Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology
Christopher J. Mruk, PhD, is a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University Firelands College in Ohio, where he has received the college’s Distinguished Teaching and Distinguished Scholarship awards several times. Dr. Mruk was trained in general psychology at Michigan State University and in clinical psychology at Duquesne University. His publications include two books and over two dozen book chapters and articles in the areas of clinical, existential-humanistic, and positive psychology. Dr. Mruk also is an associate editor of *The Humanistic Psychologist*. Prior to his academic appointment, he spent time working in a number of mental health positions, including supervising a methadone rehabilitation program in Detroit, MI; serving as a crisis intervention specialist in Lansing, MI, at one of the nation’s first two comprehensive psychiatric emergency service facilities; functioning as a staff psychologist for a community mental health center in Monessen, PA; and directing a counseling center at St. Francis College in Pennsylvania. Today, Dr. Mruk continues his clinical work by consulting at Firelands Regional Medical Center in Sandusky, Ohio.
Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology
Research, Theory, and Practice
Fourth Edition

Christopher J. Mruk, PhD

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
# Contents

**Preface** ix  
**Acknowledgments** xiii

**Chapter 1: The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem**  1  
The Importance of Defining Self-Esteem  2  
The Major Definitions  7  
The Original Definition of Self-Esteem and Self-Esteem in Everyday Life  21  
An Existentially Based Two-Factor Definition of Self-Esteem  26

**Chapter 2: Self-Esteem Research Problems and Issues**  31  
The Major Paradoxes of Self-Esteem  31  
Problems Associated With Assessing Self-Esteem  36  
Special Problems Generated by Studying Self-Esteem Scientifically  39  
The Problem of Scientific Paradigms and Researching Self-Esteem  44  
Phenomenological Methods  46  
Methodological Advances in Researching Self-Esteem  49  
Integrated Description  52  
The Question of Validity and Self-Esteem Research  54

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
Chapter 3: Major Self-Esteem Research Findings  59
   Parental Factors Affecting Self-Esteem  59
   Self-Esteem and Values  64
   Self-Esteem and Social Factors  67
   The Sources of Self-Esteem  73
   The Paradoxes Revisited  78
   Practical Research Findings: Enhancing Self-Esteem  94

Chapter 4: Major Self-Esteem Theories and Programs  103
   General Perspectives on Self-Esteem  103
   Major Contemporary Empirically Based Theories of Self-Esteem  108
   Major Self-Esteem Enhancement Programs  118

Chapter 5: An Existentially Based Two-Factor Theory of Self-Esteem  137
   The Function of Self-Esteem as Meaning Making  137
   The Basic Types of Self-Esteem  140
   Refining the Types: Integrating Levels of Self-Esteem  145
   The Development of Self-Esteem  162
   Reexamining the Link Between Self-Esteem and Behavior  174

Chapter 6: Competence and Worthiness Training (CWT)—A Two-Factor Enhancement Program  181
   Enhancing Self-Esteem in the Group Setting  182
   Week 1: Focusing Phase  185
   Week 2: Awareness Phase (Appreciating Self-Esteem)  192
   Week 3: Enhancing Phase (Increasing Worthiness)  197
   Week 4: Enhancing Phase (Increasing Competence)  204
   Week 5: Management Phase (Maintaining Self-Esteem)  209
   Week 6 (Optional): Follow-Up Session  214
   Enhancing Self-Esteem in the Individual Setting  214
   Validity Revisited  217

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
Chapter 7: Self-Esteem and Positive Psychology 221
  What is Positive Psychology? 222
  Applied Positive Psychology, Self-Esteem, and CWT 244

Appendix: Competence and Worthiness Training (CWT):
  A 5-Week Self-Esteem Enhancement Program 255

References 271
Index 287
Preface

The fourth edition of this book is different from the others in a number of important ways. First, the request to write it came to me as a surprise. While talking with Nancy S. Hale, the editor of this edition, I was asked if I would be willing to write a fourth edition. Initially, I was disinclined because I was working on a draft for another book. In addition, my students often complain about authors and publishers who simply add a few words to an existing text and call it a new edition for marketing rather than for academic purposes. I certainly did not want to be guilty of such an exploitative practice. However, Nancy’s reasoning was difficult to fault. In addition to the usual minimum criterion of at least 10% new material that Springer Publishing Company has required for a new edition in the past, she also made another more powerful point I could not refute.

Nancy pointed out that the last chapter of the third edition focused on demonstrating how there is an important relationship between the fields of self-esteem and positive psychology, but that this connection was not yet appropriately recognized in that field. Thus, the chapter focused on creating a conceptual link between the fields. Since then, she carefully pointed out, considerable progress has been made in this regard and now there is a demonstrable recognition of self-esteem in positive psychology. Perhaps, Nancy suggested, the third edition had something to do with that new development. In any event, it was clear to me that what I call the “second generation” of positive psychologists do seem to be recognizing the value of self-esteem, so her point was well made.

Now even general undergraduate textbooks in positive psychology routinely include self-esteem as a topic (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009) and at least one even includes my theory of self-esteem in a chapter on positive selfhood (Carr, 2011). In addition, people have been writing about self-esteem in relationship to positive psychology since the last edition (Mruk, 2008a, 2008b, in press). Thus, when Nancy finally pointed out to me that my choice was to either let the book recede in significance because part of it was outdated or to rewrite the book so as to reflect these new and exciting realities, her argument prevailed: I set aside the other projects in order to revise and update the book in this and several other ways.

Chapter 1 still concerns defining self-esteem, but was substantially rewritten for three reasons. First, since the last edition, I noticed some
important connections between the ways in which John Milton (1642/1950) used the term in its earliest days and various problems concerning how self-esteem is defined today. It turns out, for example, that his original rendition of the concept appears to be much more closely tied to the two-factor approach to defining self-esteem that is the basis of this book, rather than to the more common “feelings of worth” approach that is popular today. Second, the changes in positive psychology just mentioned mean that there is no longer a need to defend incorporating self-esteem into positive psychology. Thus, it is now possible to work this theme into the body of the text throughout the book, in addition to focusing on positive psychology at the end. Finally, defining self-esteem as a balance of competence and worthiness has received professional attention in the United States and Europe during the past few years, meaning that it is now possible to concentrate on showing how this two-factor approach constitutes a legitimate tradition of research, theory, and practice.

Chapter 2 remains largely focused on methodological issues facing those who work on self-esteem. However, now that the two-factor approach is an established view, I tend to emphasize the value of a research approach called “integrated description” that is capable of bringing together qualitative and quantitative work in the field. Chapter 3, which concerns research findings, was revised to update the review of work in the field during the past several years. For example, the book now includes new findings concerning work on the importance of self-esteem in relationships that did not appear in previous editions. Chapter 4 remains largely intact, although I streamlined the presentation of major historical and contemporary theories of self-esteem and the types of enhancement programs they generate. As before, Chapter 5 continues to present my theory of self-esteem. However, some additional clarification has occurred, such as clarifying the point at which self-esteem problems become clinically significant.

Next, since the previous edition, the self-esteem program presented in Chapter 6 has been researched and used by others in the United States and in Europe. Students in Eastern and Middle Eastern countries have contacted me about it for their graduate work as well. Because I wanted to preserve the researchability of the program, its step-by-step nature has been retained. However, I did make two small but notable changes. First, I gave a name to the program: It is now called “Competence and Worthiness Training,” or CWT, in order to reflect the two-factor definition of self-esteem. Second, I have included more references supporting the clinical efficacy of this existentially oriented positive therapy in order to address the call for “evidence-based” treatments that has become important today. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Chapter 7 has been extensively revised: Instead of arguing for a place in positive psychology as I did in the previous edition, now I focus on describing the existing space self-esteem actually occupies in that field and where to go next.
It should also be noted that this edition involved adding over 50 new references. In order to do that without substantially lengthening the book, it was necessary to shorten, move, and remove a good number of unnecessary or dated quotations and citations. I have endeavored my very best to be accurate in this regard. Thus, if an error occurs in this edition, it is a function of accident, not intent.

Over the years, I have taught and trained psychologists, counselors, nurses, social workers, educators, and others in academic and applied settings. Such interdisciplinary work has convinced me that all good therapists bring certain “common factors” to the table and that no single discipline is comprehensive enough to do it all alone. Thus, this edition continues to be oriented toward a range of audiences. As before, academics and researchers will probably find Chapters 2 through 5 most interesting because they cover research and theory. Clinicians and other practitioners are likely to find themselves drawn more toward Chapters 4 through 6 because they address how self-esteem works in relation to problems of living and how to help people cope more effectively. Chapters 1 and 7 should be of equal interest to both groups because defining self-esteem may be the most crucial issue in the field right now, and the relationship between self-esteem and positive psychology is likely to grow in the future.

