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Accepting our weaknesses and enjoying better relationships: An initial examination of self-security

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ABSTRACT

The present research introduces self-security, a new indicator of healthy self-evaluation. Self-security is defined as the open and nonjudgmental acceptance of one's own weaknesses. To assess self-security, we developed the Security of "I" Assessment (SofIA), a self-report questionnaire. Study 1's ($N = 195$) exploratory factor analysis suggested a single-factor model that Study 2's ($N = 158$) confirmatory factor analysis supported as providing good fit to the data. In Study 3 ($N = 195$), the SofIA demonstrated excellent test-retest reliability. Using the SofIA, Study 1 also explored self-security's correlates in a sample of 195 undergraduates, with 279 of their close others (family, long-term friends, and romantic partners) reporting on the quality of their relationships with the participants. Self-security was significantly associated, but not redundant with, other aspects of self-evaluation (e.g., self-esteem, self-compassion). Self-security was also associated with self-evaluative interpersonal traits and attachment style. Importantly, even after simultaneously accounting for other aspects of self-evaluation, self-security predicted relationship quality, as independently reported by the participants and their close others. Specifically, participants' greater self-security significantly predicted their experiencing less conflict and emotional distress and their close others' reporting more support received from the participants.

> Growth begins when we start to accept our own weakness.—Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*

> A man should not strive to eliminate his complexes but to get in accord with them.—Sigmund Freud, letter to Sándor Ferenczi

> This being human is a guest house…some momentary awareness comesas an unexpected visitor…The dark thought, the shame… meet them at the door laughing,and invite them in.—Rumi, *The Guest House*

1. Introduction

Across time and cultures, philosophers, psychologists, and even poets speak of accepting one's weaknesses, and people commonly use the words "secure/insecure" to describe how comfortable or bothered they feel about their weaknesses. Acceptance and mindfulness-based psychotherapies call for accepting—not "fixing"—these unflattering aspects of the self (Hayes, 2004). Instead of eradicating, minimizing, or ignoring them, one allows them to enter the forefront of awareness, acknowledges openly their unpleasantness, and, without judgment, accepts them as they are. Nonetheless, empirical research examining individual differences in the acceptance of weaknesses has been, surprisingly, absent. The present research endeavors to contribute to self-evaluation research by introducing a new construct called self-security, defined as the acceptance of one's own weaknesses. Everyone feels vulnerable about certain aspects of the self (e.g., personal characteristics, past experiences, or simply certain thoughts and feelings). Self-security is openly and nonjudgmentally accepting these things that challenge our sense of self-worth. We consider self-security to be a single dimension, with acceptance of one's weaknesses at one end, and rejection of one's weaknesses at the other.

Self-security is an aspect of self-evaluation, as are self-esteem, self-compassion, and shame-proneness. Needless to say, a great deal of research has examined aspects of self-evaluation, especially self-esteem. Nearly a century of research has linked self-esteem to myriad important outcomes (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). For example, low self-esteem is associated with psychopathological symptoms, whereas high self-esteem is associated with emotional well-being (Diener, 1984). Whereas self-esteem addresses how one feels about

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oneself *overall*, self-security addresses how one feels about one's weaknesses specifically. It is possible for some people to have high self-esteem but low self-security, because although their global self-evaluation is positive, they are critical of their specific weaknesses.

Curiously, even though high self-esteem is associated with better relationships in general (e.g., Swann & Read, 1981; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), research has found that when people's sense of self-worth is threatened, only high-self-esteem participants become defensive and condescending (e.g., Kernis & Waschull, 1995), and reduce their support of others (Park & Crocker, 2005). These findings suggest two clues about self-evaluation and interpersonal relationships. First, having a favorable evaluation of one's *overall* self does not equal being at ease when confronted with things that make one feel vulnerable about self-worth. Second, being secure about self-worth may play a role in interpersonal traits and influence relationship outcomes.

Unlike self-esteem, self-compassion addresses how people behave in vulnerable contexts. "Self-compassion entails three main components: (a) self-kindness—being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical, (b) common humanity—perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness—holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them." (Neff, 2003a, p. 85). Self-compassion has been linked to other indicators of healthy self-evaluation, such as self-determination (Neff, 2003b). Moreover, research has found that people who practice self-compassion not only became less emotionally reactive to unfavorable outcomes (e.g., experience less unpleasant self-relevant emotions), but also behave less defensively (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007).

We would expect practicing self-compassion to soften one's rejection of one's own weaknesses—therefore increasing self-security. However, it is possible for some people to be highly self-secure without engaging in self-compassion: these people are able to accept potential threats to self-worth without actively directing love and tenderness toward themselves (the Self-Kindness/Self-Judgment dimension of self-compassion), subscribing to the worldview that human suffering is shared universally (the Common Humanity/Isolation dimension), or regulating painful thoughts and feelings through mindfulness (the Mindfulness/Over-identification dimension). In sum, self-compassion largely concerns how one *responds* to emotional pain, whereas self-security focuses exclusively on one's *attitudes* about one's own weaknesses.

