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The Effects of Information on College Students’ Self-Worth

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Abstract
Anxiety and depression are common results of the pressures experienced by college students at all levels of their undergraduate careers. These symptoms often influence college students’ self-worth and play a key role in determining adequate self-esteem, and recent research has examined a number of the causes and effects of self-perceptions among college students. The current study examines how information that may affect the mindset of a student affects his or her self-perceptions. Specifically the present study measures the effect of neutral/positive and negative information on the self-worth of college students. A sample of 24 Xavier University of Louisiana students was randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 13$) and a control group ($n = 11$). The experimental group received information that presented college in a negative light, whereas the control group received the same information written in a manner that conveyed a neutral/positive tone. The participants’ self-worth was measured using The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003). Contrary to hypotheses, participants who read the negative information about college students did not have a more externally contingent self-worth. Thus, the information presented to participants in the experimental group did not affect how students assessed their self-worth. Although the trends in the data are promising, reasons for this lack of significant results may be insufficient manipulation strength or a small sample size.

Key Terms: Contingencies, Depression, Self-esteem, Self-worth

Students enter an entirely different world when they embark on their freshman year of college. The college environment places many new demands on students. For example, incoming freshmen often live away from their families for the first time in their lives. There are close connections between stress, substance abuse, and lack of sleep, and these factors often lead to depression in undergraduate students (Voelker, 2004). According to O’Neill and Gunthert (2004), one out of four college students will experience a depressive episode by age 24, and nearly half of all college students report feeling so depressed that they cannot function. Increases in stressful life events are associated with depression and anxiety in college students, and stress levels are a predictor of hopelessness (Deckro et al., 2002). High stress levels have a negative impact on both mental and physical health and influence self-esteem. Many students experience an increase in headaches, sleep disturbances and insomnia, and the common cold (Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995). Researchers have also found that black college students experience all of these risk factors at higher rates than their white counterparts due to lack of available social supports and family and environmental stressors already in place prior to their matriculation into college (Myers, Bastien, & Miles, 2003).
According to Joiner (1996), low self-esteem is a common symptom of depression and is a correlate of general emotional distress. A survey conducted at the University of Pittsburgh found that students were most interested in learning how to manage stress than in any other health program offered (Deckro et al., 2002). These results are another indication of the severity of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety among college students. Misra, McKean, West, and Russo (1999) found that college students reporting the highest levels of stress included seniors facing job searches or post-graduate decisions, sophomores facing major field curricular decisions, and freshmen leaving home and adjusting to group living. Kelly, Kelly, Kelly and Brown (1999) concluded that the prevalence of depression in female college students was higher than male college students.

College students are also susceptible to maladaptive perfectionism, which is characterized by self-doubt, excessive concerns about making mistakes, and perception of failure to meet individual standards (Rice & Lopez, 2004). Maladaptive perfectionism has often been associated with a wide variety of psychological problems including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, dysfunctional attitudes, and substance abuse. College students experience these effects more often than do their non-student peers, whose environment is quite different. Although jobs outside of college include their own sources of stress, such as striving for goals and evaluation by superiors, non-students are not often subjected to continuous evaluation, such as weekly tests and papers (Ross, Neibling, & Heckert, 1998). The pressure to earn high grades, balance homework, handle new responsibilities, and make academic decisions all combine to create the perfect environment for the development of stress and related symptoms such as low self-esteem.

