining dimensions of comparison versus allowing participants to freely choose them (Dunning et al., 1989)—and have shown that people's self-evaluations are more likely to take a hit when the standards of comparison are concrete and constrained. Second, our study is unique in its naturalistic examination of the implications of these laboratory findings. Indeed, we found that people's chronic self-construal levels vary along this dimension of abstractness and that this dimension is uniquely tied to self-esteem stability. Lastly, an experimental manipulation replicated the individual difference findings but did so in the context of people's everyday lives rather than the laboratory.

Taken together, these findings paint a more complete picture of what may lay at the root of self-esteem instability. Theorists have suggested that self-esteem instability is caused by either having self-esteem that is *contingent* on certain expectations (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Paradise, 2002), having self-esteem that is based on *external* rather than internal standards (Crocker et al., 2003; Pyszczynski et al., 2003), or having a *poorly defined* self-concept (Kernis et al., 1993). Indeed, when examining zero-order correlations (cf. Table 1), our study supports each of these propositions. However, as multivariate analyses attest, what matters most is not whether self-esteem is contingent or what self-esteem is contingent on but rather how abstractly a person construes his or her most important bases of self-worth. When people make self-esteem contingent on the attainment of very concretely specified outcomes and accomplishments, their self-esteem may be particularly fragile. In contrast, when people base self-esteem on broader, abstract qualities that subsume more pieces of information, it is less likely that daily events will seriously challenge those beliefs and erode their self-views, which may result in more stable self-evaluations over time.

A key distinction in our approach to understanding the roots of self-esteem stability is the issue of disconfirmability. That is, self-evaluations should be stable to the degree that they are construed in a way that makes them relatively resistant to challenge. Indeed, this issue of disconfirmability is

implied in many other previous conceptualizations of self-esteem stability (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis & Paradise, 2002; Pyszczynski et al., 2003), but little research has compared how various dimensions of self-view are uniquely tied to self-esteem stability. As we have shown, self-construals that focus on abstract qualities of the self, such as traits and general characteristics, are tied to more stable evaluations over time and a greater resistance of daily self-esteem to the influence of negative daily events. Thus, holding abstract self-construals should make it more likely that self-evaluations are *resistant* to threats when they appear and thereby serve as a potential source of stability in self-evaluation.

A separate issue involves whether abstract self-construals facilitate a person's *recovery* from a significant threat to the self. For example, would affirming an abstractly construed source of self-worth be as effective as affirming a concretely construed source of self-worth in the aftermath of a threat? Although no study has explicitly examined this question, Schimel, Arndt, Banko, and Cook (2004) had participants engage in one of two brief self-affirmation tasks before being exposed to a self-threat. One task, intended to affirm intrinsic aspects of the self, asked participants to reflect on the quality of *being* a particularly valued self-definition (e.g., "Being an athlete makes me feel \_\_\_"). The other task, intended to affirm extrinsic aspects of the self, had participants reflect on the actions and accomplishments that go along with a valued self-definition (e.g., "I know I am a competent athlete because \_\_\_"). Indeed, they found that participants who completed the intrinsic self-affirmation reported less rejection to a social threat and performed better and used fewer self-handicapping strategies on a threatening achievement task. Thus, Schimel et al.'s findings suggest that affirmations of different aspects of the self have distinguishable effects on responses to threat. Whether affirmations of abstractly versus concretely construed sources of self-worth also result in different responses to self-threat is an important direction for future research and would suggest other ways in which possessing abstract self-construals could facilitate more adaptive responses to threat.