Shame-proneness is the tendency to "feel bad" about the self and to withdraw socially after some public failure or transgression (Wells & Jones, 2000). It differs from security of oneself in two ways. First, shame-proneness involves feeling badly about one's entire self, whereas self-security concerns how one feels specifically about one's weaknesses. Second, shame includes an action tendency, specifically the inclination to withdraw, whereas self-security does not. It is possible for some people to be low in self-security without being high in shame-proneness: even though they feel badly about their specific weaknesses, they do not feel badly about their selves per se (and therefore do not withdraw socially).

The present research is the first to examine individual differences in the acceptance of personal weaknesses. Our first goal was to develop an instrument to measure self-security, and to explore its psychometric properties. Our second goal was to use this instrument to explore self-security's associations with other aspects of self-evaluation. Because we expect self-security to be an important indicator of healthy self-evaluation, we hypothesized that it would be substantially related to—albeit distinct from—self-esteem, self-compassion, and shame-proneness.

Because one's self-evaluation influences how one interacts with others, especially in contexts in which one's sense of self-worth is at stake, it should be expected that self-evaluation will be associated with self-evaluative interpersonal traits, such as fear of negative evaluation–this has, in fact, been demonstrated (e.g., Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Werner, Jazaieri, Goldin, Ziv, Heimberg, & Gross, 2012). Therefore, our third goal was to test our hypothesis that self-security, like other aspects of self-evaluation, would be associated with a wide variety of self-evaluative interpersonal traits. Specifically, we examined self-security's associations with three types of self-evaluative interpersonal traits: (a) hypersensitivity about others' evaluation; (b) anxiety about being emotionally vulnerable; and (c) self-aggrandizement. First, we theorized that people who reject their own weaknesses would be particularly vigilant against any hint of rejection by others; their lack of self-acceptance would also lead them to look to others' approval for sense of self-worth. Therefore, we hypothesized that lower levels of self-security would be associated with hypersensitivity about others' evaluation, and examined four traits about such hypersensitivity: (a) contingent self-esteem (dependency on others' evaluation for self-worth feelings); (b) fear of negative evaluation (anxiety about being judged by others); (c) external shame (easily experiencing others as shaming); and (d) self-sacrificing self-enhancement (sacrificing for others to feel good and important). Second, we also theorized that people who view their own weaknesses negatively would feel less safe opening up to others. Therefore, we hypothesized that lower levels of self-security would be associated with the aversion to being emotionally vulnerable with others, and examined two traits about such aversion: hiding the self (anxious and unwilling to expose one's vulnerabilities to others), and devaluation (blaming oneself for being disappointed by others). Third, we theorized that self-*in*security would deplete people's sense of self-worth, such that they would need to see themselves in unrealistically favorable light to defend against feelings of insecurity. Therefore, we hypothesized that lower levels of self-security would be associated with self-aggrandizement, a defining characteristic of narcissism, and examined two self-aggrandizing traits: grandiose fantasy (fantasizing about accomplishing huge feats and impressing others) and entitlement rage (anger at others for not treating one in accordance with one's exaggerated self-importance). In sum, we expected self-security—like other aspects of self-evaluation—to be negatively associated with a wide variety of emotionally and socially problematic self-evaluative interpersonal traits; we did not expect self-security to be a unique predictor in this respect.

Our fourth goal was to explore whether self-security is redundant with several major personality traits. Because we propose that self-security plays a beneficial role in interpersonal contexts, we expected it to be positively associated (yet not redundant) with the two most frequently studied interpersonal traits: extraversion and agreeableness. Additionally, because we theorize that self-*in*security (i.e., the rejection of one's weaknesses) should overlap with—but be distinguishable from—the tendency to experience unpleasant affect, we expected self-security to be negatively associated (yet not redundant) with neuroticism.

Making oneself vulnerable is part and parcel of being close with others, and according to Cordova and Scott (2001), behaving vulnerably with others is the catalyst that initiates and fuels intimacy. We theorized that people who see their own weaknesses negatively would avoid intimacy—consequently, rejection of one's own weaknesses should obstruct the healthy development of close relationships. By the same token, being accepting about one's weaknesses would enable one to feel comfortable being close with others, and thus encourage quality relationships. Therefore, we propose that accepting one's weaknesses—being comfortable about them—predicts better close relationships. Further, we expect that it is this willingness to behave vulnerably with others (which we do not expect to be part of other aspects of self-evaluation; i.e., self-esteem, self-compassion, and shame-proneness) that would largely account for self-security being associated with healthy close relationships. Thus, our fifth and most important goal was to test the hypothesis that self-security would be associated with close relationships in terms of attachment style and relationship quality, even after simultaneously accounting for all other aforementioned aspects of self-evaluation.