FlashReport

# Reducing defensive distancing: Self-affirmation and risk regulation in response to relationship threats

Lisa M. Jaremka *, Debra P. Bunyan, Nancy L. Collins, David K. Sherman

*Department of Psychology, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9660, USA*

ABSTRACT

The risk regulation model proposes that people with low self-esteem, but not those with high self-esteem, react to relationship-based self-threats by defensively distancing from their partner. In the present study, we hypothesized that a self-affirmation manipulation, by restoring self-worth and integrity for people with low self-esteem, would attenuate this defensive distancing behavior. Participants were exposed to either a relationship-based self-threat or no such threat, and then completed a self-affirmation or a control task. As predicted, when presented with a self-threat, individuals with low self-esteem distanced from their partner. This effect was attenuated if they were given the opportunity to self-affirm. By contrast, the threat and self-affirmation manipulations had no effect for those with high self-esteem. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for risk regulation theory and self-affirmation theory.

© 2010 Published by Elsevier Inc.

In order to maintain satisfying and caring relationships, people must find a balance between relationship-promotion goals, which foster interdependence and belonging, and self-protection goals, which defend the self against rejection but may weaken social bonds (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). While some individuals effectively balance these goals, people with low self-esteem (LSE) tend to prioritize self-protection goals at the expense of relationship promotion. As risk regulation theory argues, people with LSE have doubts about their own self-worth which result in heightened anxieties about their partner's love and continued acceptance (Murray et al., 2006). These rejection concerns then lead people with LSE to prioritize self-protection goals and distance from their partner in response to even mild relationship threats.

Numerous studies have supported risk regulation theory by demonstrating that people with LSE respond to relationship-based self-threats—information that threatens the self and has *implications for belonging*—by distancing from their relationship (see Murray et al., 2006 for a review). This distancing behavior helps downplay the importance of the relationship and the loss that could result from future rejection. For example, Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, and Ellsworth (1998, Study 1) posed a relationship-based self-threat by asking participants to recall a time when they transgressed against their romantic partner. This activity was self-threatening because it involved negative information about one's own behavior, and had implications for belonging because the behavior occurred in reference to an ongoing relationship partner. When faced with this threat,

people with LSE (but not HSE) distanced from their relationship by derogating their partner as a source of potential connection.

Defensively distancing in response to threat may help people with LSE achieve their short-term goal of self-protection, but it has negative long-term consequences for their relationships. For example, the romantic *partners* of people with LSE become less satisfied in their relationships over time (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003), and romantic couples are more likely to break up when one or both members have LSE (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988).

The literature thus far suggests that people with LSE may experience long-term difficulties in their relationships due, in part, to their tendency to self-protectively distance from their partner in response to threat. Risk regulation theory argues that this negative spiral ultimately stems from the concerns that people with LSE have about their self-worth and integrity. The current study investigates these claims by experimentally bolstering self-worth and self-integrity with the goal of stopping this recursive process. That is, if the relationship distancing dynamic begins with doubts about the self, bolstering self-views should prevent the negative downstream consequences that typically ensue.

### Self-affirmation theory

Self-affirmation theory offers one useful framework for understanding the roots of defensive relationship behaviors and stopping such negative recursive processes (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). Self-affirmation theory argues that people are motivated to maintain the perceived worth and integrity of the self, and that information that threatens these views can prompt efforts to restore a sense of self-worth or self-integrity (Steele, 1988). People often attempt to

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: ljaremka@gmail.com (L.M. Jaremka).

restore self-integrity by defensively distancing from the source of the threat, thereby downplaying the significance of the threat and its potential implications for the self (e.g., Harris & Napper, 2005). According to self-affirmation theory, reflecting on important values (i.e., self-affirming) reminds people of their broader identity (e.g., who they are and what is important to them), thereby reducing the pressure to defend a particular aspect of the self (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). With self-integrity affirmed, people exhibit less defensive, self-protective responses across a wide variety of domains (Sherman & Hartson, 2011), including threats to health (Harris & Epton, 2009), collective identities (Sherman & Kim, 2005), and existential concerns (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005).