Our pattern of findings was not moderated by level of self-esteem, indicating that it was as characteristic of those with lower levels of self-esteem as it was for those with higher levels of self-esteem. Thus, individuals with low self-esteem who hold abstract self-construals may also have self-esteem that is relatively protected from the influence of negative daily events, which may contribute to stable, but low, self-esteem over time. However, research is unclear on the degree of risk presented by unstable self-esteem among low-self-esteem individuals. Although some studies suggest that risk for depression is greater for those possessing stable low versus unstable low self-esteem (Kernis, Grannemann, & Mathis, 1991), other analyses suggest that stability does not predict risk for depression among those with low self-esteem (J. E. Roberts et al., 1995). However, our findings suggest that individuals with low self-esteem also tend to

hold more concrete self-construals, and those concrete self-construals may make their self-esteem more volatile over time. Whether the concreteness of one's self-construals gradually precipitates an upward or downward trend in self-esteem and well-being over time among those with low self-esteem is a question that remains to be addressed in future research and would be an important question to address in samples specifically selected for low levels of self-esteem such as clinically depressed individuals.

With respect to the potential roots of self-esteem instability, a notable finding pertained to the trait of neuroticism. In both univariate and multivariate analyses, neuroticism had associations with self-esteem instability on par with SCA. In multilevel analyses, neuroticism was also a significant moderator of the influence of daily negative emotions on daily self-esteem. In other words, neurotic individuals were especially prone to suffer drops in self-esteem on days that involved high levels of negative emotion. Thus, neuroticism deserves greater attention in future research on self-esteem instability, as it may represent a previously neglected risk factor for self-esteem instability in terms of both increasing one's experience of negative emotion and making it more likely that negative emotion will result in lowered self-esteem.

Strengths of our approach included the comprehensive assessment of a number of constructs theorized to contribute to self-esteem stability. Furthermore, these studies are among the few to use multilevel modeling as a way to understand the processes that underlie self-esteem instability (see also Nezlek & Plesko, 2001; Zeigler-Hill & Showers, 2007). As such, we were able to rule out a number of alternative explanations for our findings and provide experimental evidence attesting to the role of SCA in sheltering people's self-esteem from the negative experiences of the day. Furthermore, we demonstrated these findings in a nonclinical sample of young adults. Self-esteem instability is known to be greatest during adolescence and young adulthood (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003), so examining the roots of self-esteem stability among this group is important. The relatively high levels of self-esteem instability among these age groups are likely due to many of the environmental and developmental changes faced during this period (B. W. Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Given the known links between self-esteem instability and depression among young adults, understanding the sources of instability in adolescents and young adults can be useful for intervention. However, self-esteem stability is known to peak during middle adulthood, so future research is needed to determine whether these processes underlying self-esteem stability are also present in older populations.

In sum, the findings from the present studies elucidate the processes that underlie people's ability to maintain a stable sense of self-worth even in the face of everyday challenges. Given that self-esteem instability has been tied to higher levels of anger and excuse making (Kernis et al., 1989, 1992), increased risk for depression (Butler et al., 1994; Kernis et al., 1998; J. E. Roberts & Gotlib, 1997; J. E. Roberts &

Monroe, 1992), and more damaging physiological responses to stress (Seery et al., 2004), the dimension of SCA may contribute to our understanding of these responses to threat. Furthermore, SCA may be useful in understanding cultural differences in self-esteem. As described by Suh (2002, 2007), individuals from East Asian cultures tend to have more context-sensitive self-concepts; in other words, their self-descriptions and self-evaluations tend to change across settings to a greater extent than is found for Westerners. Thus, East Asians may be more likely to define themselves in terms of concrete actions and accomplishments (“I got an early promotion at Samsung”) rather than in more abstract trait-like terms (“I am competent”). East Asians also tend to report lower levels of self-esteem than Westerners (Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener & Suh, 2000; Heine & Renshaw, 2002). Suh (2007) suggests that these two empirical findings are connected, as the greater emphasis East Asians place on their social context and the opinions of close others sets into play a variety of motivational, cognitive, and emotional processes that promote self-criticism rather than self-enhancement. Accordingly, it is possible that SCA is a dimension of self-construal that maintains the form of the self that is most sanctioned by one’s own culture. Thus, we believe that the dimension of SCA may also serve as a useful link in understanding these ties between culture, self-esteem, and well-being (Updegraff & Suh, 2007).

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