In light of all of these findings, many researchers have explored the relationships between self-esteem, anxiety, and depression among college students. Self-esteem refers to a global judgment about the worth or value of the self. Clinical researchers have long suggested that depression-prone people have self-esteem that relies on external sources such as success in competence related activities or approval from other people (Kelly et al., 1999). Crocker, Luhhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) developed a means of measuring self-esteem and self-worth through a measure called the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale. Contingencies of self-worth represent the areas where self-esteem is challenged by failures and setbacks. For some people self-esteem depends on being virtuous, powerful, attractive, or loved. However, for others self-esteem could depend on being self-reliant or competent. People differ in what affects their self-esteem (or the contingencies of their self-esteem). Contingencies of self-worth in association with related events may predict depressive symptoms over time because instability in self-esteem is associated with vulnerability to depression (Crocker et al., 2003). For example, external contingencies of self-worth, which place self-esteem in the hands of external events or other people’s views of the self, cause people to repeatedly endure drops in self-esteem due to events that are beyond their control, while self-worth that is internally contingent (and therefore less susceptible to external events) does not have the same effect. According to Ross, Neibling, and Heckert (1998), freshman students are particularly prone to experience a significant increase in self-reported stress and anxiety over the first semester of college due to the transition into college life. This information is not surprising considering that an individual with academic-contingent self-worth would be vulnerable to depressive symptoms if that individual failed an exam or did poorly in an academic area. Contingencies that depend on the opinions of others and represent superficial aspects of the self are related to lower levels of psychological well-being than
contingencies that reflect internal aspects of the self. Therefore, many researchers argue that people whose self-esteem is based on unique, core values of the self are likely to function better than those whose self-esteem is based on more superficial aspects such as achievements or the approval of others (Sargent et al., 2006). When externally motivated self-worth is coupled with the other pressures and responsibilities students encounter during college, depression and anxiety are sure to follow.

Crocker et al. (2003) used the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale in a study conducted on college students. The researchers hypothesized that more internal contingencies of self-worth would be associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. In the first sub-study the participants completed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale which assessed how much their self-esteem depended on external and internal sources. The researchers found that external sources of self-worth that depend on other people’s behavior or opinions of one’s accomplishments are related to lower self-esteem, narcissism, neuroticism, or a combination of these negative personality qualities. These findings supported the researchers’ hypothesis that basing self-worth on intrinsic characteristics or abstract features of the self is associated with psychological well-being. They found that core contingent self-worth provides a better defense against anxiety and low self-esteem than self-worth based on conditional approval from others or other unstable aspects such as achievements.

Crocker et al. (2003) conducted a second sub-study in which they involved only the freshmen students of the first sub-study. The goal of the second study was to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, to examine the stability of contingencies of self-worth over time, and to explore the hypothesis that contingencies of self-worth predict how college students spend their time. The participants completed Time 1 questionnaires before arriving on campus, Time 2 questionnaires during the first two weeks of their second semester, and the Time 3 questionnaire during the last two weeks of the second semester. At all three times the students completed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and at Times 2 and 3 the participants completed items about their activities in the previous semester. The results of this sub-study revealed that the subscales of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale predict how college students spend their time and supported the convergent and discriminant validity of the measure. The results of this study suggested that there is a strong link between self-worth and behavior that deserves further observation.

The previous study about the contingencies of self-worth of college students served as an inspiration for the present study. The present study combines the exploration of the self-worth of college students with the presentation of open-ended (neutral/positive) and negative research about adjustment to college environment and university life. The present study hypothesized that a group of participants who read negative research before completing the Contingencies of Self Worth Scale will report a more extrinsically contingent self-worth than the group of participants who read positive information.

**Method**

**Participants**
The participants of this study included 24 Xavier University psychology students. The students included two freshmen, seven sophomores, seven juniors, and eight seniors. The sample included two men and 22 women participants, all of whom were African American. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years.

**Materials**

Each group of participants read a short passage of research that presented a neutral/positive or negative outlook on the transition to college and university life. After reading the paragraph the participants completed the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al., 2003). The neutral/positive paragraph stated that the number of college students reporting depressive symptoms is on the decline because college provides an avenue for new academic achievements that often boost students’ self-esteem. However, the negative paragraph explained that the number of university students reporting depressive symptoms is increasing due to the challenging nature of the transition from high school to college and the possibility of failure in difficult academic ventures. This test included 35 randomly ordered items that assessed the participants’ self-worth contingencies in seven different areas. The seven areas included competencies, competition, approval from generalized others, family support, appearance, God’s love, and virtue. The competition subscale refers to self-esteem that is based on being superior to others (“Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect”), whereas the competencies subscale refers to self-esteem derived from evaluations of one’s abilities such as academic outcomes (“I feel bad about myself whenever my academic performance is lacking”). The family support subscale refers to self-worth that depends on love and support from family (“It is important to my self-respect that I have a family that cares about me”), and the appearance subscale identifies self-esteem that is contingent upon the basis of physical appearance (“When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself”). The approval from generalized others subscale highlights self-esteem that depends on what people perceive others to think of them (rather than what others actually think of them) (“My self-esteem depends on the opinions others hold of me”). The God’s love subscale describes self-esteem that is dependent on intrinsic religiosity (“My self-esteem goes up when I feel that God loves me”), and the virtue subscale measures the degree to which self-esteem is based on one’s moral adequacy (“I couldn’t respect myself if I didn’t live up to a moral code”). For example, spiritual support has been found to be related to higher levels of self-esteem and better personal adjustment (Harris, Schoneman, & Carrera, 2002). Depending on the response of the individual, all of these contingencies can be classified as either internal or external. Responses to each item were made on a Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*), with the midpoint, 4, labeled *Neutral*. Most of the items were worded in such a way that “agree” responses indicated a more contingent self-esteem, but some reverse-scored questions were included on each subscale.
Table 1.
The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contingency</th>
<th>Source of Contingency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval From Others</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Love</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale was developed to measure an individual’s level of intrinsic and extrinsic self-esteem based on the seven topics listed above.