The evidence thus far suggests that a self-affirmation exercise can attenuate defensive responses to self-threats by reassuring people that they possess self-worth and integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). If the defensive distancing typically exhibited by people with LSE in response to relationship-based self-threats stems from their negative self-views, a self-affirmation task, which directly counters these chronic doubts, should eliminate these self-protective responses. Accordingly, the goal of the current study was to examine the effects of a self-affirmation task on defensive distancing for people with LSE in the context of a romantic relationship.

## The current study

The experiment featured a 2 (threat: no threat vs. threat) × 2 (affirmation task: affirmation vs. control) × self-esteem (continuous) design. We predicted a significant three-way (threat × affirmation × self-esteem) interaction characterized by a significant threat × affirmation interaction for those with LSE, but not those with HSE. For those with LSE, we predicted that the threat manipulation would lead to relationship distancing in the no-affirmation condition and that this effect would be attenuated in the affirmation condition. We expected no effect of self-affirmation in the no-threat condition because there was no threat to buffer against. For those with HSE, we predicted no evidence of defensive distancing in response to threat and thus no effect of self-affirmation.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 172 undergraduates (37 men, 135 women) who participated for research credit ($M_{age} = 19$, $SD = 1.94$). All participants were in a romantic relationship of at least 3 months ($M_{months} = 19$, $SD = 17$).

### Procedure

#### Background measures

Participants completed a measure of self-esteem ($\alpha = .91$, Rosenberg, 1965) and relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = .92$, adapted from Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) approximately 24 hours before their lab appointment. Participants completed the self-esteem measure again upon arriving at the lab ($\alpha = .91$). The two self-esteem scores were averaged into a single index to obtain the most reliable assessment ($r = .80$).

#### Threat manipulation

Next, participants received the relationship-based self-threat manipulation. Participants in the threat condition were asked to spend 5 minutes describing three aspects of themselves that they were trying to keep secret from their partner (adapted from Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). Participants were also told that "partners eventually discover one another's more negative sides and conflicts could develop as a result." Participants in the no-threat condition did not receive these materials.

#### Self-affirmation manipulation

Participants then completed a standard self-affirmation manipulation (McQueen & Klein, 2006). First, they ranked a list of values in order of personal importance. Next, participants in the affirmation writing condition wrote about the value they ranked as most important and why this value was important to them. Participants in the control writing condition wrote about the value they ranked as second to least important and why this value might be important to the typical UCSB student. Participants were asked to write for 5 minutes.

### Psychological distancing measures

#### Communal divestment

Participants responded to 5 items measuring the extent to which they were unwilling to invest in their partner's well-being ($\alpha = .86$). Sample items include "I sometimes resent having to do things for my partner," and "I do not like being responsible for helping my partner." Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*agree completely*).

#### Partner derogation

Participants rated their partner on 24 negative (e.g., lazy, demanding) and positive (e.g., intelligent, warm) traits ($\alpha = .86$; adapted from Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 9 (*completely characteristic*). Higher numbers reflect more negative ratings.

#### Destructive behavioral intentions

Participants rated how often they would engage in 6 relationship destructive behaviors over the next six months ($\alpha = .79$; adapted from Murray et al., 1998). Sample items include "I will act selfishly and ignore my partner's feelings," and "I will do something that causes an argument." Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*rarely, if ever*) to 7 (*frequently*).

## Results

We ran a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses with the main effects of self-esteem (continuous, mean centered), threat, and affirmation entered on Step 1, all possible two-way interactions entered on Step 2, the three-way interaction entered on Step 3, and the defensive distancing measures as separate outcomes (see Table 1 for intercorrelations among dependent measures). Relationship satisfaction (mean centered) was entered as a control variable on Step 1 because it was related to the outcomes of interest (refer to the online supplemental material for the complete regression output for each DV). Significant three-way interactions were decomposed into the two-way (threat × affirmation) interactions for LSE and HSE (computed at ±1 SD from the mean). If a two-way interaction was

**Table 1**
Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations for the dependent variables.

| | Variable | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Communal divestment | Partner derogation | Destructive behavioral intentions |
| Communal divestment | 1.00 | – | – |
| Derogation of partner | .52*** | 1.00 | – |
| Destructive behavioral intentions | .46*** | .41*** | 1.00 |
| Mean (SD) | 2.24(1.25) | 3.15(.96) | 2.68(1.07) |

Note. $N = 172$. † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

significant, planned comparisons were conducted to test specific hypotheses of interest.