Finally, it might be helpful to say a word about writing style. Moving all the way from research, through theory, and then to practice for an entire field is an unusual approach: Most books emphasize only one or two dimensions of a topic. However, I know as a researcher and clinician that the best practical tools come from a theory that is based on good research. Thus, I try to find a “middle path” in style and tone that is compatible with key needs and expectations of academics or researchers as well as practitioners or educators. The result is an attempt to proceed in a logical, systematic fashion that begins with research issues and findings, that then moves through theories (including my own approach), and that ends with practical applications, including possibilities for the future.
Acknowledgments

It usually takes more than one person to write a book, even though most of the credit (or blame, as the case may be) falls on the author. First and foremost, of course, is my wife, Marsha Mruk, who lovingly shows the patience to put up with the challenges associated with being a “book widow” once again. As always, thanks go to my original family consisting of Steven, Veronica, and Joseph Mruk, my brother, mother, and father, respectively; to my second family, which includes Dee Mruk, Tina Bradshaw, and Pam Pawloski; and to my married family, especially Virginia, Carl, and Sylvia Oliver.

Friends who helped smooth out the process this time include Scott Churchill, Joan Hartzell, Pete and Marsha Kowalski, Robert Noe, and Frank and Mary Ann Salotti. Karen Page Osterling, my colleague at work and personal copy editor for both of my books in all their editions, continues to play a key role in my writing. Others include two psychological colleagues and friends. The first is Edward O’Brien, who is a kindred self-esteem soul and sometime coauthor with me in the field. The other is William Balzer, who often helps me find a balance between quantitative and qualitative positions. And then, of course, there are my mentors: Tony Barton and Connie Fischer, who will never be forgotten for the goodwill they consistently extended to an often struggling graduate student.

Finally, I remain indebted to the staff of Springer Publishing Company for their interest and help over the past two decades. In addition to Sheri W. Sussman’s continued support, this time Nancy S. Hale is given credit for the possibility of a fourth edition, which at the time of this writing may be the only one in the field. Of course, a word of thanks always goes to Dr. Ursula Springer, who stands as something of a David facing the Goliath of gigantic for-profit publishing houses in her dedication to bringing scholarly work to psychology and related fields. Last, but closer to first than to least, it is important to thank all the clients whom I cannot name. However, common practice does allow me to acknowledge former students, and this time I would like to mention Mia Bartoletti and Travis Skelly for their willingness to engage in discussions that help reveal more of the subtle and lived dimensions of self-esteem. Thank you all!
The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem

Although seldom mentioned by those wishing to understand self-esteem, the single most important task one faces while venturing into this rich territory may concern the need for clear definitions. Beginning at this point is especially important when dealing with this field because social scientists define self-esteem in at least three different ways. For example, one major definition connects self-esteem to a person’s general success or “competence,” particularly in areas of life that are especially meaningful to a given individual. A second and most commonly used definition is based on understanding self-esteem as an attitude or feeling concerning a sense of worth or one’s “worthiness” as a person. The third approach involves defining self-esteem as a relationship between these two factors. In this view, it is only an individual’s competence at dealing with the challenges of living in worthy ways that gives rise to healthy, positive, or authentic self-esteem. Although the least well known of the three, this book aims to demonstrate how such a two-factor approach (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) offers insights, possibilities, and applications concerning self-esteem and its value not found in work based on the other definitions.

The opening chapter is devoted to defining self-esteem this way because clear, operational definitions are a hallmark of good science, including social science. Each of the other chapters not only addresses an important topic in the field, but also marks a step in what I hope is a logical and empirically supported progression that steadily moves from research on self-esteem, through major theories about it, to practical applications that are compatible with both existential and positive psychology. Thus, Chapter 2 identifies the important research issues in the field. Next, we attempt to identify and summarize the major findings concerning self-esteem that have emerged over time. Chapter 4 examines the leading theories of self-esteem that seem to consistently attract attention. Then, we consider the comprehensive two-factor model of self-esteem that is the heart of this book. Based on this theory, Chapter 6 presents a detailed, step-by-step enhancement program called Competence and Worthiness Training (CWT), which has been shown to increase authentic self-esteem in an evidence-based fashion. Finally, the book ends with a chapter that discusses how this program, as well as authentic self-esteem in general, stands as a part of what is now being called positive psychology. In the
end, the book attempts to be true to its title: taking the reader through the research, theory, and practice of self-esteem from its beginning as a field to its current place in modern psychology, one that now includes positive psychology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINING SELF-ESTEEM

We begin with defining self-esteem because different definitions lead to different types of theories, research findings, and practical applications. Since self-esteem is one of the oldest topics in psychology, it is not surprising to find that the work generated using one definition tends to become mixed with material found by another. To compound matters, the need for operational definitions is always great when dealing with “subjective” phenomena, such as self-esteem, because they are difficult to observe, measure, or test. Today, the result of not paying sufficient attention to the types of definitions available manifests itself in at least three unfortunate ways: confusion about what is meant by self-esteem, unsubstantiated claims made about practices aimed at increasing self-esteem, and exaggerated criticisms questioning the importance of self-esteem. In order to address this situation, it is necessary to focus on what is meant by self-esteem from the outset. This approach involves the process of examining the development of the major definitions of self-esteem, evaluating their respective strengths and weaknesses, and then selecting the one that seems to best describe what is meant by the term “self-esteem.”

The context for the following investigation is surrounded by the vitality of this topic. For example, if history is an indication of significance, then self-esteem easily stands out as an important subject. After all, William James (1890/1983) introduced the topic to social science more than a century ago in what is often regarded as the first American textbook on psychology, thereby making self-esteem one of the oldest themes. Similarly, the breadth of a subject or how much attention it generates is another good indicator of importance. Even a cursory database search of PsycINFO will reveal that scholars, researchers, and practitioners have written a massive amount of material on self-esteem to date. For instance, in early July of 2012, a PsycINFO key-word search of self-esteem in the title of a work resulted in 9,078 publications. The term was also identified in 29,744 abstracts and a search in “All Fields” resulted in 37,314 references to the term. The latter number is nearly a third larger than the one produced by the same method in the last edition of this book only 6 years earlier. The fact that the number seems to grow substantially each time the database is updated certainly supports the position that self-esteem is a basic, if not fundamental, topic in the social sciences. Indeed, Rodewalt and Tragakis (2003) stated that self-esteem is one of the “top three
covariates in personality and social psychology research,” following negative affectivity and gender (p. 66).

Finally, the ability to endure controversy may be seen as another general indicator of vitality, and self-esteem appears to be resilient in this regard as well. Indeed, we shall see that self-esteem shows itself to be one of those relatively rare topics for which even heated controversy only seems to stimulate more interest in the subject, as indicated by the numbers cited above. In short, self-esteem is just as likely to be an important subject in the 21st century of psychology as it was in the last.

Today there are several sets of reasons that self-esteem deserves continuing attention. One of them is that self-esteem appears to be among those relatively few dimensions of human life that stretches across the full spectrum of behavior, much like the topics of development, personality, or identity. At one end of the continuum, for instance, low self-esteem is often mentioned in regard to various clinical phenomena, such as depression or anxiety. Leary and MacDonald (2003) noted that studies overwhelmingly show that when compared to people with high self-esteem, those with low self-esteem experience more negative emotions, affect, or states across the board. Examples include anxiety, sadness and depression, hostility and anger, social anxiety, shame and guilt, embarrassment, loneliness, as well as general negative affect and neuroticism (pp. 404–405).

Even more to the point, O’Brien, Bartoletti, and Leitzel (2006) pointed out that low self-esteem is identified as either a diagnostic criterion for, or associated feature of, some 24 mental disorders in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Indeed, if it is true that some 15% of Americans meet criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition in a given year (Regier et al., 1993), and if self-esteem is involved in many more conditions such as those mentioned above, then it is evident that self-esteem is of considerable social significance. After all, in addition to those who directly suffer from self-esteem problems, others around them often encounter the “fallout” of low or unhealthy self-esteem as well. The result is that problems associated with self-esteem probably touch most of us either directly through personal experience or indirectly through such things as the pain of a loved one, negative self-esteem–related behavior that is directed at us, or at least some of the general costs associated with providing mental health care.

In addition to clinical issues, self-esteem and problems with it are also important for what may be seen as the middle of the human behavioral spectrum. For example, we shall see that self-esteem appears to play a role in being able to manage one’s life in ways that are competent and worthy while facing developmental and other challenges of living. These challenges occur in everyday life and take place in ways that are sure to affect us all, such as dealing with failures, facing losses, and overcoming setbacks (Epstein, 1979; Jackson, 1984; Mruk, 1983). Finally, self-esteem
also seems to be a factor at the other, more positive end of the spectrum. For instance, studies clearly demonstrate links between self-esteem and happiness, well-being, and optimal functioning (Diener & Diener, 1995; Kernis, 2003a), all of which are important themes in positive psychology.

A second set of reasons for looking at self-esteem anew concerns events that seem to be creating important changes in the field. This development means that it is necessary to appreciate something of the field’s history. William James introduced the concept of self-esteem, but then academic psychology made a strong shift to the behavioral position, which eschewed phenomena involving consciousness or experience and instead focused on observable behavior (Harter, 1999; Mruk, 1999). The concept of self-esteem was then embraced by those with more clinical and applied interests, especially psychodynamic thinkers. For example, Alfred Adler (1927) saw self-esteem as a way of overcoming a deep sense of inferiority, which he thought was related to much of human behavior, both positive and negative. Karen Horney (1937) went so far as to declare “war” on neurosis and envisioned healthy self-esteem as the solution to many, if not most, psychological and behavioral problems. During the 1950s, Robert White (1959) focused on the developmental implications of self-esteem, particularly in relation to mastery and competence.