Procedure

The participants signed an informed consent form and were directed towards their randomly assigned group as they entered the room. After all of the participants were seated, the experimenter distributed the neutral/positive or negative research and the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale. After completing the survey, each participant returned the survey to the experimenter. After all the participants had completed the survey they were debriefed collectively about the entire purpose and manipulation of the experiment.

Results

The data was analyzed using independent samples $t$-tests to determine the relationship between the seven different contingencies and the type of information read before completing the survey. None of the seven independent samples $t$-tests comparing the mean scores of the contingencies and the information read revealed significant results. For example, no significant difference in family support contingency was found between the participants who read neutral/positive information and the participants who read negative information $t(22) = 1.53, p > .05$. The mean of participants who read neutral/positive information ($m = 5.58, sd = .80$) was not significantly different from the mean of participants who read negative information ($m = 5.06, sd = .85$). However, analysis using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient resulted in significant relationships. This test determined the strength of the relationship between two contingencies. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between the contingencies of God’s love and morality. A single positive correlation was found, $r(22) = .44, p < .05$, indicating a significant linear relationship between the two contingencies. Based on this correlation virtue-conscious participants have a self-worth highly contingent on God’s love for them. A positive correlation was also found ($r(22) = .42, p < .05$) between God’s love and family support which means that participants who value God’s love highly also hold family support as important. Appearance and approval from others were also positively correlated ($r(22) = .44, p < .05$). Participants whose self-worth relies largely on the opinions of others tend to hold their appearance as an important part of their self-esteem as well.
Discussion

In summary, the present study combined the exploration of the self-worth of college students with the presentation of neutral/positive and negative information about adjustment to college environment and university life. The present study hypothesized that the group of participants who read the negative research before completing the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale would have a more extrinsically contingent self-worth than the group of participants who read the neutral/positive information. The results of the study did not support the hypothesis in that there was not a significant difference between the contingencies of participants who received negative information and those who read the neutral/positive information before answering the Contingencies of Self-Worth scale.

However, significant positive correlations were found between God’s love and family support, God’s love and virtue, and appearance and the approval of others. There are several possible reasons to explain why these variables are positively correlated. For instance, it is a logical conclusion that participants whose self-worth relies heavily on God’s love will also hold virtue as important because belief in God and religion tend to focus on upholding morality. Additionally, it is logical that participants whose self-worth is highly contingent on the opinions of others will also worry about their appearance because it is a reflection of themselves. Appearance is a venue that people use to judge others, so those who value the opinions of others would take great care in perfecting this aspect of their persona. Similarly, participants whose self-worth is highly contingent on God’s love tend to value family support as well because belief in God and religion promote family values such as honoring parents. Honoring parents and valuing their opinions and support are therefore related to God’s love.

There were several limitations on this study that had an effect on the results. First, when answers to the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale were scored, it was noticed that some of the participants had answered the questions in a specific pattern (answering “1, 2, 3,” etc). This could have greatly altered the results of the study because the participants who answered the questions in this manner were not responding truthfully or reading the questions carefully. If these participants had read the questions carefully and answered honestly, there might have been more significant correlations between contingencies or a significant difference between the participants who read neutral/positive and negative information.