### Effects of self-affirmation on relationship distancing

#### Communal divestment

The analysis of communal divestment revealed a significant three-way (threat × affirmation × self-esteem) interaction, $\beta = .41$, $t(162) = 2.62$, $p = .010$. As predicted, there was a significant threat × affirmation interaction for LSE [$\beta = -.37$, $t(162) = -2.15$, $p = .033$], but not for HSE [$\beta = .27$, $t(162) = 1.60$, $p = .111$]. See Table 2 and Fig. 1.

Consistent with prior work, when LSE participants completed the control writing task, they were more likely to withdraw communal investment in the threat condition than in the no-threat condition (B vs. A). Importantly, when LSE participants completed the threat manipulation, they were more likely to withdraw communal investment in the control writing condition than in the affirmation condition (B vs. D). Thus, the affirmation manipulation significantly reduced the distancing response. A stronger test of this hypothesis would demonstrate that the affirmation led to responses that are similar to the no-threat condition. Indeed, LSE participants who were threatened and given the opportunity to affirm did not differ in their ratings from LSE participants who were not threatened and who completed the control writing task (D vs. A). Finally, we examined whether the self-affirmation task would reveal benefits in a non-threatening context. As predicted, for participants who were not threatened, there was no significant difference between those who received the control writing task and those who received the affirmation task (A vs. C).

Participants with HSE were unaffected by the manipulations, as evidenced by non-significant paired comparisons. For those with HSE, mean levels of communal divestment did not differ significantly across the four conditions.

#### Partner derogation

The analysis of partner derogation revealed a significant three-way (threat × affirmation × self-esteem) interaction ($\beta = .30$, $t(162) = 1.97$, $p = .05$). As expected, there was a significant two-way (threat × affirmation) interaction for LSE [$\beta = -.40$, $t(162) = -2.45$, $p = .016$] but not for HSE [$\beta = .06$, $t(162) = .38$, $p = .708$]. The pattern of results for partner derogation was highly consistent with the pattern found for communal divestment (see Table 2 and Fig. 2). Of particular note, LSE participants tended to derogate their partner in response to the threat (A vs. B), but this effect was eliminated for those who were given an



**Fig. 1.** Predicted means for communal divestment at ± 1 SD from the mean on self-esteem. The letters correspond to the conditions listed in Table 2 for ease of understanding.

opportunity to affirm (A vs. D). None of the paired comparisons were significant for participants with HSE.

#### Destructive behavioral intentions

The analysis of destructive behavioral intentions revealed a significant three-way (threat × affirmation × self-esteem) interaction ($\beta = .32$, $t(162) = 2.16$, $p = .032$). The two-way (threat × affirmation) interaction did not reach significance for participants with LSE [$\beta = -.23$, $t(162) = -1.46$, $p = .146$] or HSE [$\beta = .26$, $t(162) = 1.63$, $p = .105$]. However, the planned comparisons were very similar to the results for communal divestment and partner derogation (see Table 2 and Fig. 3). As predicted, LSE participants responded to the threat with increased destructive behavioral intentions (A vs. B). When given the opportunity to affirm, this effect was eliminated (A vs. D). None of the paired comparisons were significant for participants with HSE except one (C vs. D) that was not relevant to our hypotheses.