Then in a way somewhat akin to a Cambrian explosion, self-esteem suddenly erupted back onto the psychological stage in the mid 1960s. This period was led by such figures as Carl Rogers (1951, 1961) and Abraham Maslow (1964, 1968), who explored self-esteem from a humanistic perspective. Thus, the importance of self-esteem was connected to such things as self-actualization and living a full or authentic life. Stanley Coopersmith (1959, 1967) began to look at self-esteem from a learning theory point of view and attempted to observe and even measure self-esteem in controlled situations. Morris Rosenberg (1965) introduced a major research tool with the creation of a 10-item, easy-to-administer, self-esteem scale that became the “gold standard” for assessing self-esteem. Indeed, this instrument may have been used in as much as a quarter of all the (considerable) research that existed on self-esteem up to the 1990s and beyond (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Finally, during this rather amazing period in the development of the field, Nathaniel Branden introduced self-esteem to popular culture through a best-selling book, The Psychology of Self-Esteem (1969).

During the late-1980s to mid-1990s, two converging forces worked together to push the field of self-esteem into a much larger social arena. One of them originated with a group of academicians and politicians largely based in California. Among other things, they emphasized to the general public the possibility of a link between individual self-esteem and major social problems, including substance abuse, welfare, and teen pregnancy. As Smelser (1989) said, “The well-being of society depends on the well-being of its citizenry. . . . many, if not most, of the major problems

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
plaguing society have roots in the low self-esteem of many of the people who make up society” (p. 1).

Perhaps in response to the Zeitgeist of the time, maybe as a result of the high profile from which this group benefited, or simply because it seemed to make so much "common sense," this position generated a broad base of political and social support. For the first time, self-esteem work received considerable financial backing and interest. This support allowed the field to involve other areas, especially the educational setting (Beane, 1991; Damon, 1995). At the same time, self-help and popular psychology markets joined the self-esteem bandwagon and spread interest in the topic to an even wider audience, including the popular media. The results of this concatenation of events included such things as a dramatic increase in programs aimed at enhancing self-esteem in school settings, a greater parental interest in fostering self-esteem, and a significant rise in the number of books and discussions on self-esteem across the board. In short, the old but quiet field of self-esteem achieved social significance culminating in what is now commonly known as the “self-esteem movement.”

However, popularity is a double-edged sword. In addition to obvious benefits, such as more research funding and more people working in the field, bringing a scientific concept to the public forum also exposes it to scrutiny and, sometimes, negative forms of attention. The most important of these appears to be the development of a second, countervailing social force operating against self-esteem that took the form of a backlash against the topic. Early signs of what might be called "self-esteem bashing" or even an "anti-self-esteem movement" began to appear in social commentaries with eye-catching titles such as The Trouble with Self-Esteem (Leo, 1990) or Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good (Krauthammer, 1990), that appeared in popular news magazines. Such criticism of self-esteem spread to various segments of the popular media during the remainder of the 1990s (Johnson, 1998; Leo, 1998) and still persists today (Gottleib, 2012), although in somewhat muted form.

At the same time, a more substantial line of scientific work criticizing the merit of self-esteem research and practices arose in professional literature. For example, the psychologist Martin Seligman (1995b) said in a book on child rearing that by focusing on self-esteem, “parents and teachers are making this generation of children more vulnerable to depression” (p. 27). William Damon (1995) criticized self-esteem work in the educational setting even more strenuously when he called it a “mirage” for those who work with children, and “like all mirages, it is both appealing and perilously deceptive, luring us away from more rewarding developmental objectives” (p. 72).

Perhaps the most significant and influential scientific work of this type was led by Roy Baumeister. Although once a strong advocate supporting the
importance of self-esteem for understanding human behavior (Baumeister, 1993), a turning point seemed to occur just a few years later. In a highly reputable scientific journal, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) suggested that high self-esteem appears to be associated with certain undesirable forms of behavior, most notably egotism, narcissism, and even violence. These negative correlations were collectively presented as the “dark side” of self-esteem. Other scientifically oriented work also criticized the importance of self-esteem in similar ways (Emler, 2001). Although we will find that this so-called dark side may be understood in a very different way, the phrase caught the negative eye of the popular media and press. The result was an atmosphere that was far less receptive to self-esteem work than ever before in the history of the field. In short, the combination of poignant empirically based criticism from within, coupled with a reversal of fortune in the popular media from without, worked together to challenge the very foundations of self-esteem, let alone increasing it. In fact, some even questioned the merit of pursuing self-esteem altogether (Crocker & Nuer, 2003, 2004) and advocated its abandonment.

Fortunately, science can be unrelenting in its pursuit for knowledge and little dominates the picture for long. At the turn of the 21st century, the same self-correcting power of the scientific method that exposed the dangers of overgeneralizing the value of self-esteem also placed the claims of those who criticize it into question. The result of this progressive process is that over the past few years a number of research and theoretical advances have occurred in the field that make it absolutely necessary to examine the topic anew. For example, some recent work focuses on emerging findings concerning the existence of several types of self-esteem. Low self-esteem still seems to be strongly associated with unhealthy forms of behavior, such as depression and anxiety. However, another type, often called defensive self-esteem, might be connected to more socially disturbing behavior, such as narcissism, bullying, or the dark side mentioned earlier. Similarly, now people differentiate between high self-esteem, which can just be a score on a test, and healthy, genuine, or authentic self-esteem, which is correlated with highly desirable personal and interpersonal phenomena (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003b).

In addition, developmental work seems to be making considerable progress in terms of understanding the antecedents of self-esteem (Harter, 1999; Trzesniewski, Robins, Roberts, & Caspi, 2004), something that Coopersmith (1967) called for decades ago. Perhaps even more important, the critical look at the field has not only led to re-examining old theories, but has also stimulated the formation of powerful new ones, such as terror management theory, sociometer theory, and two-factor theory, all of which we will explore in detail later. In other words, recent events in the field are so important that they must be considered when thinking about self-esteem from this point onward.
The third and final group of related reasons for taking another look at self-esteem is that new positive forces are now at work in the field that are creating exciting possibilities. Some of these developments arise from within the field. For example, it is already well established that there is a relationship between self-esteem and happiness that even critics of self-esteem are forced to recognize (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Research also points to an important relationship between self-esteem, authenticity, and optimal functioning (Kernis, 2003a, 2003b). Similarly, the two-factor approach has been shown to be capable of increasing healthy or authentic self-esteem in ways that are measurable in both clinical and general population settings (Bartoletti, 2008; Hakim-Larson & Mruk, 1997).

Most recently, the emergence of the field known as positive psychology is beginning to focus on these and other topics related to self-esteem. In fact, where the previous edition of this book argued that positive psychology needed to make room for authentic self-esteem, this one builds on the growing place self-esteem now occupies in that field. For instance, self-esteem is now clearly recognized as a topic in positive psychology. This topic is now discussed in positive psychology textbooks (Carr, 2011), in work concerning the relationship between self-esteem and happiness that is relevant to both fields (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009), and in ways that are relevant to positive therapy (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Mruk, 2008b). In short, attempting to clear up confusion, making an effort to address an issue that spans a broad spectrum of human behavior, responding to new developments in the field, and integrating one stream of work with another are good reasons to re-examine self-esteem in a new edition of this book. Having delineated the context, we may now turn back to the first task and take a closer look at the importance of defining self-esteem.

**THE MAJOR DEFINITIONS**

In one sense, we all know something about what self-esteem “really is” because it is a human phenomenon. However, as Smelser (1989) observed, “We have a fairly firm grasp of what is meant by self-esteem, as revealed by our own introspection and observation of the behavior of others. But it is hard to put that understanding into precise words” (p. 9). In other words, like many common-sense understandings, there are serious limits to such knowledge that become apparent as soon as we begin to examine them more closely.

A simple but revealing way to explore this problem is to ask almost any reasonably mature group of people to do the following exercise. At the beginning of a class or discussion, ask each person to write down his
or her own definition of self-esteem. Then, invite the group members to
either read their definitions aloud or to hand them in to be read aloud. As
the information comes in, write the key components of each definition
down so that they can be examined publicly. After that is done, ask the
group to develop a single definition of self-esteem. Participants usually
see the point almost immediately: What seems so familiar and easy at the
beginning of the activity quickly shows itself to be quite complex or dif-
ficult at the end. Typically, people tend to be struck by the diversity of defi-
nitions. For some, it may even seem as though there are as many ways to
define self-esteem as there are people trying to do so. However, the group
will also notice that, although different, several definitions appear to be of
some value in that they suggest, capture, or describe an important aspect
of the phenomenon few wish to discard.

If the group spends enough time with this exercise, participants also
begin to notice that definitions can be grouped on the basis of key char-
acteristics. For example, one person might see that some depictions focus
on values, such as self-respect. Another might point out that other defini-
tions center on the affective dimension of self-esteem and how it involves
a feeling of worth. Someone else may be struck by how it is that some of
the definitions emphasize cognitive factors, such as the attitudinal com-
ponents of self-esteem. An astute individual may even notice that particular
definitions focus attention on the behavioral aspects of self-esteem, such
as being more independent or assertive. The lesson, however, really begins
to solidify when they are asked to defend the definitions they developed
while the others in the group offer critique.