Another limitation of this study was the measures used to determine the participant’s contingency of self-worth. Another measure could have been used to assess the participants’ self esteem such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Expanding the study in this manner would expose the results to a more widely used scale and allow for a deeper analysis of how reading certain research affected the participants’ self-assessments. Another scale that could have improved this study is the Social Desirability Scale. This scale has been used in similar studies, and it measures the extent to which people describe themselves in favorable terms. This survey would allow use of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient to determine if those who had self-worth highly contingent on other’s approval also scored high on the Social Desirability Scale. This might also yield another hypothesis; it is logical to predict that those with high social desirability will also look toward the approval of others for validation and self esteem boosts.
Another variation that could be used in the future is a survey that assesses the participants’ satisfaction with their college experience thus far. Using this information, researchers can compare the self-worth of participants who rate their college experience with great satisfaction and the self-worth of participants who rate their college experience poorly. Researchers can investigate a correlation between the participants who received negative information and participants who rated their college experience with the least satisfaction. A strong relationship could be expected between participants who read negative information and participants who rate their college experience poorly because negative information places the individuals in a pessimistic and critical mindset that will carry over into their answers.

In conclusion, stress and anxiety are major issues for undergraduate students who balance a multitude of academic, social, and personal pressures in their new environment. College freshmen are most noticeably affected by these pressures as they navigate a new and challenging environment for the first time (McWhirter, 1997). Young women are another group exceedingly vulnerable to caving to pressures to excel academically while maintaining a pleasing physical appearance and social life (Watkins, Akande, Cheng, & Regmi, 1996). Self-esteem is in a precarious position during this transition phase and sometimes well into the end of students’ college careers. With all of this in mind, students can use their Contingencies of Self-Worth score to identify areas where they need to improve confidence levels. Teachers and counselors can also use this valuable information to better relate to each type of student or to meet individual needs. Counselors may also offer solutions and methods to enhance students’ self-worth in various areas. Further exploration will unlock a multitude of positive possibilities for the use and expansion of the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale.
References


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Contingencies of Self-Worth in College Students

1. I don’t care what other people think of me.*
2. What others think of me has no effect on what I think about myself.*
3. I don’t care if other people have a negative opinion about me.*
4. My self-esteem depends on the opinions others hold of me.
5. I can’t respect myself if others don’t respect me.
6. My self-esteem does not depend on whether or not I feel attractive.*
7. My self-esteem is influenced by how attractive I think my face or facial features are.
9. My self-esteem is unrelated to how I feel about the way my body looks.*
10. When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself.
11. Doing better than others gives me a sense of self-respect.
12. Knowing that I am better than others on a task raises my self-esteem.
13. My self-worth is affected by how well I do when I am competing with others.
14. My self-worth is influenced by how well I do on competitive tasks.
15. I feel worthwhile when I perform better than others on a task or skill.
17. I feel better about myself when I know I’m doing well academically.
18. Doing well in school gives me a sense of self-respect.
19. I feel bad about myself whenever my academic performance is lacking.
20. My opinion about myself isn’t tied to how well I do in school.*
21. It is important to my self-respect that I have a family that cares about me.
22. When my family members are proud of me, my sense of self-worth increases.
23. Knowing that my family members love me makes me feel good about myself.

24. When I don’t feel loved by my family, my self-esteem goes down.

25. My self-worth is not influenced by the quality of my relationships with my family members.*

26. My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles.

27. My self-esteem would suffer if I did something unethical.

28. I couldn’t respect myself if I didn’t live up to a moral code.

29. Whenever I follow my moral principles, my sense of self-respect gets a boost.

30. Doing something I know is wrong makes me lose my self-respect.

31. My self-esteem goes up when I feel that God loves me.

32. I feel worthwhile when I have God’s love.

33. My self-esteem would suffer if I didn’t have God’s love.

34. My self-worth is based on God’s love.

35. When I think I am disobeying God, I feel bad about myself.

*Item is reversed for scoring.

The majority of these items are worded so that an “agree” response indicates a more dependent self-esteem, but some of them were reversed-score items. The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale is measured on a 1 – 7 Likert Scale. Responses are scored from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), with a midpoint, 4, labeled Neutral.