### Discussion

The current study demonstrated that a self-affirmation task can attenuate the defensive interpersonal responses exhibited by people with LSE in response to relationship-based self-threats. Results were highly consistent across three operationalizations of psychological distancing—communal divestment, partner derogation, and destructive behavioral intentions. These results extend the risk regulation literature in an important new direction by providing empirical support for the argument that the defensive distancing exhibited by people with LSE ultimately stems from a vulnerable sense of self (Murray et al., 2006). By targeting this vulnerability at its roots via a self-affirmation exercise, we were able to eliminate LSE individuals' self-protective

**Table 2**
Predicted means and paired comparison results for the three-way interactions.

| | | Predicted means | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Control writing | | Affirmation writing | |
| | | No threat | Threat | No threat | Threat |
| | Dependent measures | A | B | C | D |
| Low self-esteem | Communal divestment | 2.04$_a$ | 2.76$_b$ | 2.34$_{ab}$ | 2.03$_a$ |
| | Partner derogation | 2.98$_{a\dagger}$ | 3.46$_b$ | 3.39$_{ab}$ | 2.98$_a$ |
| | Destructive behavioral intentions | 2.68$_{a\dagger}$ | 3.26$_b$ | 2.73$_{a\dagger}$ | 2.74$_a$ |
| High self-esteem | Communal divestment | 2.40$_a$ | 2.00$_a$ | 2.04$_a$ | 2.41$_a$ |
| | Partner derogation | 3.16$_a$ | 3.08$_a$ | 3.11$_a$ | 3.17$_a$ |
| | Destructive behavioral intentions | 2.46$_{ab}$ | 2.51$_{ab}$ | 2.22$_a$ | 2.90$_b$ |

Note. $N = 172$. Predicted means were computed at one standard deviation above and below the mean of self-esteem. Higher predicted means reflect more psychological distancing from the relationship. Within each row, all possible pairwise contrasts were conducted. Unless otherwise noted, means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$. †These means differ from other means in that row with a different subscript at $p < .10$.
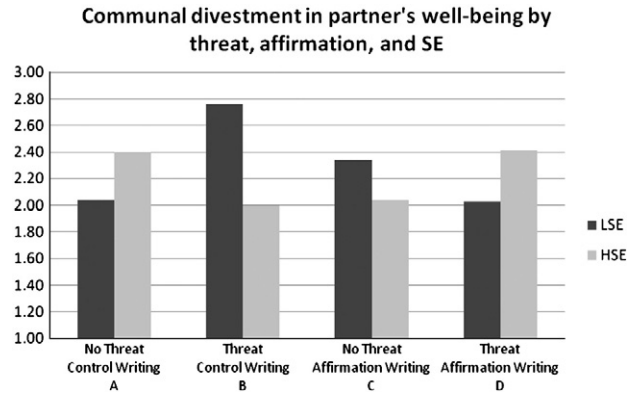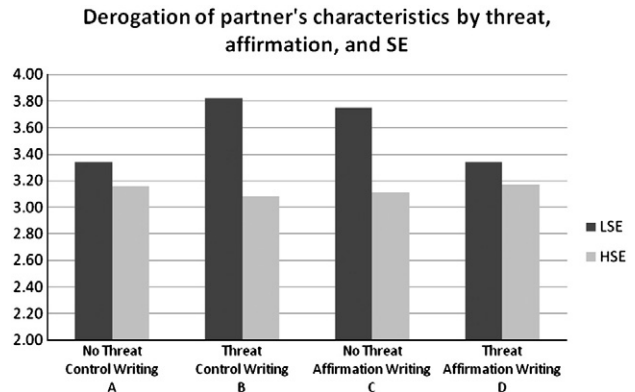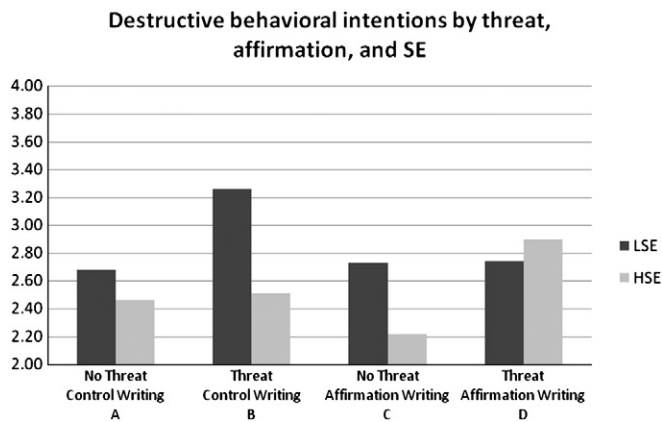


**Fig. 2.** Predicted means for partner derogation at ± 1 SD from the mean on self-esteem. The letters correspond to the conditions listed in Table 2 for ease of understanding.