Two things usually become quite apparent by the end of this activity.
The first is that developing a good definition of self-esteem is difficult,
because people tend to emphasize different aspects of it when they put
their thoughts into words. The other is that how one defines self-esteem
is a crucial issue, because definitions have power: They help shape what
we see and what remains hidden. In addition to being a good pedagogi-
cal tool, the reason the exercise is mentioned here is because it is a micro-
cosm of what actually seems to happen among writers, researchers, and clinicians
in the field (Smelser, 1989; Wells & Marwell, 1976). Unfortunately, what
typically seems to be so clear to beginners often appears to be forgotten
by experts, for it turns out that some researchers define self-esteem in
one way, others define it differently, and many simply take the term for
granted and don’t offer a particular definition at all. The result is that
the concept loses specificity: People may talk about self-esteem, but often
little communication occurs.

Thus, there are several good reasons to consider why defining
self-esteem is a crucial first step when investigating this phenomenon.
First, definitions open up pathways of understanding, in part because
they name things. “Naming” shapes perception and, therefore, much that
follows. In this sense, every major definition is important because each one shows us some things about self-esteem that can only be seen from that particular point of view. At the same time, of course, definitions also create limits. Although each particular definition opens up a way of looking at a phenomenon, it closes off other perspectives that can lead to different insights or understandings. Phenomenologists call this aspect of human perception “perspectivity” (Gurwitsch, 1964), which means that it is necessary to fully appreciate the ways in which each approach or definition both reveals and conceals.

Second, even though we are limited in this fashion, we must choose a direction in beginning any kind of a journey, even one of understanding. Thus, it behooves us to select the best definition possible. The problem in this field is that there is much variation in this process. Indeed, there are so many ways to proceed that confusion is the rule, not the exception. Even worse, whereas novices know that taking the time to define terms operationally is a scientific first step, it is surprising to find that experts often do not: “Of the thousands of entries listed in ERIC on some aspect of self-esteem, only a few are listed as targeting its definition” (Guindon, 2002, p. 205). A consequence of this condition is what Smelser (1989) calls a “definitional maze” (p. 9) concerning self-esteem.

One way to deal with such a problem is to examine the major definitions of self-esteem that are in use to see whether or not any of them proves itself superior to the others. For instance, in one of the earliest attempts to deal with this situation, Wells and Marwell (1976, p. 62) organized definitions of self-esteem on the basis of two psychological processes: evaluation (which emphasizes the role of cognition) and affect (which prioritizes the role of feelings) as they pertain to self-esteem. The result was a typology of definitions that consists of four ways of defining self-esteem. The first and most basic definition is to simply characterize self-esteem as a certain attitude. As with any other attitude that is held toward a given object, this one can involve positive or negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions.

They found a second type of definition to be based on the idea of a discrepancy. In particular, it is the discrepancy between the self that one wishes to be (the “ideal” self) and the self that one currently sees oneself as being (the “real” or “perceived” self) that matters. The closer these two perceptions are, the higher the individual’s self-esteem is said to be. Conversely, the wider the gap between the two, the more self-esteem is thought to suffer. A third approach focuses on the psychological responses a person holds toward himself or herself rather than attitudes alone. Such global indicators of self-esteem are usually described in terms of positive or negative affect about the self or feeling accepted versus rejected, and so forth. Finally, Wells and Marwell (1976) maintained that self-esteem is understood as a function or component of personality. In this case, self-esteem
is seen as a part of the self-system, usually one that is concerned with motivation, self-regulation, or both.

A newer approach to organizing definitions is based on identifying general or common aspects of self-esteem. Using this method, Smelser (1989, p. 10) developed a classification system based on which of three basic components a given definition emphasizes. To paraphrase, one is cognitively oriented and involves describing what type of a person one is in terms of specific descriptive characteristics, such as power, confidence, and agency. Another is more affective and concerns an emotional process that involves attaching general positive or negative quality to the perception or experience of one’s self. The third focuses on an evaluative process that compares one’s current level of worthiness to an ideal or standard. He went on to note that definitions also vary as to whether they focus on self-esteem as a global or situational phenomenon. That is, some definitions see self-esteem as being reasonably stable over time, whereas others regard self-esteem as being responsive to situational and contextual influences, which means that it fluctuates. This aspect of self-esteem is seen in such phrases as “trait versus state” self-esteem (Leary & Downs, 1995), “stable versus unstable” self-esteem (Greenier, Kernis, & Waschull, 1995), or “global versus situational” self-esteem (Harter, 1999).

Unfortunately, neither developing typologies nor identifying basic elements can offer us the one thing that is needed most: a clear statement concerning what self-esteem is as it is actually lived by real human beings in real life. Although typologies reduce the number of definitions with which we must contend, they offer us no criteria for identifying one as being more valid than another. Similarly, while identifying common elements is a necessary step toward developing such a definition, it is also important to work them into an integrated, comprehensive form; otherwise, the elements simply constitute a list. Clearly, then, we are in need of another method.

The approach that we use to reach this goal consists of two steps. First, we examine the three definitions of self-esteem that seem to run throughout the depth and breadth of the field. This activity involves analyzing the theoretical strengths and weaknesses of each one to assess their potential usefulness. The second step takes us into the lived character of self-esteem or how it is actually experienced in everyday life. Then, it should be possible to evaluate the definitions and find out whether one of them stands as superior to the others existentially as well as theoretically.

At first glance, it might seem as though identifying major definitions, significant findings, or leading theories of self-esteem is an arbitrary process. However, using time as a criterion to “measure” such things is one of the most useful and accepted ways of identifying important themes in a field. Time is helpful in this task because the field of self-esteem is old enough to have undergone several scientific shakeouts. In other words,
once a definition, finding, theory, or technique is formed, later researchers
tend to re-examine such work in the process of replication. In doing so,
the particular item in question is confirmed, modified, or discarded on the
basis of current evidence or understanding. Those that withstand scrutiny
over a long period of time and yet remain relatively intact may at least
be considered to be persistent or reliable enough to be useful, although
certainly not necessarily valid.

Another test offered by time concerns power rather than duration.
Definitions, findings, theories, or techniques that are able to stimulate
meaningful research and give rise to entire schools of thought over time
demonstrate another valuable characteristic, namely significance. Of course,
items of scientific discourse that are both persistent (i.e., enduring) and sig-
nificant (i.e., generative) are likely to warrant the status of existing as a
“standard” in the field. The three approaches mentioned in the introducto-
ry paragraph meet these criteria, so let us examine and evaluate them in
turn so as to identify the one to be used and why.

**Self-Esteem as Competence**

Time and history are good places to begin when looking at previous work,
so it seems most appropriate to start with the oldest psychological defini-
tion developed by William James (1890/1983, p. 296) more than a century
ago. While describing the qualities of the self, he said,

> So our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we
> back ourselves to be and do. It is determined by the ratio of our
> actualities to our supposed potentialities; a fraction of which our
> pretensions are the denominator and the numerator our success:

\[
\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}
\]

This definition offers a number of things worth considering. First and
foremost is that James defined self-esteem in terms of a type of behavior,
namely, action that results in success. We can call this type of action “com-
petence” because it involves exercising one’s abilities and skills effectively.
Second and equally important, James noted that self-esteem also involves
“pretensions,” which today are better understood as aspirations, includ-
ing one’s desires, goals, hopes, and dreams. Thus, work on self-esteem
that stems from this definition tends to focus on particular forms of suc-
cess, namely those that are related to an individual’s identity.

James presented this aspect of self-esteem in a well-known analogy
with which it is easy to identify. “I, who for the time have staked my all on
being a psychologist, am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am contented to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek” (James, 1890/1983, p. 296). James went on to emphasize the point by noting that the situation could be completely reversed for someone who identified with Greek instead of psychology. Thus, when we say that a definition of self-esteem is based on competence, we also maintain that it is a certain type of competence that matters: It is one that must be demonstrated in areas of life that matter greatly to an individual in terms of his or her sense of self. James strongly conveyed this vitality of self-esteem by the word “staked,” which is to say that success or failure in such an area is tied to nothing less than our basic values, identity, and hopes as a person. Also note that from this definitional perspective, it is quite possible to be very successful and yet have low self-esteem. For example, being successful in areas that do not matter to a person in terms of his or her identity would have no positive impact on self-esteem.

Finally, James’ expression offers two more valuable insights into self-esteem when it is seen this way. One is that, like a steady ratio, the self tends to be fairly stable, which means that self-esteem can be seen as a trait. The other is that, like all ratios, numbers can be changed, which is to say that self-esteem is also dynamic. On one hand, for example, self-esteem may reach a fairly steady level and become relatively stable. On the other, it is also possible to modify self-esteem by increasing the frequency of success, decreasing the degree of aspiration, or shifting attention to other meaningful areas of life in which one is more competent and, therefore, more likely to succeed.