**Fig. 3.** Predicted means for destructive behavioral intentions at $\pm 1$ SD from the mean on self-esteem. The letters correspond to the conditions listed in Table 2 for ease of understanding.

responses. Accordingly, a self-affirmation has the potential to stop chronic self-doubts from spiraling into self-protective and defensive relationship behaviors.

This study adds to recent work examining individual differences in self-affirmation dynamics, and is consistent with studies showing that self-affirmation effects are most likely to emerge for people who are most vulnerable to the threat of interest (e.g., Harris & Napper, 2005). For example, students who were most concerned about college evaluation experienced the greatest increases in stress hormones in the absence of an affirmation, but the greatest reduction with an affirmation (Sherman, Bunyan, Creswell, & Jaremka, 2009). This study adds to these findings by demonstrating that people with LSE (who are most vulnerable to the threats investigated in this study) reap the largest benefit from an affirmation. Although people with HSE did not benefit from an affirmation in the current study, it may be because they were not threatened in the first place. Indeed, other research has found that people with HSE are often more reactive than those with LSE to ego-based threats (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000) and that when people with HSE are defensive, self-affirmations can attenuate this response (Landau & Greenberg, 2006). Thus, a growing literature suggests that individual differences that index vulnerability to specific threats are crucial to understanding self-affirmation processes.

It is also noteworthy that, in the no-threat conditions, there was a trend suggesting that, for those with LSE, the affirmation task may have been counterproductive relative to the control task (see Briñol, Petty, Gallardo, & DeMarree, 2007, and Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993, Study 2 for similar arguments). These patterns suggest that the presence or absence of a threatening stimuli may also be critical to understanding affirmation processes.

This study also adds to a growing literature examining the interplay between self-affirmation and relationship processes (see also Tesser & Cornell, 1991). Prior studies show that *relationships* can be used as an affirmational resource for coping with *self*-threats (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005; Murray, Bellavia, Feeney, Holmes, & Rose, 2001). The results of the current study suggest that the *self* can be used as an affirmational resource for coping with *relationship* threats. Other research demonstrates that people respond to threats to belonging (e.g., social exclusion) by affirming social traits and values (Knowles, Lucas, Molden, Gardner, & Dean, 2010) and that self-affirmation tasks elicit greater positive, other-directed emotion (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008). Because close relationships are so central to people's lives, and threats to the self are so common within relationships, the intriguing connections between self and relationship processes provide fertile ground for future research.

We raise two other questions for future research. First, it is difficult to conclusively determine from this study whether the affirmation manipulation impacted views of the self, which had downstream consequences for belonging, or whether it had a direct impact on belonging. Future research is needed to disentangle these specific mechanisms. Second, future research should examine long-term relationship outcomes. In the academic domain, self-affirmations have been shown to inhibit negative recursive processes, leading to better grades over time among minority students (Cohen et al., 2009). If self-affirmation also reduces negative recursive processes in the relational domain, we should see long-term benefits for couples as well.

In conclusion, people with LSE defensively distance from their relationship in response to self-threats that have implications for belonging (Murray et al., 2006). The present study suggests that this self-protective distancing stems from insecurities about the self—and that bolstering self-views via a self-affirmation task can eliminate these defensive behaviors.

**Appendix A. Supplemental data**

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.08.015.

**References**

Briñol, P., Petty, R. E., Gallardo, I., & DeMarree, K. G. (2007). The effects of self-affirmation in non-threatening persuasion domains: Timing affects the process. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *33*, 1533—1546.

Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, *324*, 400—403.

Crocker, J., Niiya, Y., & Mischkowski, D. (2008). Why does writing about important values reduce defensiveness? Self-affirmation and the role of positive, other-directed feelings. *Psychological Science*, *19*, 740—747.

Harris, P. R., & Epton, T. (2009). The impact of self-affirmation on health cognition, health behaviour and other health-related responses: A narrative review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *3*, 962—978.

Harris, P. R., & Napper, L. (2005). Self-affirmation and the biased processing of threatening health-risk information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*, 1250—1263.

Heatherton, T. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2000). Interpersonal evaluations following threats to self: Role of self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 725—736.

Hendrick, S. S., Hendrick, C., & Adler, N. L. (1988). Romantic relationships: Love, satisfaction, and staying together. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 980—988.

Kumashiro, M., & Sedikides, C. (2005). Taking on board liability-focused information: Close positive relationships as a self-bolstering resource. *Psychological Science*, *16*, 732—739.

Knowles, M. L., Lucas, G. M., Molden, D. C., Gardner, W. L., & Dean, K. D. (2010). There's no substitute for belonging: Self-affirmation following social and nonsocial threats. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *36*, 173—186.

Landau, M. J., & Greenberg, J. (2006). Play it safe or go for the gold? A terror management perspective on self-enhancement and protection motives in risky decision making. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *32*, 1633—1645.

McQueen, A., & Klein, W. P. (2006). Experimental manipulations of self-affirmation: A systematic review. *Self and Identity*, *5*, 289—354.

Murray, S. L., Bellavia, G., Feeney, B., Holmes, J. G., & Rose, P. (2001). The contingencies of interpersonal acceptance: When romantic relationships function as a self-affirmational resource. *Motivation and Emotion*, *25*, 163—189.

Murray, S. L., Bellavia, G. M., Rose, P., & Griffin, D. W. (2003). Once hurt, twice hurtful: How perceived regard regulates daily marital interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *84*, 126—147.

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Collins, N. L. (2006). Optimizing assurance: The risk regulation system in relationships. *Psychological Bulletin*, *132*, 641—666.

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The self-fulfilling nature of positive illusions in romantic relationships: Love is not blind, but prescient. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *71*, 1155—1180.

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., MacDonald, G., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1998). Through the looking glass darkly? When self-doubts turn into relationship insecurities. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1459—1480.

Murray, S. L., Rose, P., Bellavia, G. M., Holmes, J. G., & Kusche, A. G. (2002). When rejection stings: How self-esteem constrains relationship-enhancement processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*, 556—573.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rusbult, C. E., Martz, J. M., & Agnew, C. R. (1998). The investment model scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Personal Relationships, 5*, 357—391.

Schmeichel, B. J., & Martens, A. (2005). Self-affirmation and mortality salience: Affirming values reduces worldview defense and death-thought accessibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*, 658—667.

Sherman, D. K., Bunyan, D. P., Creswell, J. D., & Jaremka, L. M. (2009). Psychological vulnerability and stress: The effects of self-affirmation on sympathetic nervous system responses to naturalistic stressors. *Health Psychology, 28*, 554—562.

Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 38*. (pp. 183—242)San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Sherman, D. K., & Hartson, K. (2011). Reconciling self-protection with self-improvement: Self-affirmation theory. In M. Alicke & C. Sedikides (Eds.), *The Handbook of Self-Enhancement and Self Protection* (pp. 128—151). Guilford Press.

Sherman, D. K., & Kim, H. S. (2005). Is there an "I" in "team"? The role of the self in group-serving judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*, 108—120.

Steele, C. M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 21*. (pp. 261—302)New York: Academic Press.

Steele, C. M., Spencer, S. J., & Lynch, M. (1993). Self-image resilience and dissonance: The role of affirmational resources. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 885—896.

Tesser, A., & Cornell, D. P. (1991). On the confluence of self processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 27*, 501—526.