As mentioned earlier, self-esteem became an important theme in the psychodynamic tradition after James abandoned psychology. Freud’s (1914/1957) original discussion of self-regard is limited to understanding it as a function of narcissism that occurs when meeting ego ideals. However, Adler (1927) greatly expanded this notion into a general theory of motivation and Horney (1937) made self-esteem a central clinical concern. White’s (1959, 1963) work is probably the most articulate psychodynamic expression of self-esteem and it is explicitly based on competence. He began by noting that both classical analysis and behavioral psychology suffer a central contradiction when it comes to their theories of motivation. In one way or another, both models are based on drive reduction theory. In other words, people become motivated when a need is not met because it disturbs homeostasis, which generates a negative tension or distress. That stress, in turn, motivates behavior by directing it toward an incentive or goal that is seen as capable of satisfying the need, thereby reducing the tension and re-establishing the steady state of homeostasis. From this point of view, all basic needs appear to work in this fashion.

However, White pointed out that the problem with homeostatic theories of motivation is that they have great difficulty accounting for a
set of behaviors that seems to do just the opposite. For example, although properly fed, young animals, such as cats and dogs, seem to disrupt the steady state generated when basic needs are satisfied (homeostasis) by engaging in highly energetic activities, such as play. Children will experience boredom if left in unstimulating environments for long. Adults will even give up comfortable lives to explore unknown regions. Such behaviors, he argued, are also need-based but cannot be explained in terms of tension reduction because the organism actually seeks out activities that stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, create new tension, and may even involve risk to life and limb. Consequently, he concluded, “it is necessary to make competence a motivational concept; there is a competence motivation as well as competence in its more familiar sense of achieved capacity” (White, 1959, p. 318). Satisfying this need through the mastery of developmental tasks and experiencing other successes in childhood result in feelings of “effectance” and a sense of self-respect. In White’s (1963) words, “self-esteem . . . has its taproot in the experience of efficacy” (p. 134).

The most recent manifestation of seeing self-esteem largely in terms of competence does not come from a psychodynamic perspective, but it does take us to what might be the ultimate expression of this definition. Crocker and Park (2003), for example, began their work on self-esteem by basing it squarely on James’ definition when they said that, “Our central proposition is that people seek to maintain, protect, and enhance self-esteem by attempting to obtain success and avoid failure in domains on which their self-worth has been staked” (p. 291). They went on to build a model of self-esteem based on contingencies of worth that both regulate and motivate behavior. Like James, in this view, people seek out activities and situations that are meaningful to them in terms of their identities. Since who they are and how they feel about themselves depend upon success and failure in these areas more than others, people shape their lives around them in various ways. If it is true that self-esteem is based on success and failure in this fashion, and if it is true that people must have self-esteem, then in some sense, we are bound to these particular areas of life. Some people may even become so invested in success in these areas that they become driven, or in more extreme cases, even enslaved by them.

In other words, instead of being a positive developmental and motivational force, Crocker and Park (2003, 2004) took the competence model to its final conclusion and pointed out that self-esteem could actually motivate people to seek success and avoid failure in ways that are harmful to themselves or to others. They referred to this aspect of self-esteem as the “problem of pursuing self-esteem” (Crocker & Park, 2004) and went on to list its many costs. On one hand, potential problems of self-esteem when it is defined this way include such things as taking too many risks or being driven by the need to succeed at all costs, including the use of aggression.
or force. On the other, those without the skills necessary for success may react by lowering expectations, avoiding risks, or damaging relationships by defending themselves against losing self-esteem when honesty and openness would serve the relationships much better. These authors even discussed how various clinical problems could result from an unhealthy pursuit of self-esteem connected with a drive toward perfection. Eating disorders are one such condition.

In sum, we can reach at least four conclusions about defining self-esteem primarily in terms of success. First, individual competence is the key to self-esteem from this point of view, because being successful over time requires the ability to acquire and use skills relevant to domains of life that are tied to one’s sense of identity. This vision of self-esteem allows us to appreciate how unique individual self-esteem is for each of us: We care deeply about success and failure in areas that are personally significant to us based on our particular constellation of abilities, history, circumstances, and interests. Second, this approach certainly merits the status of a major school of thought and work in the field of self-esteem. After all, seeing self-esteem in terms of competence not only was the first way to conceive of it, but it is still very much alive over a century later.

Third, there are considerable advantages to this approach. For example, by understanding self-esteem in relation to success and failure, we can connect self-esteem to such things as basic needs, human motivation, and self-regulation. Such an approach is useful when, for instance, attempting to understand why people can seem so driven to succeed, so fearful of failure, and so defensive when their ego or sense of self is threatened. In other words, this type of definition shows that self-esteem does, indeed, have a potential dark side and gives us insight about unhealthy ways of pursuing self-esteem. Finally, we also see that there is a glaring problem with this approach to self-esteem that cannot be ignored. If self-esteem is defined in terms of competence, then it is contingent on success and failure. Because success never lasts forever and because failure is always possible, this view of self-esteem means that it is as much a liability as an asset, perhaps even more so, depending upon the degree to which one feels vulnerable in a given domain of life. Indeed, having reached this conclusion, Crocker and Park (2003, 2004) advocated the position that it may be more rational to give up the pursuit of self-esteem than to engage in it. They might be correct if this way of defining self-esteem is the only one available.

**Self-Esteem as Worthiness**

Morris Rosenberg (1965) introduced another way of defining self-esteem that led to the development of the next major school in the field. This definition is also the one that is most commonly used today. He defined it in terms of a
1. The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem 15

particular type of attitude, one that is thought to be based on the perception of a feeling, a feeling about one’s “worth,” which is to say one’s character or value as a person. Hence,

Self-esteem, as noted, is a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely, the self. . . . High self-esteem, as reflected in our scale items, expresses the feeling that one is “good enough.” The individual simply feels that he is a person of worth; he respects himself for what he is, but he does not stand in awe of himself nor does he expect others to stand in awe of him. (pp. 30–31)

The distinguishing characteristic of defining self-esteem this way is that it is seen primarily as affective in nature: In this case, self-esteem is based on a particular feeling, one of being worthy or what I often refer to as worthiness. This emphasis on evaluative mental processes and affective experience, rather than on behavior and its outcomes, means that self-esteem can be seen in terms of the psychology of attitude formation.

Of course, forming attitudes about the self is more complex than doing so for anything else, largely because the perceiver is also the object of perception (Wylie, 1974). However, social scientists are reasonably familiar with the formation of attitudes, how they work, and, especially, how to measure them. Indeed, the chief strength of this approach to defining self-esteem is that it allowed social scientists like Rosenberg to develop scales and other instruments to assess self-esteem. The ability to quantify and measure self-worth in this way opened the door to a wide range of research possibilities. For instance, this approach makes it possible to rate individuals and groups in terms of various categories, such as high, middle, and lower levels of self-esteem.

The primary advantage of such instruments may be that they give us the opportunity to explore connections between self-esteem, various levels of it, and a wide range of characteristics or behavior, such as depression, anxiety, neuroticism, happiness, academic success, and so forth. Scales can and have been used to assess the self-esteem of large groups of individuals, such as high school students (Rosenberg, 1979). Indeed, this approach even makes it possible to compare the self-esteem of entire demographics, such as Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic populations, or even Americans in general (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Thus, it should come as no surprise that the majority of empirical research in the field is based on this way of defining self-esteem.

Rosenberg’s definition may seem to suggest that self-esteem plays something of a passive role in behavior: After all, from this point of view, self-esteem is the result of something else, namely, a process of evaluation. However, others who see self-esteem as a function of individual worth

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
understand it as a much more active and dynamic process. For example, cognitive psychologists, such as Seymour Epstein (1985), give self-esteem an active, even central, role in the life of the self. In this case, feelings of worth are essential for one’s identity and, therefore, self-esteem plays a crucial role in regulating behavior. Such an approach may even see self-esteem as a lynchpin, because a good portion of the entire self-system is to help to protect and enhance the feeling of worth.

Others who operate from this definitional perspective also see self-esteem performing similar functions in an interpersonal context. For instance, in another chapter, we will see that Leary’s and Downs’ (1995) work on Sociometer Theory demonstrates how feelings of self-worth help govern social behavior, much like an emotional compass that helps us find a socially functional path. New research looks at self-esteem as a central variable in forming, maintaining, enhancing, and ending relationships (Mruk, in press). When seen in these ways, self-esteem is part of the emotional glue that holds personal identity and social relationships together. Thus, like competence-based definitions, understanding self-esteem in terms of worth also gives it powerful emotional and social motivational implications.

As with competence-based definitions, the weakness of this approach is made obvious by considering what happens when it is carried too far, when there is nothing to balance it. In this case, self-esteem can be taken to mean merely feeling good about one’s self. For example, the powerful critique of the work on self-esteem offered by Baumeister et al. (1996) is based on such a (shaky) version of the definition. They said, “Although some researchers favor narrow and precise concepts of self-esteem, we shall use the term in a broad and inclusive sense. By self-esteem we mean simply a favorable global evaluation of oneself” (p. 5). In later work, Baumeister et al. (2003) modified this definition somewhat, but for them self-esteem is “literally defined by how much value people place on themselves. . . . Self-esteem does not carry any definitional requirement of accuracy whatsoever” (p. 2).

It is easy to see how such a weak definition of self-esteem would mean that it can be associated with positive characteristics, such as dignity, honor, conscientiousness, and so forth. However, such a loose definition also makes it possible to associate self-esteem with negative phenomena, including egotism, narcissism, or aggression, because this type of behavior can make one feel good about one’s self, at least temporarily. When seen as a mere positive feeling or as only a positive view of one’s self, it is no wonder that self-esteem can be said to have a dark side. The result of defining self-esteem in such an open-ended way is more confusing than clarifying.

Recognizing that the most common way of defining self-esteem is to understand it as a judgment or feeling of worthiness or worth can
help us to understand another important problem in the field. Although “common sense” suggests that self-esteem is important because it plays a major role in human behavior, social scientists have been puzzled by the general lack of empirical support for such a position. Even those who are sympathetic to self-esteem work note this condition. For example, when reviewing the literature concerning the social importance of self-esteem for a study commissioned by the State of California, Smelser (1989) said, “The news most consistently reported . . . is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent” (p. 15). Emler (2001) did an independent report examining the correlations between self-esteem and behavior in England and reached similar conclusions. Finally, Baumeister et al. (2003) conducted a highly structured review of self-esteem literature done in a given period and found that, “With the exception of the link to happiness, most of the effects are weak to modest. Self-esteem is thus not a major predictor or cause of almost anything” (p. 37).

This line of work leaves us with several possibilities to consider. One of them is that self-esteem is not a particularly significant phenomenon. If so, then we should move beyond discussions about self-esteem. Another possibility is that even if self-esteem is significant, it is too difficult to untangle it enough to tease out clear relationships between self-esteem and behavior. If this position is correct, then we must await new methodological breakthroughs as Smelser (1989) or Wells and Marwell (1976) recommended. Of course, it could also turn out to be that, as some conclude, self-esteem is more of an outcome than a cause (Seligman, 1995a). In this case, we should look for the variables that affect self-esteem instead of focusing on self-esteem per se. Finally, if any of these possibilities are true, we must conclude that work on self-esteem, which “probably represents the largest body of research on a single topic in the history of all of the social sciences” (Scheff & Fearon, 2004, p. 74), has been an abysmal waste of time.

However, it is also possible that just as defining self-esteem in terms of competence leads to one kind of scientific dead end, so does seeing it largely in terms of worth or worthiness. If this position is correct, then many of the difficulties that we just mentioned may actually be the result of unidimensional ways of defining and understanding self-esteem, and not a problem with the concept or phenomenon itself. To be sure, such a realization would not mean that all the problems involved in researching self-esteem or measuring its significance will be solved. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider this alternative for two reasons. First, there may be a more effective way of defining self-esteem that clarifies such matters and that opens up new pathways in the field. Second, if such an approach does show that self-esteem is an important aspect of human behavior in spite of methodological complexity, then failing to consider it is a serious error, one that constitutes scientific “bad faith.”
Self-Esteem as Competence and Worthiness

Fortunately, one more definition of self-esteem seems to have withstood the tests of time as indicated by the fact that a distinct body of work has developed around it: It is a two-factor approach that defines self-esteem in terms of a relationship between competence and worth or worthiness. Nathaniel Branden (1969) may have been the first to offer such a definition when he said that,

Self-esteem has two interrelated aspects: it entails a sense of personal efficacy and a sense of personal worth. It is the integrated sum of self-confidence and self-respect. It is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living. (p. 110)

Working from this position, it is possible to maintain that human beings have a fundamental need to feel worthy but can only achieve that goal by acting competently when making decisions, especially those that involve facing the challenges of living. Competence, in this case, means facing reality directly and then making rational decisions. Branden also specified that rational decisions are based on goals that are personally significant, are life affirming, and are such that they do not compromise one’s integrity as a person either in design or in execution. Because we are faced with making decisions so often in life, and since there is no guarantee as to their outcomes, self-esteem may be seen as a precious psychological resource that can be won or lost when seen from this point of view. If so, self-esteem is something that needs to be carefully managed at all times.

Tying competence to worthiness in this fashion distinguishes this view of self-esteem from mere success because, from this position, competent behavior must be tied to worthwhile actions in order to matter for self-esteem. In other words, one cannot be good at bad things and merit authentic self-esteem. Conversely, connecting a sense of being worthy to competence in this way also means that just feeling good about oneself does not necessarily reflect self-esteem: Such a feeling must also be rational, which is to say based on appropriately corresponding behavior that demonstrates one’s worth as an individual. In other words, authentic self-esteem must be earned.

Perhaps because Branden offered more philosophical than empirical support for his definition, it did not receive the kind of attention in the field as did the others. Even worse, the book in which the definition appeared became a best seller, something that the scientific community often regards as “popularistic” and, therefore, is easily ignored or dismissed. However, this approach has been generating empirically oriented work on
self-esteem since the early 1970s. For instance, this third force in the field is described as a “dual model” of self-esteem (Franks & Marolla, 1976), a “two-factor” theory (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995), and a “multidimensional approach” (Harter, 1999; O’Brien & Epstein, 1988). Viktor Gecas (1971) may have been the first researcher to follow this path when he investigated factors affecting self-esteem in adolescence. After exhausting other possibilities, he finally found that only a two-factor approach accounted for the variables that were necessary for his adolescent population to experience self-esteem: They were independent enough to recognize the importance of personal accomplishment (a form of competence) and yet still young enough to seek some form of parental approval or acceptance (a form of worthiness). When both factors were present, so was self-esteem.

Later, while reviewing two-factor or multidimensional work, Gecas (1982) noted that, “Common to these subdivisions is the distinction between (a) self-esteem based on a sense of competence, power, or efficacy and (b) self-esteem based on a sense of virtue or moral worth” (p. 5). He also went on to explore how each factor involves different psychological and social processes. For example, the competence dimension of self-esteem is connected to performance, whereas virtue is grounded in values, particularly those that concern one’s own worth as a person. Finally, like Branden, he also pointed out that competence and worthiness intertwine in regard to self-esteem: It is the relationship between these two factors that creates self-esteem. In other words, the reciprocal interaction of these two factors working together makes self-esteem a unique phenomenon.

We will see that the multidimensional approach is also very much alive in empirically oriented research today. However, it is profoundly disappointing to see that such material is often missing in the reference sections of more “mainstream” work done from the perspectives of the other two definitions. The absence of the two-factor approach is conspicuously characteristic of the work that criticizes self-esteem research for its “weak,” “conflicted,” “heterogeneous” findings. Yet, time and time again it has been shown just how inadequate and ineffective unidimensional approaches to defining self-esteem are in theory and in research.

Tafarodi and Swann (1995), for instance, examined Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale and found that its questions actually load in two directions. Some items seem to assess factors that are associated with worthiness, which was the original intent. However, others clearly tap into competence even though the instrument was not designed to do that. Noting that researchers have been aware of the need to consider two axes of self-esteem, they took the position that, “Rather than experiencing ourselves as simply positive or negative, we experience ourselves as globally acceptable-unacceptable (referred to here as self-liking) and globally strong-weak (referred to here as self-competence). Together these dimensions are

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC.
held to constitute global self-esteem” (p. 324). The term self-esteem, then, may be seen as an efficient way of talking about an interaction between these two variables. In short, self-esteem “may simply be an expedient of discourse, in the same way that one speaks of the size of a person’s build rather than the person’s (constitutive) height and girth” (p. 337).

Furthermore, those who work within this school often note that the two-factor approach has the potential ability to bring two major streams of the field together much more effectively than do the other ways of defining or understanding self-esteem. For example, competence and worthiness work well together conceptually. On one hand, “Self-competence, as the valuative experiences of one’s own agency, is closely linked to motivational concepts such as effectance. . . personal causation. . . and striving for superiority. It is the self-valuative result of acting out one’s will on the world—of being effective” (Tafarodi & Vu, 1997, p. 627). Thus, competence involves the types of behavior that James talked about and has the conceptual room to accommodate such things as Bandura’s (1997) notion of self-efficacy, which concerns one’s beliefs about one’s own competence. On the other hand, self-liking “is the valuation of one’s personhood—one’s worth as a social object as judged against internalized social standards of good and bad. This social worth dimension of self-esteem figures prominently in accounts of the genesis of the ethical self” (Tafarodi & Vu, 1997, p. 627). Here we see the potential to incorporate the worthiness-based affective components of self-esteem, including those seen in Rosenberg’s concern with attitudes and feelings of worth in regard to self-esteem.

In addition to the possibility of bringing two very well-established lines of existing work on self-esteem together, the two-factor approach to self-esteem also takes the field in new directions. For instance, one possibility concerns the relationship between culture and self-esteem. Tafarodi and Swann (1996) found that whereas both individualistic and collectivist cultures appreciate the need for people to demonstrate competence and to feel worthy, each one tends to emphasize one component of self-esteem over the other, namely, the one that is most characteristic of the general social orientation of the culture. Other areas of research that characterize this school include investigating such things as how self-competence and self-liking affect success and failure over time (Tafarodi & Vu, 1997); how a dual model accounts for major types of self-esteem (Mruk, 1999; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002); and how to use a two-factor definition of self-esteem to effect change in the clinical setting (Bartoletti, 2008; Hakim-Larson & Mruk, 1997). All of these themes and more will be pursued in the following chapters.

Finally, it is helpful to realize that much of the work that is based on understanding self-esteem in terms of competence and worthiness does not necessarily use the phrase “two-factor” or “dual.” For example, although still emphasizing these two general sets of factors, the term
“multidimensional” is sometimes used to distinguish the work from that which is based on only one or the other of the two unidimensional definitions. While Susan Harter (1999) used the terms “self-esteem” and “self-worth” interchangeably, for instance, her multidimensional approach to self-esteem clearly includes competence in various domains of life and feelings of worth in regard to others as its two primary components. Similarly, modern methods of measuring self-esteem eschew the unidimensional approach to assessing it. For example, the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory developed by O’Brien and Epstein (1988) measures several dimensions of self-esteem that reflect primarily competence and others that do the same for worthiness.

In addition, there is another richer but even more complex way in which there are dual factors in the two-factor approach. At one level, it may seem that this view only involves identifying competence and worthiness as the two factors that are involved in self-esteem. But virtually everyone in this school recognizes that the relationship between competence and worthiness is also a central feature of this approach. Perhaps the term “three-factor model” is more accurate in this regard (competence, worthiness, and their dynamic reciprocity). However, for consistency’s sake, it is not beneficial to alter the name of the approach. Suffice it to say that although this dimension of the two-factor approach is often underappreciated, it may arguably be the most important part of the definition: It is the relationship between competence and worthiness that actually creates or generates the psychological phenomenon we call self-esteem in the first place. So as not to be theoretically naive, of course, it is also necessary to point out that this strength is also the chief weakness of this approach to self-esteem: Multidimensional models are more complex than unidimensional ones, and that characteristic complicates the research process.

THE ORIGINAL DEFINITION OF SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-ESTEEM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The final task of this chapter is to examine the three standard ways of defining self-esteem in the hope that one stands out as more accurate (valid) or at least more comprehensive (descriptive) than the others. By now, it should be fairly clear that defining self-esteem primarily in terms of either competence or worthiness alone offers no advantage because they both seem to have reached a serious impasse, perhaps even a dead end. After all, success is never guaranteed and is always fleeting, even when it is achieved. Therefore, basing self-esteem largely on competence means that the individual must live in a constant state of vigilance, a state of being that entails looking out for and acting against a threat when it occurs, sometimes in ways that are destructive. If this view of self-esteem
is followed to its logical conclusion, then Crocker and Park (2003, 2004) are quite correct: The pursuit of self-esteem is far too “costly” and we should be studying ways to get rid of it rather than means of enhancing it.

Similarly, understanding self-esteem in terms of feeling good about oneself without connecting such a belief, attitude, feeling, or affect to reality through the expression of appropriately corresponding behavior is also a lopsided way of understanding self-esteem. As we have seen, Baumeister et al. (1996, 2003), Damon (1995), Seligman (1995b), and others pointed out that such a “feel-good” approach can only result in confusing authentic self-esteem with things like narcissism, egotism, conceit, and other undesirable or “dark” states. One very good reason to investigate the concept of self-esteem based on a relationship between competence and worthiness, then, is that otherwise there is simply no reason to go any further with work based on unidimensional definitions.

The second reason to define self-esteem in terms of competence and worthiness is more appealing. This way of understanding self-esteem is inherently more comprehensive than the others, which means, among other things, that it offers different possibilities, such as standing as a stronger platform upon which to integrate the disparate literature of the field. Tafarodi and Vu (1997, p. 627) use an analogy concerning the difference between rectangles and the lines that form rectangles to help understand the relationship between competence and worthiness, and why it is so important for self-esteem. Seeing self-esteem only as a single factor, such as mere lines on a page, will never result in forming a space or a shape. However, identifying lines as length and width and then putting them in relationship to each other creates something much more substantial, in this case a rectangle and the space it defines. In other words, competence and worthiness together define the “semantic space of global self-valuation” (p. 627). Defining the “thing” we call self-esteem in terms of competence and worthiness rather than either term alone allows us to view the phenomenon more completely and, therefore, puts us in a better position to understand it more fully.

In addition to providing a more powerful conceptual understanding of self-esteem, there are two other ways that thinking about self-esteem as a relationship between factors is helpful. One of them is seen in regard to the earliest uses of the term. The concept of self-esteem appears to have been introduced to English-speaking peoples by the great writer and poet John Milton in the 17th century. His earliest use of the term can at least be traced to an essay that he wrote defending his work from what he, and others, felt was unwarranted criticism. In that piece, Milton (1642/1950, p. 565) identified “self-esteem either of what I was, or what I might be, (which let envie call pride)” as a legitimate reason to stand up for oneself in regard to unjust accusations. Notice that there are two components to his use of the term. The first is that identity is involved in regard to self-esteem, in this
case terms of his character as a person, including such matter as honor, dignity, and self-respect, which he called pride in a healthy sense. The other is that by writing a reasonable response to critics, Milton competently dealt with his challenge in a worthwhile fashion: He faced it directly, which is to say authentically. The point is that, from the beginning, the term self-esteem was meant to convey something about respecting value or worth and about having the courage or ability to stand up for it when necessary.

The way that Milton goes on to use the term in *Paradise Lost* reveals these aspects of self-esteem more clearly. In a section that involves the protagonist discussing worthy pursuits with an angel, Milton (1667/1931) wrote,

> Then value: Oft times nothing profits more
> Then self esteem, grounded on just and right
> Well manag’d; of that skill the more thou know’st,
> The more she will acknowledge thee her Head,
> And to realities yield all her shows... (p. 256)

Here, we see that self-esteem expresses two factors and a connection between them. First, the concept of “just and right” certainly pertains to positive values and their importance for living a good life in the authentic sense. Second, self-esteem appears to involve competence, namely, the skills necessary to conduct one’s life in relation to that which is just and right.

In other words, it appears as though self-esteem was first used to describe a particular way of dealing with the challenges that life brings to each and every human being. Although we seldom face those of a biblical nature, many of them involve matters of right and wrong (worth) and doing them justice by taking appropriate actions (competence). In short, the two-factor approach seems to be very consistent with Milton’s original sense of the term. Note that this view of self-esteem has some powerful implications for those who wish to rant about the dark side of self-esteem, but we will deal with those issues later.

As substantial as that argument is, social science requires evidence as well as theoretical validity, which means that we must go one step further. Although the methods used to research self-esteem as it is lived in everyday life are discussed in the next chapter, it is necessary to bring some of the results forward here so that we can take a position on which definition of self-esteem has more empirical value. Fortunately, a surprising number of studies have investigated self-esteem in this way. Epstein (1979) is one of the pioneers of rigorous experiential work in this area. For example, in *A Study of Emotions in Everyday Life*, he asked female and male participants to track daily experiences for a month and record in some detail the ones that enhanced or lessened their self-esteem. In brief, he
found that there are two types of experiences that people report as being particularly thematic in this regard. I call these and other such poignant self-esteem experiences “self-esteem moments.”

Epstein found that situations capable of generating success or failure in areas of life that are important to a given person constitute one set of powerful self-esteem experiences. The other type concerns those that involve being accepted or being rejected by others, both of which seem to pertain to one’s sense of worth as a person. Others have done work that comes to similar conclusions. For instance, Tafarodi and Milne (2002) asked 244 students to respond to a retrospective measure of life events on two separate occasions, some 4 weeks apart. Their results correspond to Epstein’s, with failure affecting participants’ sense of “self-competence” and negative social events affecting their reports of “self-liking.”

In addition to demonstrating that competence and worthiness are linked to self-esteem, other work indicates that it is actually the relationship between competence and worthiness that creates self-esteem. For example, in a study titled “Experiences That Produce Enduring Changes in Self-Concept,” Epstein (1979) asked a total of 270 college participants to describe in writing “the one experience in their lifetime that produced the greatest positive change in their self-concept and the one experience that produced the greatest negative change in their self-concept” (p. 73). The analysis of this data, which were gathered from almost equal numbers of men and women, identified that there are three types of such experiences that occur most often in adulthood. They are having to deal with a new environment, responding to a problem that requires the person to acquire new responses, and gaining or losing significant relationships. Once again, we see competence and worthiness in action.

Using a smaller number of subjects but studying them much more in-depth, I examined another class of self-esteem experiences that appear to change self-esteem at deeper, more existential levels. The participants were reasonably well-diversified in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic status. They were asked to describe in detail a time when they were pleased with themselves in a biographically crucial way and a time when they were displeased with themselves in that fashion (Mruk, 1981, 1983). Then, they were interviewed extensively about these powerful self-esteem moments.

The experiences spontaneously chosen by all the subjects can be described as encountering a situation that challenged them to deal with what could be called a strong approach-avoidance situation, but one with unusually powerful biographical implications that tied the entire situation to important dimensions of their personal histories and identities. This dimension of the situation called into question who the people knew themselves to be at deep levels, particularly ones that had caused difficulty for them in the past. That is, each subject was faced with a situation where,
on one hand, they desperately wanted to do what they believed to be the “right thing” (notice the connection to Milton here), but where their ability to do so was historically problematic or filled with inauthentic decision making or behavior. To use James’ language, these self-esteem moments take place in situations where one’s self-esteem is genuinely put “at stake” by a challenge of living in a way that calls one’s very identity as a decent person into question.

One example involved an older woman with a traditional sense of gender who had to choose between complying with a male supervisor’s request to give up her current duties for others or to take a stand and argue vigorously against changing positions based on the fact that she liked her job and did not want the new duties. On the surface, the immediate problem is a relatively simple one of compliance versus risk-taking. Interviewing and analysis revealed, however, that she had a long history of complying with authority figures, particularly males, and especially her father, sometimes even to the point of abuse. In her life, then, such decisions inevitably led to an inauthentic outcome, namely, merely complying instead of standing up for what was “just and right,” and feeling terribly unworthy as a person when so doing.

Another example concerned a much younger man who had a clinically significant fear of public speaking. In the past, he always avoided situations in which speaking publicly was necessary, sometimes at a cost of considerable psychological pain and missed financial opportunities. However, this individual also had a strong commitment to his career and work. Then, one day life suddenly challenged him on both levels when his career and personal development came together in a situation that required him to either defend his work in public forums or lose any hope of staying in the field that he loved the most.

In these two examples, the individuals faced their particular challenge of living and handled them in a way that was appropriate for a mature adult. After facing the challenge authentically by doing that which was “just and right,” both participants experienced a meaningful increase in their self-esteem that lasted well into the future: Each of them demonstrated competence at living in ways that were worthy of a decent, healthy, or authentic human being. We will examine each step of this process later on, but it is important to note here that facing such existential dilemmas does not always end on a positive note.

One negative example involved a woman who had a life theme of loneliness around the holidays connected with the fact that her entire family died when she was young. One holiday season, she was facing the possibility of terrible isolation yet again. At that moment, a certain colleague made advances toward her. She did not care for the individual in any special way and was also aware that the circumstances were such that fellow workers would know of any intimate contact. Even so, the
thought of being alone again seemed too overwhelming and the immediate possibility of comfort seemed too appealing to resist. Giving in to these biographic forces in an inauthentic mode of care, she compromised herself with the colleague, much to her own chagrin.

Similarly, a young man had a negative biographic theme that involved neglecting his physical well-being in certain situations. He subjected an already injured body to additional stress rather than allowing himself the time to rest, because doing so would have meant thinking about the loss of an important relationship he could not bear to face. Unfortunately, this decision led to the development of a chronic illness and continual pain. In both instances, the person took what at first appeared to be the easy way out, failed to face the challenge of living authentically, and then subsequently suffered negative consequences, especially inauthenticity and a concomitant loss of self-esteem. We will also examine the stages involved in this type of response at the appropriate time. However, right now the point is that we do seem to be able to find evidence supporting the position that self-esteem involves competence and worthiness at the lived level, sometimes even in ways powerful enough to have a transforming effect on people.

AN EXISTENTIALLY BASED TWO-FACTOR DEFINITION OF SELF-ESTEEM

The two-factor approach to defining self-esteem seems to be more theoretically valid because it may be more robust than either of its single-factor counterparts, because it seems closer to the original definition of the term, and because it appears to be empirically descriptive at the lived level. Therefore, there is only one more task that needs to be completed before taking this way of defining self-esteem to the field. This step involves fleshing the definition out so that we can see what is meant by competence and worthiness, as well as how their relationship works to create self-esteem in positive or in negative ways.

Phenomenological psychologists often use what is called the “general structure” of an experience, process, or phenomenon (Giorgi, 1971, 1975) to complete this process. A general or fundamental structure is a succinct description of all the elements that are necessary to give rise to a given human phenomenon or experience. It also describes how the individual components work together to create the phenomenon at the lived level. When properly done, such a complete and dynamic description also makes an excellent definition of a phenomenon because it is more substantial than a mere abstract concept. Because fundamental structures are only found in the “real” world of everyday human experience, something phenomenologists call the “life world,” their descriptions must emerge
1. The Crucial Issue of Defining Self-Esteem

from data generated at this level. The investigation that I conducted into more poignant self-esteem moments presented earlier also led to the development of a fundamental structure, and it has been refined over time (Mruk, 1981, 1995, 1999, 2006). As it is used in this book, then, self-esteem is the lived status of one’s competence at dealing with the challenges of living in a worthy way over time.

One of the valuable things about succinct descriptions of human phenomena offered by fundamental structures is that they show what is both necessary and sufficient for a particular human phenomenon or experience to occur. Thus, it should be possible to unfold such a description in a way that reveals the inner workings of the phenomenon, as well as its basic components. The lived structure of self-esteem consists of five key elements, which can be unpacked in the following fashion. The first one, “status,” concerns states of being. The word was chosen to represent this aspect of self-esteem because status implies something that is present, reasonably stable, and yet still open to change under certain conditions. One’s economic, social, or marital status is an example of this condition. In this sense, each of us tends to live a relatively stable degree, level, or type of self-esteem that we characteristically bring to the world. The word “lived” is added to status to express that existential fact that self-esteem, when defined this way, cannot be avoided: It is grounded in the past, can become alive in the present, and follows us into the future in one form or another. Of course, like other dynamic conditions, sometimes self-esteem is lived in a way that is more important in regard to particular situations than others, such as the ones that have been identified as self-esteem moments.

Competence, of course, is a familiar term. It is often used in this field to refer to an individual’s particular set of physical, cognitive, and social skills or abilities. However, it is also important to realize, as developmental psychology does, that competence is also a process, one that involves mastery. Thus, it takes time and practice to learn how to master the tasks of life. Competence, which includes a sense of efficacy in any given situation, is important for self-esteem because individuals deal with the various challenges of living on the basis of two things: what specific skills are available to them at a given time in their lives and their level of maturity as an individual, particularly their degree of authenticity or sense of self and individual responsibility.

Sometimes the challenges of living are small, or at least normal, such as learning to walk, growing up, and acquiring the survival skills that are necessary in a particular culture. However, we also are likely to encounter much larger challenges, such as finding and maintaining meaningful relationships, earning a living, raising a family, and so forth. In addition, at other times, life presents us with challenges that are especially powerful because they mobilize who we are at the deepest or most authentic levels.
In all three cases, the word “challenge” is appropriate because, by definition, a challenge involves facing a task that has an uncertain outcome, taxes us in terms of our current abilities, and stands as an opportunity to reach higher levels or fall back to lower ones in ways that suggest either gains or losses.

The concept of worth, worthy, or worthiness is important in describing the structure of self-esteem because it expresses the fact that self-esteem does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is tied to the value or quality of our actions. In this sense, there is a relationship between worthiness and what the Greeks called virtues, which, we shall see in the last chapter, is an important connection between self-esteem and positive psychology. Competent behavior tends to result in positive feelings and poor performance often creates negative ones. However, worthiness is more difficult to understand because it is based on meaning, not measures, connected to that which is “just and right.” Although social scientists are often reluctant to speak in this way, certain actions are worth more than others because they are more virtuous. For example, “doing the right thing” generates healthy or authentic self-esteem because such actions are both competent and worthy, whereas failing to do so indicates a lack of competence, a lack of a sense of that which is “just and right” or worthy, or both.

In relationship to self-esteem, then, competence is needed for worthiness because only certain types of actions have such a positive meaning. However, worthiness also balances competence because not all things that one does effectively are necessarily meritorious. Accordingly, talking about competence or worthiness without stressing their relationship could mean that we are not talking about healthy, genuine, or authentic self-esteem at all. After all, competence without worthiness can result in negative acts of human behavior, such as lying, stealing, or injuring others for personal gain; and feelings of worthiness without doing something to earn them is narcissism. Again, the relationship between competence and worthiness is at the heart of self-esteem, just as we saw earlier in the analogy of a rectangle offered by Tafarodi and Vu. Because they are equal partners, the only way to show the particular nature of the relationship between competence and worthiness using lines and figures is to point out that one form captures such balance: that of a square. Since this analogy is a bit more complete, it will also play a major role in presenting the theory of self-esteem that is the heart of this book and its approach to enhancing authentic self-esteem.

Time is the last component in the fundamental structure of self-esteem and it pertains to this phenomenon in several ways. First, it takes time to develop a stable form of self-esteem because, in the largest sense, it is the result of a developmental process that involves facing many challenges of living, both large and small. Second, time is also that which carries us into the future, which is to say toward self-esteem moments that
have yet to come to us as adolescents, as adults, and as older people. This aspect of the relationship between time and self-esteem means that time is both an adversary and a friend when it comes to self-esteem. The bad news is that when we fail to act in ways that are competent and worthy, we suffer a loss of self-esteem and experience corresponding pain of one type or another. The good news is that when we do rise to the challenge of being “just and right” and actually demonstrate our competence and worthiness in this fashion, then we have the opportunity to affirm, to regain, or even to increase healthy self-esteem. In either case, time is important to the fundamental structure of self-esteem because it shows us that self-esteem is something that deserves our attention throughout the entire life cycle.

By now it should be clear that defining self-esteem as a relationship between competence and worth or worthiness is more comprehensive than basing it on either competence or worthiness alone. Similarly, there is reason to believe that this approach also better reflects the intent in Milton’s original use of the term than is found in the other definitions. Finally, it should seem plausible that defining self-esteem in terms of these two factors (three, if one counts the relationship as a factor) may be more accurate at the lived level, which is the basic source of data for understanding human behavior. In the following chapters, I hope to show that understanding self-esteem as a balanced relationship between competence and worthiness helps deal more effectively with important problems in the field, such as measuring self-esteem, increasing authentic self-esteem in both clinical and nonclinical settings, and understanding the connections between the field of self-esteem and positive psychology.